



ERIN JOHNSON: UNNAMED FOR DECADES

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I MIGHT NOT BE HERE WHEN YOU COME

By Ellen Y. Tani

“We become or we are unbecoming. We change. We are no longer who we were or who we would have been. When something happens differently than it has before, when something affects us, we reforge ourselves in response. Every now harbors chaos and, therefore, a capacity for change. When survival is posed as enduring as such, we miss how that task calls for its own undoing in time. None of us survives as such; indeed, perhaps, freedom requires we give way to other things. Now. And perhaps again.”^[1]

In her text *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling calls on us to accept the impossibility of survival as such. While the conditions of racial capitalism call up a desire for escape in an effort to stay alive, she argues, one’s survival does not mean one survives unaltered. It is in this process of altering, she notes, that we find freedom, taking as a point of departure a harrowing stanza from “A Litany for Survival,” penned in 1978 by Audre Lorde: “we were never meant to survive.” Keeling sees a radical, transformative potential in survival as an opportunity for our own undoing for the sake of future selves.

Survival, in other words, might not be about preserving some enduring notion of “normalcy.” It can be understood instead as a continually unfolding process of unbecoming and becoming simultaneously. This proposal fundamentally rejects the assumed motivation of survival and, by extension, other matters of being: What futurity is possible in the refusal to classify and contain knowledge within the known parameters of a system? What investments in the future can be made in the face of inevitable loss? How can survival and care intertwine? How can a network of people who support and believe in that intertwining construct a vision of the future based not on loss, but rather on connection?

In the exhibition *Unnamed for Decades*, Erin Johnson’s work addresses these questions by shuttling between reality, dream, and a dream-like proposition. We start with a plant specimen known only recently as *Solanum plastisexum*, whose sexual fluidity confounded botanists for years. It is a flowering Australian bush tomato, but unlike other plants, is unpredictably hermaphroditic and does not conform to sexual binaries. Many plants have male and female sexual reproductive functions, and experience sexual change over their lifespan, but as researcher Christopher Martine noted, “Each time [*Solanum plastisexum*] was encountered, it was expressing itself a different way through its sexual form.” The plant required an elastic classification to accommodate its unstable sexuality and unpredictable identity—thus, the etymology of its name combines the Greek root for “moldable” or “pliable” with “sex.” Its confusing behavior paralyzed research for years, and as such it remained unnamed until 2019, when it was officially described by a group of researchers at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. In the words of researcher Angela McDonnell, “no one has been able to understand what exactly it’s doing, and how it’s doing it, and why it’s doing it.”

In Johnson’s video *There are things in this world that are yet to be named*, researchers in Bucknell University’s *Solanum plastisexum* lab gently examine plant specimens in a greenhouse, juxtaposed with film footage taken from the Australian section of Los Angeles’s Huntington Botanical Garden. The researchers study live specimens within an atmosphere that re-creates the climatological system in which they thrive in nature, and present for the camera dried plants that have been tenderly pressed between newspaper pages in the facility’s storage area. Below whirring greenhouse fans that circulate climate-controlled, temperature-corrected air, the researchers snake throughout the greenhouse while reciting the incantation “there are things in this world that are yet to be named,”

phase shifting between states of controlled study and enchantment, perhaps a nod to what were believed to be the spellbinding powers of nightshade plants like the tomato.

To name something is to call it into existence, and in the case of plants like *Solanum plastisexum*, to name it enabled its study and conservation. That the strangeness of this species' sex was cast off as unknowable and thus irrelevant, that its very survival was occluded by assumptions that unchanging binary parameters could contain all of existence—reflects the heteropatriarchal assumptions governing its field of study. To propose a dream-like space within a laboratory of “hard” science queers the latter domain of knowledge in order to expose the dream not as escape, but as possibility.

In her heartfelt manifesto, “I dream of a feminist science,” Carol Halpern reflects on a turning point in her feminist conscience as a research scientist in the 1970s. After years of enduring gender-based slights and microaggressions, she learned of Carol Gilligan: the social psychologist whose groundbreaking 1982 book *In a Different Voice* exposed implicit gender bias in the field by exposing how its fundamental assumptions and theories were based on research that used only male subjects. “All graduates in psychology knew that if they ever wanted to finish their theses they shouldn't include females in their studies,” Halpern writes. “The data always fits much more nicely into some sensible hypothesis if women are left out.”

