

Margate Now: Sunken Ecologies

Royal Esplanade, Westbrook
25 September to 10 October

For artist Holly Slingsby, the reclusive 14th-century anchoress Julian of Norwich and the 12th-century nun Hildegard of Bingen were icons of lockdown. Slingsby incarnates them both in her eight-minute video *An Enclosed Garden*, commissioned for this year's edition of Margate Now and installed in the derelict Nayland Rock Hotel. While Julian, who lived during the Black Death pandemic, famously entreated her reader to 'be a gardener ... and carry it to God as your true worship', Hildegard developed sophisticated botanical and medicinal texts and treatments that continue to fascinate. Slingsby also portrays Penelope, the Queen of Ithaca, who whiled away 20 years waiting for her husband Odysseus to return from war, and the Virgin Mary, often defined in analogy to an enclosed garden or *hortus conclusus*, a term used to designate a style of medieval painting that Slingsby reinterprets by sitting on a compost heap wearing a halo of gold-painted cardboard.

Over the past 18 months, gardening and local patches of greenery have provided relief from physical confinement and grief, while many exhibitions have moved outdoors. Slingsby's video, filmed in four Kentish gardens, features amusing correctives to the righteousness that can blossom with a purported return to nature: Julian's gardening gloves are imprinted with glossy red stigmata; a notebook destined for divine transcription is revealed as a Christian colouring-in book. In Margate's Sunken Garden, created in the 1930s in the pit left behind after the mayor ordered 13 men to quarry gravel for a local railway escarpment, her meditative crossing of the garden is mirrored in a slow slapstick backwards walk.

Those quarry labourers are memorialised in 13 ceramic trowels, part of Sara Trillo's installation *The Hortorium*. The assemblage of ceramic sculptures of axe heads and ancient jewellery, dried plants and salvaged tools has an imaginative archaeological sensibility inspired by the discovery of a local Bronze Age hoard and fuelled by speculation about the buried past of the garden. A set of simple tabards dyed with plant pigments and ornamented with dried flowers and seeds exudes both the austerity of religious garb and the exuberance of pagan or masonic costumes; a reminder that ritual has always been a component of gardening.

Over the decades, stewardship of the garden passed from the local council to 'Mother Nature', but, since 2018, Sunken Garden Society volunteers have maintained it to an impeccable standard. It is the main site of this year's festival, guest curated by Anna Colin, which extends to several partner organisations across Margate. The 13 commissions include permanent additions, such as illustrator Molly Pickle's visual identity for the Society, and fixtures like Nicolas Deshayes' cast-iron tool store gate, whose looping bars evoke the winding pathways of entrails and fishing nets; Lindsey Mendick's Wedgewood-blue compost bin adorned with effigies of organic waste and crowned with a huge slug; and Olu Ogunnaike's *Nesting*, a public seating solution of interlocking benches made using wood from species of trees that



Holly Slingsby, *An Enclosed Garden*, 2021, installation detail

birds visiting Margate might pass on their migratory journeys across the world.

Other commissions are more ephemeral, with several sound works dotted around the garden or available online. Ama Josephine Budge's poem, 'Spliced: An Obituary in Three Movements', alludes to the garden's use as memorial space. Contrasting the personal nature of individual acts of remembrance with a wider sense of mourning, she laments, 'I / am here / Mourning / A homeland / A peoples / A future / An ecology'. Her elegy for the lives, human and non-human, taken and traduced through colonial theft, linguistic obliteration and misdirection, articulates the truth that plants, like people, have specific and consequential histories. The spiritual barrier imposed to segregate humans from fellow species has been naturalised over time, especially in industrialised societies. When Budge incants the names of the maidenhair fern in different languages and tells of its journeys through etymology, history and indigenous cultures, she invites a current of awareness and empathy through and beyond this separation.

Adam Chodzko's ten-minute video *The green, the flow, the path of the game* picks up on this empathic movement and hints at the possibility of merging with our plant environment. Composed of footage shot by a group of children wearing action cameras as they play hide-and-seek in the Sunken Garden, it puzzles together their points of view as they devise ways of disappearing into the trees and bushes. When their clothing picks up burdock burrs, they are transformed into agents of fertilisation, further participating in the generation of the plantscape. Just three weeks long, Margate Now was fleeting. By foregrounding the sociocultural and interspecies dynamics at play in the public garden, it was in tune with the preoccupations of its time; with its legacy of permanent commissions, it also makes a gift to the future.

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