



The Gorgeous Nothings

Flowers at Chatsworth

15 March –
5 October 2025

CHATSWORTH.ORG





Welcome

One of the most celebrated rooms at Chatsworth is the Library and it was in here, surveying the astonishing collection of botanical books that a kernel of an idea was formed – to stage an exhibition dedicated to flowers, horticulture and the ongoing relationship that plants have had with the house, garden and its contents. Our guest curator, Allegra Pesenti, has worked for a number of years to bring together both celebrated works of art from the collection and loans from institutions and private lenders elsewhere. These are displayed throughout the house alongside new voices and perspectives, with some work created especially for this exhibition. There surely has never been a more important time to look towards nature, marvel at it and all that it has inspired and reflect on our relationship with it.

Finally, thank you for choosing to visit Chatsworth and supporting Chatsworth House Trust, the charity that cares for the house and gardens, for the enjoyment of all. We very much hope you enjoy your day.

William and Laura Burlington

The Gorgeous Nothings

Flowers in all their forms and incarnations take centre stage in this exhibition. The Devonshire Collections are at the source of this survey that stems from the rare botanical books and herbaria in the Chatsworth library and extends to the grounds and garden that mark the estate's compelling environment. An important lineage of gardeners and botanists have foraged, planted, conserved and protected an array of specimens at Chatsworth over the past five centuries. Together, they have created what amounts to a living compendium of the natural world that continues to be nurtured today for the future.

Botany has been referred to as the science of beauty, but it is also the study of humanity. The great horticultural mind and engineer Joseph Paxton, head gardener to the 6th Duke of Devonshire from 1826, spoke expressively of the "structure, affinities, and habits of plants and vegetables."¹ This exhibition encompasses a series of themes that reflect the features and temperaments of flowers, and by association of human nature in all its contrasts and complexities: mythology and magic, still lifes, gatherers, in place and out of place, sexuality and the senses, beauty and horror, permanence and transience, and flowers as symbols.

The exhibition takes its cue from the American poet Emily Dickinson's habit of composing poems on scraps of paper and used envelopes. The 'gorgeous nothings' she refers to in one such poem are vital and existential matter to her.² They are not dissimilar to the specimens of ferns in a 19th-century album which will have represented a world unto its own to the specialist who compiled it. Gathering – to bring together and take in from different places and sources – is an act of preservation and often of survival. This practice is engrained in the history of collecting at Chatsworth and it underlies the choice of artists

and selection of objects featured in this exhibition. Specimens of scientific nature, like the remarkable collection of fossils and minerals put together by Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, or the over 400 species of British algae catalogued and photographed by Anna Atkins in the 1840s, find visual echoes in the works of contemporary artists such as Simryn Gill, Elliott Hundley, Liza Lou, Alessandro Piangiamore and Elias Sime. Different forms of collage and assemblage are featured throughout *The Gorgeous Nothings*, like the modulated surfaces and found items that converge on the canvases of 'scavenger' painter Frank Bowling, or Chiara Camoni's regal female figure composed of myriads of clay components.

The installations presented here evoke the tenacity and focus of 'gatherers' – be it gardeners, scientists, archivists, artists, poets or collectors. They also reflect the resilience and persistence of nature amidst the scourge of the environmental crisis. Each flower is associated with deep-rooted and geographically diverse histories and myths. Individually, they may be considered gorgeous nothings, but together, they manifest life and endurance against all odds.

Allegra Pesenti

Botany, the science of the vegetable kingdom, is one of the most attractive, most useful, and most extensive departments of human knowledge. It is, above every other, the science of beauty.