The sciences are supposed to fill in the gaps of our knowledge rather than create them. Yet in asking how a hypothesis can be sensible if it is fundamentally partial, Halpern reveals the aporetic qualities of empirical thinking when it is faced with the unexpected, the mercurial, or the unpredictable within its own system. Aporia is a rhetorical state of puzzlement or perplexity, expressed as being “at a loss” or “at an impasse”—it is the dead end or uninhabitable space within a given system. Both Halpern and Gilligan, as interlocutors between feminist critique and the hard sciences, interrogate the “universals” whose gendered quality reveal them as non-neutral.^[2] If we heed their voices, we can see other aporetic spaces within conventional structures of knowledge and thereby understand and appreciate the significance of the discrepant and the marginalized. Through Johnson's video, which tenderly explores the metaphorical afterlife of this unruly plant, aporia becomes fertile harbor for secrecy, queerness, care, and knowledge in an era that feels precarious, if not terminal.

There are things in this world that are yet to be named has a scripted voice-over drawn from interviews with botanist Tanisha Williams and love letters between Rachel Carson (1907–1964) and Dorothy Freeman (1898–1991). Carson was forty-six and Freeman fifty-five when the two met in 1953 on Southport Island in Maine. Though Freeman had a husband and child, the two sustained a passionate, romantic correspondence throughout Carson's writing of seminal environmental texts. The letters Johnson chose were written by Carson, who was dying of cancer as she finished the manuscript of her book *Silent Spring*, which was posthumously published in 1964. As the camera concentrates on the plants and their careful handlers, a woman's voice (photographer Farah Al Qasimi) reads one of Carson's last letters: “You're starting on your way to me this morning. But I have such a strange feeling that I might not be here when you come. So this is just an extra little note of goodbye should that happen. I've had many pains in the past few days and I'm weary in every bone. And tonight, there is something off about my vision, which may mean nothing. But of course I thought: what if I can't write, can't see to write tomorrow? So, a few words before I turn out the light...Our trouble has always been that

we don't start talking soon enough. I guess because we knew or hoped there would always be another chance to meet, and the letters would fill the gaps.” Calling attention to Carson's yearning to have lived an openly queer life while she still had the time, Johnson highlights the connection between her regrets for a personal life unknown and her urgent call to prevent collective regrets in the face of looming environmental disasters. As I think of Carson's own mortality slipping away, I understand her well-known phrase, “in nature, nothing exists alone,” not just as a poetic observation of environmental systems. It is also, in the rapidly escalating intensity of climate crisis, a final, pressing call to seize and elongate the finite strands of time with other species and ourselves, undergirding the quiet urgency of the *Solanum plastisexum* researchers and, by extension, all of us. Filmed while wildfires ravaged 25.5 million acres of the Australian bush, *There are things in this world that are yet to be named* reveals the understanding of the plant's puzzling nature just as biodiversity, which gave rise to this plant, seems poised to collapse. It inhabits a tipping point that feels as potent, as imminently mortal, as Carson's last letters. This is art for the end times: it acknowledges the potential futility of caring for life in the face of its destruction, and calls for care—in all its unconventional forms—even when it seems illogical.

Acknowledging a complex system of problems that seems unresolvable, yet determined nonetheless to explore its unknowns, Johnson's practice stands adjacent to the critiques voiced by *Silent Spring*, Carson's most famous book. *Silent Spring* was and still stands as a trenchant response to technocracy and its faith that all complex situations had an “optimal solution.” Embracing top-down solutions espoused by the scientific-industrial complex, technocracy is the ideological belief, emergent in the 1930s and resurgent in the 1960s, that governance should be driven by engineers rather than politicians. The rise of both expertise and the interdisciplinary think-tank promised to resolve some of societies' most complex challenges (by framing situations like racial capitalism as problems that had a solution: see urban renewal or the “war on drugs”). The end of World War II introduced opportunities to imagine an engineered future, made possible by the increasing faith in technology during the Cold War and the anthropocentric optimization of that world for the singular unit “man,” as in “mankind,” as in “humans.” Carson's resistance to this phenomenon was a poetic reminder that humans *are* nature: what we try to kill in nature ultimately harms us.

In other videos, Johnson merges a curiosity for the dream space with a faith in intimacy and community, which unfolds as a set of propositions rooted in touch. Offering a vision of connectedness and queer futurity, *Lake*, (*Skowhegan ME*) holds a mesmerizing aerial perspective on a cluster of bodies floating in water. They express irregularities in movement and arrangement, as some kick to keep afloat while others are immovably buoyant; at this scale, they appear like specimens. Over the film's five-minute duration the group of artists dissipates into sub-clusters and free-floating independents. Some link hands, others kick themselves closer to the center, and some let the currents determine their direction.

