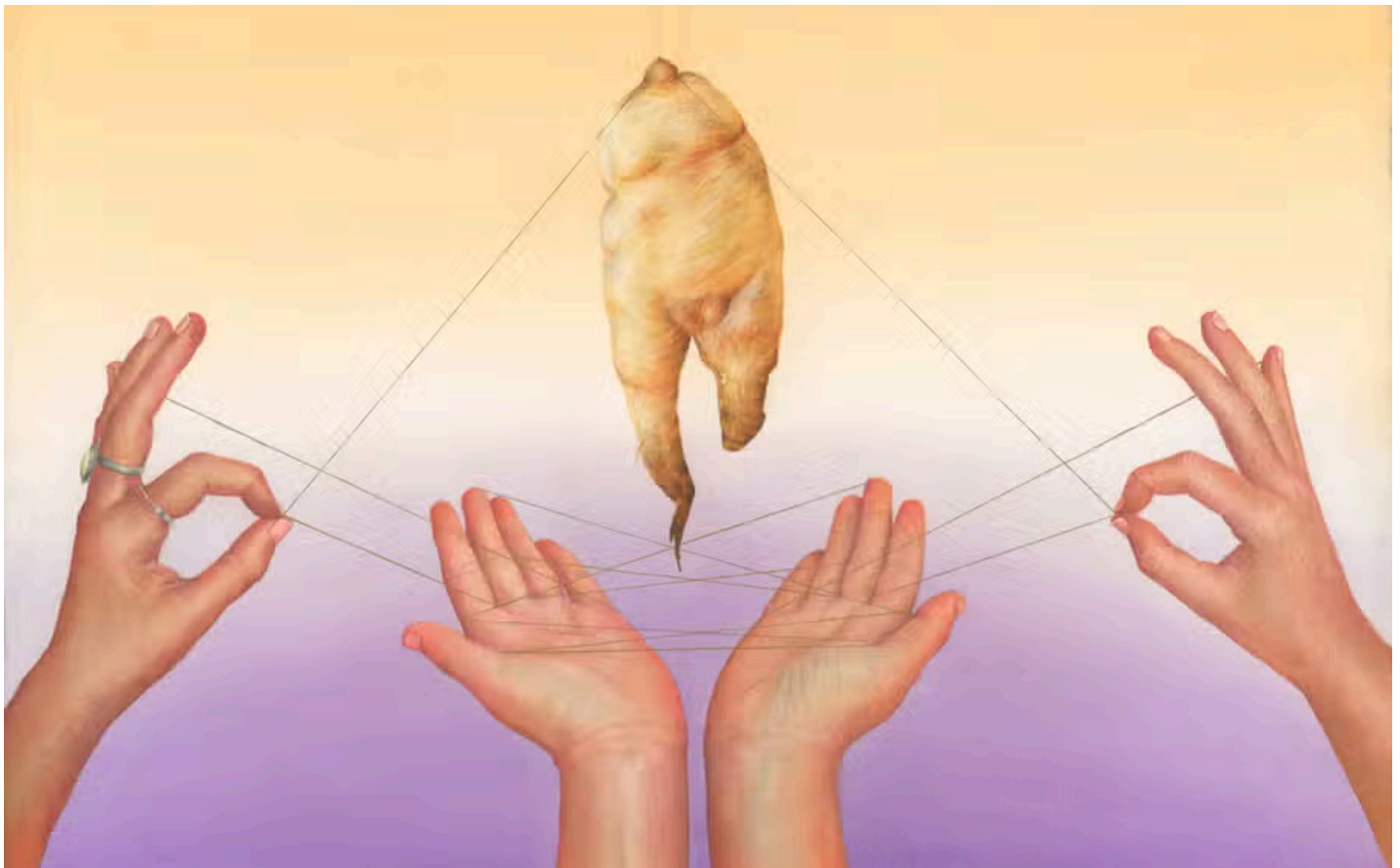




CULTURE | EXHIBITIONS

Rooted Beings at the Wellcome Collection review: woo-woo whimsy aside, this is a fascinating show