James Main³

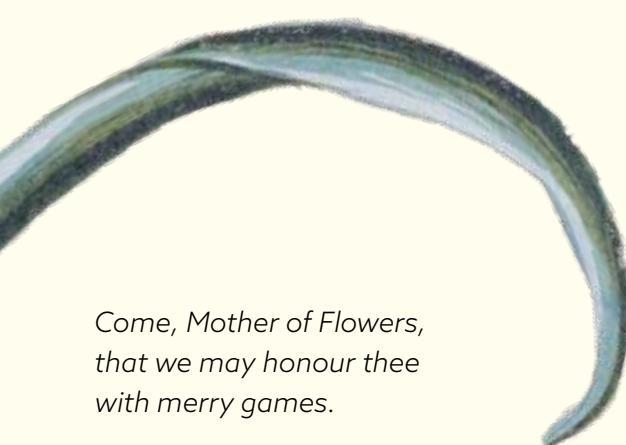
¹ Joseph Paxton, *A Practical Treatise on the Cultivation of the Dahlia* (W.S. Orr & Co, 1838), 2.

² See Marta Werner and Jen Bervin, *Emily Dickinson, The Gorgeous Nothings* (Christine Burgin/New Directions in association with Granary Books, 2013), 172.

³ James Main, *Popular Botany* (W.S. Orr & Co, 1835), 1.

Mythology and Magic

Flowers and the natural world have long been the foundations for mythological figures and tales of the supernatural. In the room known as the Grotto, works from both past and present embody the otherworld. Diana, goddess of wildlife and the moon, is captured bathing with her nymphs and framed by sea creatures in an ornate 17th-century fountain. As a patroness of nature and protector of birth, she has a talismanic presence in the context of Chatsworth and this exhibition. Grottoes have long been described as dwelling places of divinity and portals to the underworld. They are places of seclusion and protection yet they never feel fully safe. David Wiseman conjures the lure and mystery of the grotto in his bewitching mirror. Stalagmites proliferate in a collusion of earthly life and the imaginary. In a parallel environment conceived by the Roman master micro-mosaicist Maurizio Fioravanti, a leaping frog in a halo of daisies is one of a cast of fantastical organisms.



*Come, Mother of Flowers,
that we may honour thee
with merry games.*

Ovid, *Fasti* (V.183)



Rana

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2022

Gold, titanium, yellow and white diamonds, emeralds, micro-mosaics, signed by the artist

Courtesy of Contessa Daniela Memmo d'Amelio



Diana at her Bath

About 1690-92

Stone



Lost Valley Mirror

David Wiseman, 2019

Bronze and mirrored glass

Image Courtesy of Wiseman Studio

Photo: Mark Hanauer



Still Lifes

Floral compositions in paintings can be categorised as *still lifes*, but they are often visual manifestations of life in action from birth to death. A young bud may suggest the vibrancy of conception while a wilting leaf might symbolise death and the transience of life. Flora and the human condition are conjoined in these 'portraits' of nature.

The 1st Duke of Devonshire acquired a great number of still life paintings in the late 1600s at a time when this genre was particularly in vogue in England. Many still hang on the walls of Chatsworth, like those by the Duke's contemporaries Jakob Bogdany and Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer. Individually they impart the technical bravura of the artists and, assembled as a group as they are for the first time in the context of this exhibition, they express the ebullience and regenerative charge of a garden in bloom.

*O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:*

*Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

William Blake, The Sick Rose,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, 1794

Still Life of Flowers with a Monkey

Jakob Bogdany, about 1699

Oil on canvas



Gatherers

Nearly five centuries of foraging, researching, assembling and preserving at Chatsworth have formed an extraordinary range of 'gatherings' both indoors and outdoors. Areas of focus range in type and scale from 18th-century porcelain teacups by the celebrated German manufacturer Meissen to the collection of conifer trees in the Pinetum conceived by the 6th Duke and his head gardener Joseph Paxton in the 1830s.

The artists featured in this exhibition are all gatherers of sorts: they explore the fields of nature and science, and collate their specimens into formats of their imagination. The painter Eileen Agar emphasised the surreal qualities of the marine world in whimsical objects made out of found shells and flotsam. The anonymous French author of an 18th-century herbarium used hand-coloured cut-out prints to create a world where science and the imagination collide. Among the elaborate collages, a harlequin is crowned beneath a sunflower. This rare volume belonged to Lady Anne Tree, a campaigner for prison reform and daughter of the 10th Duke of Devonshire, however its origins remain a mystery.