Shot from a central point with a slow rotational pan, the video *Tomatoes* (*Skowhegan ME*) canvases a young and diverse group of people (many of the same artists from *Lake*) in a grass field, each of them touching, fondling, licking, consuming, or otherwise manipulating ripe, heavy tomatoes being passed around in a large bowl. The camera keeps close company with this tight circle, fixed at face-level at the expense of revealing bodies, context, or background. Besides the occasional audible slurp, all we hear is the low rustle of leaves, some bird calls, the wind, and people whispering secrets to one another. Their intentional



fondling and consumption of the fruit, combined with their indifference to the camera, feels like ritual. Ritual—the purposeful calling up of otherworldly power—and touch—a form of unspoken messaging—together conjure a new language of connection.

Feminist theorist Karen Barad writes of touch not as one surface coming into contact with another, but as thousands of particles bumping up against each other on an atomic level, thousands of whispers. In her essay “On Touching” (2012), Barad explores quantum field theory, among other things, and the indeterminacy that it introduces as a survival mechanism: “it may well be the inhuman, the insensible, the irrational, the unfathomable, and the incalculable that will help us face the depths of what responsibility entails.”^[3] Thinking deeply about touch reveals the interstices of its affective and scientific dimensions.

“Measurement is surely a form of touching. (Heisenberg got that part right.) So are chemical reactions... And touch engages us in a felt sense of causality, whether we generally acknowledge that or not, and whatever it is we may think of this charged and highly important term. Touch moves and affects what it effects.”^[4]

This is a bold counter to the logics of measurement in the interest of classificatory systems, such as Francis Galton and Alphonse Bertillon’s anthropometric studies that sought to link criminality and social deviance to physiognomic traits, which easily gave way to racial discrimination. I’m reminded of Edward Steichen, renowned photographer and curator, and perhaps under-recognized horticulturist (and President of the American Delphinium Society), whose first exhibition at MoMA in 1936, *Edward Steichen’s Delphiniums*, featured his tall, meticulously cross-bred stalks of blooms for one week. The exhibition, as announced in the press release, was timed to the flowers’ peak bloom, and Steichen showed only the plants that fit within the criterion of “best” and buried the rest. Did he disregard abnormality as imperfection in the interest of man-made selection—reflecting a technocratic “optimal solution” to the conundrum of exhibiting pristine floral blooms in a museum for seven days? Or was he an author expressing a certain search for form, for cultivating, presenting and arranging the very essence of delphinium as a modernist botanical project?

As we continue to exist in an environment in which loss of both the real and the strange feels palpable, what proposition or tools exist for communication? How can we better recognize the conditions of estrangement that make things *seem* strange or unknowable, and which can lead to their potential obscurity? Johnson offers up a precious talisman, the only physical object in the exhibition. *i hear, i see* (2020) is a replica of a late 13th/early 14th c. medieval ring, made with onyx—rare in its time—that introduces a shift from past to present. In the original object, which is held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an inscription adorns the exterior of the ring’s band, which comprises three pairs of interlocked hands pierced with a narrow gash of onyx. The Latin inscription “Avdi, vidi,” which means “I heard, I see,” is repeated twice, echoing the rhythms of the chanting scientists in the video *There are things in this world that are yet to be named*. Such repetition refers to the object’s purported function, which, according to one Hebrew text, enabled its wearer to speak to their deceased loved ones in their dreams. The onyx, meanwhile, is set perpendicular to the band—dagger-like, or perhaps claw-like, since its Greek cognate refers to “claw” or “fingernail.” Johnson’s replica, *i hear, i see*, shifts the tense of the phrase ever so slightly. While the original text “I heard, I see” suggests causality as one

sense perception (hearing) gives way to another (seeing), “i hear, i see” captures a synaesthetic experience, as both sensory intakes happen simultaneously. It aligns sight (even though one doesn’t “see” while dreaming) as a metaphor for enlightenment and understanding—in this case, of a supernatural sort.

