

A Greenhouse for Extinct Flora

Michael Wang's installation resembles an assisted living facility for plants.



Louis Bury October 19, 2019



Installation view of *Michael Wang: Extinct in New York* at LMCC's Arts Center at Governors Island (all photos by Michael Wang)

The four 8 by 12-foot greenhouses, lined up in a row, that greet visitors to Michael Wang's *Extinct in New York* strike just the right balance between eerie and inviting. Each bright and airy greenhouse contains plants that used to, but no longer, grow wild in New York City, arranged in regimented grids of tabletop planters and vitrines. Organized by the Swiss Institute, and displayed as one of two quite promising inaugural exhibitions in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Arts Center at Governor's Island, the installation's calm atmosphere is more buoyant than its elegiac title would lead you to expect.

Yet the installation contains elements that tincture this calm with disquiet. Visitors cannot enter the greenhouse interiors, which creates a sense of separation, as though the plants were laboratory specimens. The orderly plant grids — in which, for example, a plant last observed growing in the city in 1819 (*Cirsium altissimum*, or Tall thistle) sits alongside a plant last observed in 1994 (*Viburnum cassinoides*, or Witheroid Viburnum) — reinforce the feeling of laboratory artifice. The motley plants themselves, whose names and dates of local extinction are provided in a checklist, exist in various stages of their growth cycles, from sprouts poking up through the soil to full-grown plants whose leaves have begun to droop and brown. In both form and content, Wang’s installation resembles an assisted living facility for plants.



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Extinct in New York works so well because it avoids the pathos you might expect such a facility to evoke. In a side room, a series of wispy, brown watercolors depicting plant parts trades on a similar dynamic. Each painting has been paired with a 5 by 7-inch color photograph of the present-day site where the pictured plant was last observed. The visual disjunct between the photographs’ prosaic cityscapes and the watercolors’ poetic closeups makes the two images seem unrelated to one another — a feeling that is enhanced by the different media. In smart and subtle ways, Wang’s project turns on precisely such productive tensions: between optimism and pessimism, abstract concept and material form, past and present, art and life, life and death.

Michael Wang: Extinct in New York continues at LMCC's Arts Center at Governor's Island until Oct. 31.

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