The greatest pleasures are the simplest. I do not want to speak of the things that we believe to be great pleasures, but of those which are inconspicuous and humble, which we should call nothings.

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*,
Vol. 1: *Swann's Way*, 1913

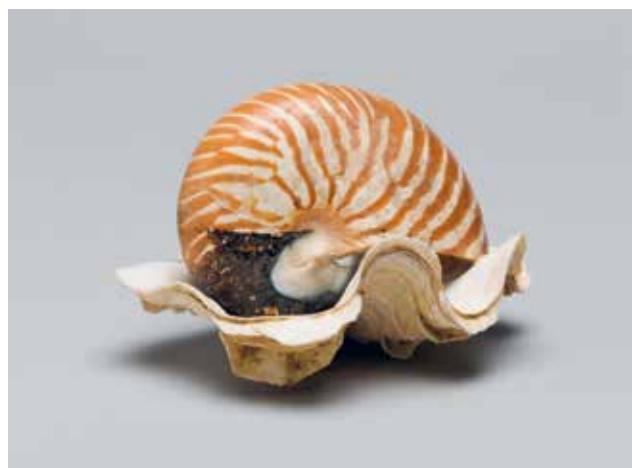


Herbarium

Unknown creator, France, mid-1700s
Plant specimens and collage



Photographs of British Algae:
Cyanotype Impressions, vol. 1
Anna Atkins, 1843-53



Sculpture Consisting of a Nautilus Shell Glued to a Clam Shell

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991
Shell
Tate Archive
© The Estate of Eileen Agar.
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In Place and Out of Place

Weeds are plants that are out of place, but like gorgeous nothings they can also be considered beautiful and beneficial. Dorothy Cross expresses both the lure and the threat of the foxglove in her magisterial bronze sculpture of this weed. It is a sensuous and elegant plant, that can be used for the treatment of heart conditions. The cutting edges of its leaves warn us of its more dangerous properties – extracts of *Digitalis*, as it is otherwise known, can be toxic if taken in large doses. Casts of the artist's own fingertips in lieu of the tubular flowers that flop from its tall, bent stem expose the affinity between human and botanical nature.

One is tempted to say that the most human plants, after all, are the weeds.

John Burroughs, 1881 ⁴

Foxglove

Dorothy Cross, 2023

Cast Bronze

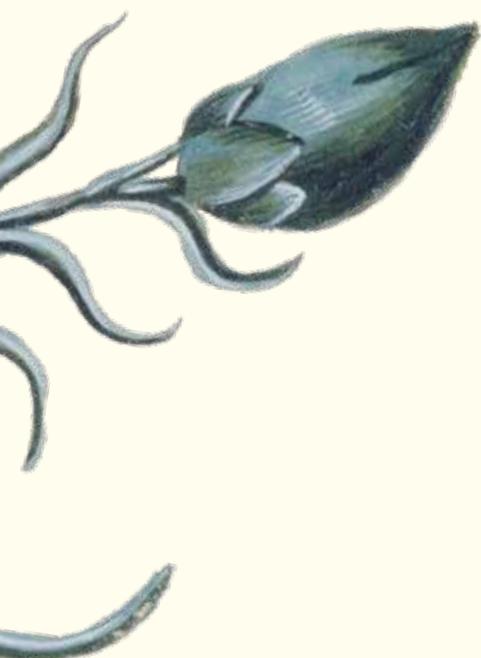
Courtesy of the artist and
Frith Street Gallery, London

⁴ John Burroughs, *Pepacton* (Houghton Mifflin, 1902), 193.

Sexuality and the Senses

Like humans, plants are born, grow, reproduce and die. Plants can also sense the world. They communicate with other plants and organisms, and respond to light and temperature. Nature flourishes through plant reproduction, which may involve a bee pollinating a flower, a bird dropping a seed, or a gardener pruning a tree. The majority of flowering plants have both male and female reproductive structures.