Such synaesthesia is also associated with clairvoyance, or the ability to gain information about the world through extrasensory perception (whether it be communication or ascertaining future events). Clairvoyance (from the French *clair* (clear) and *voyance* (vision)) is a foil for the mystery of things that cannot be known, because they cannot be contained, by the imaginative scope of their categorical frameworks. As the omnipresent threat of loss hovers in the air, Johnson returns us to a commingled dream space: a dream of a feminist science, the dream of intra- and inter-species communication, and the dream as a proposition for a way of being in the future. The exhibition’s title, *Unnamed for Decades* is both a description of an obscure plant and an acknowledgment of certain freedoms discovered in registering the strange, which, long relegated to the margins and unexamined, remains a powerfully latent domain. Life forms can thrive outside of the systems we invent to affirm their existence; in nature, nothing exists alone.

Ellen Y. Tani, PhD is an independent curator, art historian, and the A. W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow (2020-2022) at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts. She has developed exhibitions at the ICA Boston, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her research in modern and contemporary art engages conversations from critical race studies, disability studies, black studies and feminism. Her writing has been published in exhibition monographs on Charles Gaines, Senga Nengudi, in peer-reviewed journals; *Art Journal*, *American Quarterly*, *Apricota*; and elsewhere.

[1] Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*

(New York: New York University Press, 2019), p. ix

[2] Gilligan shaped the field of psychology with the concept of “difference feminism,” which acknowledges the different qualities of men and women, but asserts that no value judgment on them. She is known for establishing a theory of care, upsetting longstanding beliefs about stages of moral development that psychologists thought reflected universal codes of behavior. In a different voice offers a rhizomatic theory, a dynamic web of an individual’s unique relations with the world rather than a linear, hierarchical spectrum of an individual’s path along the scales of normative/non-normative, or under- to adequately-developed.

[3] Karen Barad, “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *difference: A Journal of Feminist Culture Studies*, v.23, no. 3 (2012), p.218.

[4] *Ibid*, p.208.



i hear, i see, 2020
brass ring with onyx
Edition of 4





*There are things in this world
that are yet to be named*, 2020
single-channel video
Edition of 4
Directed and Produced by: Erin Johnson
Directors of Photography: Erin Johnson
and Kanthy Peng
Editors: Erin Johnson and Matt Nelson
Sound Design and Mix: Matt Nelson
Additional Sound Design: Nikita Gale
Voice-over: Farah Al Qasimi
Featuring: Chris Martine, Cheyenne
Moore, Ariel Antoine, Tanisha Williams
from Bucknell University's *Solanum
platisexum* lab
Voice-over: Farah Al Qasimi

Tomatoes, (Skowhegan, ME), 2020
multi-channel video
Edition of 4
Directed and Produced by: Erin Johnson
Directors of Photography: Erin Johnson
and Sondra Perry
Editor: Matt Nelson
Sound Design and Mix: Matt Nelson
Featuring: Genesis Baez, Pat Blocher,
Ally Caple, Anika Carterfield, Nicole
Chaput, Azza El Siddique, Asaf Elkalai,
Maria Fragoso, Nikita Gale, Philipp
Guffler, Chase Hall, Nasim Hantehzadeh,
Kamron Hazel, Raneer Henderson, Jack
Hogan, Ariel Jackson, Tomashi Jackson,
Kat Lyons, Jeffrey Meris, Rehan Miskci,
Kanthy Peng, Zuqiang Peng, Bryson Rand,
Gonzalo Reyes, Youngeun Sohn, Sindhu
Thirumalaisamy, Maria Tinaut,
Jake Troyli, Audra Wist



Lake (Skowhegan, ME), 2020
single-channel video
Edition of 4
Directed and Produced by: Erin
Johnson
Director of Photography:
Christopher Carroll
Editor: Erin Johnson
Featuring: Shani Ben Simon, Anika
Carterfield, Elizabeth Flood,
Maria Fragoso, Jessica Fuquay,
Meredith Gaglio, Chitra Ganesh,
Nasim Hantehzadeh, Raneer
Henderson, Bryson Rand, Jinal
Sangoi, Hannah Shaban, Saar
Shemesh, Sindhu Thirumalaisamy,
Maria Tinaut, Lan Tuazon,
Jordan Weitzman





Erin Johnson and Jordie Oetken
Ears, 2020
16 5/8 x 22 3/4 inches
Archival Inkjet Print
Edition of 4

Solanum Platisexum, 2020
16 5/8 x 22 3/4 inches
Archival Inkjet Print
Edition of 4

Sheet, 2020
29 1/2 x 44 1/2 inches
Archival Inkjet Print
Edition of 4

Erin Johnson and Jordie Oetken
Ears, 2020
16 5/8 x 22 3/4 inches
Archival Inkjet Print
Edition of 4