The best works in this absorbing show are those which speak for themselves



MANDRAKE, 2021

PATRICIA DOMINGUEZ



Review at a glance

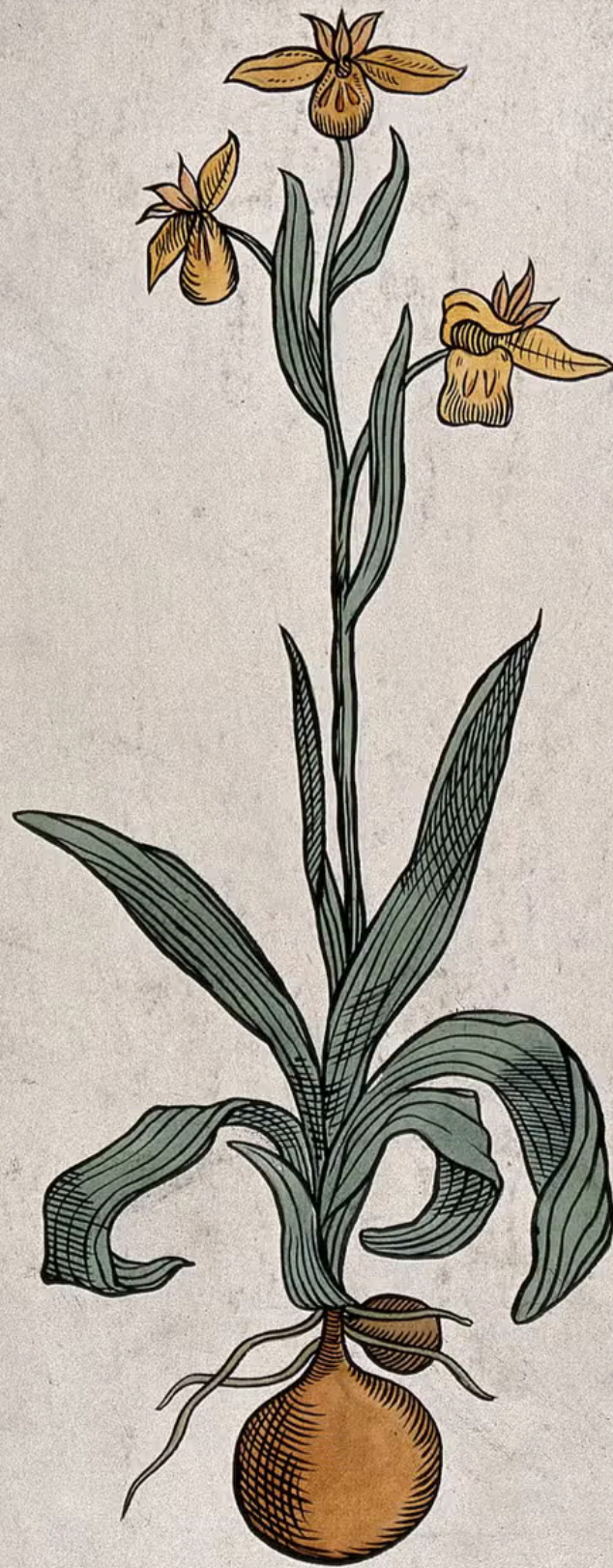


As the climate emergency deepens, there's a distinct feeling of a zeitgeist around the idea of human symbiosis with nature, interspecies connectivity and hybrid cultural-natural forms. In the influential Biennales of Sydney, on now, and Venice, coming up later in the year, these themes are dominant, and now here in London, at the Wellcome Collection, is a show examining our relationship with plants and fungi through seven artists and collectives' work.

Rooted Beings looks backwards – to an extractive past that now defines the present, a geological period being defined as the Anthropocene, where plants are seen as a passive resource to be exploited – to a possible future where humans rewild not just their landscapes but their minds, and think of plants as equal beings, ushering in a new period, the Symbiocene.

As accompaniments to the contemporary projects, there are botanical illustrations from the fifth century CE Johnson Papyrus, the first of its kind, to a 19th-century study of fungi. But species classification was bound up with exploration and, with that, colonialism and the exploitation and destruction of Indigenous communities and their distinctive knowledges, in which a balanced relationship with nature is fundamental.

It's important, then, that the show includes drawings by Joseca, from the Yanomami community in the Brazilian Amazon, in which he illustrates particular specimens of tree accompanied by the ecosystem that depends on and supports them, with wildlife including toucans, macaws, tortoises and monkeys, alongside the Yanomami people.



DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES: A PLANT (ORCHID) RESEMBLING A BEE, AFTER G.B. DELLA
PORTA C. 1923

Close to Joseca's drawings are the "totems" of Patricia Domínguez – bespoke units shaped to evoke both plants and human bodies which contain historic documentation relating to four botanical specimens, their forms, histories and medical and cultural uses. A shifting hologram hovers above each totem, and a watercolour painting is set within a niche in the back of each one, too, alongside clusters of encased dried plants and gems that look like votive objects or charms.

There's a lot to unpack here – there's a booklet you can pick up in the gallery – and it's fascinating stuff, especially her investigation into pre-Columbian thought around plants as "allies". But Domínguez's aesthetic – especially the watercolours – has a whiff of woo-woo whimsy about it, despite the project's grounding in science and social research. That may be a critique of that language. But, for me, despite all her multimedia activity, the booklet is the most absorbing element of the project.



PHOTOSYNTHETICS, 2021

EDUARDO NAVARRO

Indeed, ideas of wellbeing and mindfulness are a regular accompaniment to the works. The green and black charcoal drawings of the Argentinian artist Eduardo Navarro – human-plant syntheses rendered on huge envelopes containing plane-tree seeds that will eventually be buried in the soil and prompt new arboreal life – are wonderful. But I’m not sure they need an accompanying text and sound work by Navarro and Michael Marder to make their point – it essentially asks us to imagine ourselves as plants, asking us to draw in “a cosmic breath with [our] whole body” and telling us that our skin is “an enormous leaf in which [our] whole body is wrapped, as well as a respiratory system, and a number of sense organs, photosensitive and acoustically engaged”.

In many ways the best things here are those that speak for themselves, like Joseca's drawings and the embroideries of the Turkish artist Gödze İlkin, which open the show. İlkin stitches together human limbs, plant shapes, and amorphous forms almost like lumps of stem ginger, that are strangely compelling – monstrous yet, because of the delicacy of her materials, tender. Privileging the imagination while clearly engaging with social issues, they convey the fraughtness yet also the possibilities of human-plant interaction – in a way that only art can.

Wellcome Collection, to August 2, wellcomecollection.org