It is possible that gender-nonconforming artist Gluck responded to the bisexual character of flowers in still lifes. The painting *Convolvulus* combines cool tones and sharp outlines with the curvaceous and sensual forms of the plant in bloom. Flora, the Roman goddess of flowering plants, personifies fertility and the regenerative force of nature. In his sculpture of her in the garden at Chatsworth, Caius Gabriel Cibber renders her larger than life, voluptuous and the epitome of abundance with her flower-laden vase above her head.



*I hide myself within my flower,
That wearing on your breast,
You, unsuspecting, wear me too --
And angels know the rest.*

*I hide myself within my flower,
That, fading from your vase,
You, unsuspecting, feel for me
Almost a loneliness.*

Emily Dickinson, *With a Flower*, 1890



Convolvulus

Gluck, 1940

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of a private lender



The Marias

Kapwani Kiwanga, 2020

Paper, wire, paint, customized wood plinths

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: David Stjernholm

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Beauty and Horror

The world of plants is a field of opposites. Where there is growth there is decay, where there is science there is spirit and serendipity, where there is beauty there is horror. Similar contrasts and complexities are found in human nature. Obscured history is brought to light in Kapwani Kiwanga's immersive installation *The Marias*. Reconstructions of flowers depicted in Suriname by the 17th-century botanist Maria Sibylla Merian point to the enslavement and persecution of women during colonialism. The peacock flower, which can act as a natural way to terminate a pregnancy, was one of the methods used by women (subjects not only of forced labour but also of sexual violence) to maintain control of their own bodies and break the chain of reproduction and exploitation. Kiwanga's paper-made botanical specimens are perched on custom-shaped plinths and surrounded by chromatic yellow walls that evoke the harsh light of the sun, while vividly foregrounding horrors of the past.

The Agony in the Garden

The Old Master Drawings Cabinet is a room conceived for the display of works on paper at Chatsworth. Here, 11 intaglio prints by contemporary artist Chris Ofili from the portfolio entitled *The Agony in the Garden* take inspiration from a biblical subject (intaglio is a metal-plate printmaking technique in which the lines are incised below the surface of the plate). Each scene is set in the Garden of Gethsemane and depicts the same moment when Judas betrayed Christ with a kiss. Ofili represents the scene as perceived by the other disciples, from close-ups to more distant viewpoints. 11 shaded Afro heads vary in position from print to print, echoing these shifting perspectives. The tension between love and threat is poignantly felt within the different framings of the figures and their bucolic surroundings. In some, the facial features are in focus, in others it is their bodies that speak. All are captured with minimal yet swaying linear form. The soldiers that accompanied Judas to capture Christ and those who ultimately sentence him to crucifixion are absent from these images, but their presence is sensed.



Agony in the Garden
Chris Ofili, 2006

Portfolio of 11 intaglio prints with spit-bite aquatint printed in one colour on Somerset Paper hand torn to size, edition of 20 plus 5 APs

Published by the artist and Two Palms Press, NYC

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: Jack Hemps

© Victoria Miro



Ikebana
180920191
Ikebana
080220192
Alessandro
Piangiamore, 2019
Concrete,
flora, metal
Courtesy of
Alessandro
Piangiamore
and Magazzino
Gallery, Rome



Some Roses and Their Phantoms

Dorothea Tanning, 1952

Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by the Tate Collectors Forum 2003

© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2025

Permanence and Transience

In nature, there are roots and grounding properties that assure life and longevity, but death and decay are never too far away. Dorothea Tanning, like many Surrealist artists whom she associated with, perceived beauty and seduction in the evanescent qualities of nature. Her painting *Some Roses and Their Phantoms* of 1952 is permeated with a sense of mystery and transience.

Alessandro Piangiamore references the Japanese art form of Ikebana in his series of petrified flowers. The term *ikebana* comes from the combination of the Japanese *ikeru* (to arrange, have life, be living) and *hana* (flower), and it relates to the practice of nurturing, arranging and viewing plants throughout the four seasons, as established in Japan over 550 years ago. Piangiamore blends life and death in his own interpretation of the practice. Found flowers from the streets and markets of Rome are impressed in poured concrete. Where there is fleetingness and ephemerality in his art, there is also gravitas and solidity.

Here some roses from a very different garden sit?, lie? stand?, gasp?, dream?, die?—on white linen. They may serve you tea or coffee. As I saw them take shape on the canvas I was amazed by their solemn colours and their quiet mystery that called for—seemed to demand—some sort of phantoms. So I tried to give them their phantoms and their still-lifeness.

Dorothea Tanning ⁵



⁵ Dorothea Tanning: *Birthday and Beyond*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000 (exhibition catalogue).

A Flower is a Symbol

Flowers have long been associated with figures in the visual arts. They may appear as attributes of the subjects they accompany, as evocations of status or origin, or as premonitions of the future. A rose for instance can have different meanings according to the context in which it is depicted. In Christian iconography, it is the flower of martyrs and miracles. It symbolises beauty and purity, but as in Domenichino's *Madonna della Rosa* it may also allude to Jesus's crown of thorns and impending death. The rose as held by the standing noble woman in the portrait from the circle of Alonso Sánchez Coello reflects sumptuousness and fidelity. Pinkish-red roses and buds held by Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, in her portrait by Thomas Gainsborough, echo the sitter's soft yet piercing persona. The rose is most commonly associated with love, although in Pietro Tenerani's marble sculpture *Cupid Removing a Thorn from the Foot of Venus* its thorns can also warn against the dangers of love.



**Cupid Removing a Thorn
from the Foot of Venus**

Pietro Tenerani, 1823-1825
Marble



**Portrait of Georgiana,
Duchess of Devonshire**
Thomas Gainsborough,
1785-1787
Oil on canvas



**Portrait of a Lady,
Possibly Margaret of Parma**
Circle of Alonso Sánchez Coello,
about 1560
Oil on canvas





Ana Prvacki – *Ludi Florales*

Berlin-based artist Ana Prvacki has conceived a site-specific performative piece for *The Gorgeous Nothings* that takes inspiration from the goddess Flora and involves a live trail through the garden and grounds of Chatsworth House. With particular reference to the *Ludi Florales* or Games of Flora, the ancient Roman festival that honoured the goddess of flowers, vegetation and fertility, Prvacki leads her viewers into a realm of playfulness and wonder. Intersections of science, folklore, spirituality, and human connection emerge in Prvacki's conversations with nature. Her findings will feature in a series of immersive films that are to be released periodically on the Chatsworth online networks.



Flora

Caius Gabriel Cibber, about 1687-90

Marble

Photo: India Hobson



If you would like more information about *The Gorgeous Nothings, Flowers at Chatsworth*, please speak to our guides.

Find out more about *The Gorgeous Nothings* and the events we have on offer at: chatsworth.org/thegorgeousnothings
#TheGorgeousNothings

Chatsworth is a Charity

Chatsworth House Trust is a registered charity established in 1981 to look after the house, collection, garden and parkland for everyone.

Every penny generated by ticket sales, Gift Aid, donations, legacies, sponsorship and membership is reinvested into the charity to fund essential conservation and our programme of exhibitions, events, learning and community outreach.

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Sister (Capanna)

Chiara Camoni, 2022

Iron, black terracotta, fresh and dry flowers

Photo: Camilla Maria Santini

Courtesy SpazioA, Pistoia and the Nicoletta Fiorucci Collection

Eileen Agar
Ruth Asawa
Anna Atkins
Frank Bowling
Chiara Camoni
Dorothy Cross
Maurizio Fioravanti
Simryn Gill
Gluck
George Graham
Donna Huddleston
Elliott Hundley
Konstantin Kakanias
Kapwani Kiwanga
Michael Landy
Cecily Lasnet
Liza Lou
Jonas Mekas
Chris Ofili
Alessandro Piangiamore
Ana Prvacki
Elias Sime
Dorothea Tanning
Emma Tenant
David Wiseman