

# Voynich Botanical Studies

Miljohn Ruperto  
Ulrik Heltoft



The strangeness and mystery of the Voynich Manuscript has inspired musicians and novelists. Not surprisingly, the document has also proved a springboard for visual artists, but the remarkable thing about the body of work made by Miljohn Ruperto and Ulrik Heltoft is how it doesn't just feed off the manuscript's secrets and complications but builds upon them to become something odd, fantastic and mysterious in its own right.

The Voynich Manuscript, in the collection of the Beinecke Library at Yale, dates from the 15th or 16th century. At least the vellum does. Everything else about the modest-sized, 240-page volume is in dispute: its country of origin (though scholars narrow it down to Central Europe); the undecipherable language of its text (possibly a code?); the purpose--scientific? artistic? both?--of its botanical, astronomical, astrological, and biological illustrations. Some claim the manuscript is a hoax. Some say it was written by aliens. Some attribute curative powers to the pages and have attempted to lick or consume them.

Ruperto, based in L.A., and Heltoft, from Copenhagen, have produced a series of photographs based on the manuscript's 100+ ink and colored wash botanical illustrations, which detail unidentifiable plant species. Using computer imaging software, they construct three-dimensional visualizations of the individual plants, make a negative from each digital file, and then silver gelatin prints, the traditional way, in the darkroom.

The images are stunning, surprising, curious. Each plant specimen, isolated against a rich black ground, reads as a sculptural presence with palpable texture--thistled, shriveled, silky, rugged, rubbery, glossy. One of them has two stems that dangle bell-like pods and a crown of tiny pineapples, this sweetly ornamental array rising from a thick, hairy rod of roots surging with raw sexuality. Another crazy beauty mashes together a trio of whiskered lotus seed heads, a chandelier of sinuous stems barnacled with dark beads, and a drooping mass of vaguely animate ridged pods.

The pictures pay homage to Karl Blossfeldt's elegant taxonomic studies of the 1920s, published as "Urformen der Kunst" (Art Forms in Nature), and also recall Joan Fontcuberta's witty and whimsical "Herbarium" photographs of the early 1980s, documenting hybrid flora of the artist's own devising.

Whatever the motivations behind the original Voynich illustrations, Ruperto and Heltoft's pictures manifest a delicious paradox as photographic records of imaginary subjects, indexical traces of fictions. Their integration of analog and digital photo technologies further complicates the temporal weave upon which these images float: old yet new; hand-crafted but electronically-generated; historically grounded and also ephemerally ageless. Steeped in contradiction, they supply crisp evidence of a gauzy, existential indeterminacy. They are perfect relics of photography's 21st-century era of exploration.

Leah Ollman

Ghost Plants  
Timothy Morton

A text that may not be text, accompanied by images of plants that may not be (actual) plants. This sounds unpromising. But it isn't. It says something deep about the nature of a thing: it is so specific, so uniquely itself, that it's always deeper than anything we can say about it, or any of its relative appearances.

We thus confront a world of pretense—and as Lacan puts it, “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don't know whether it's pretense or not.” It may be writing, or not. It may be a real plant, or not.

A ghost plant: a specter, an illusion. Or a haunting double of a real plant. Or of a “real” book, like some piece of art brut. Or something far in excess of what can be diagrammed, anatomized, predicted in advance.

Strangely animate, these ghost plants. They flow and curl.

A thing that explodes into a galaxy, or is it a cutaway diagram of a fruit, or the interior of a single celled organism, or a pool full of bathing women? Is it a hoax? There is no way finally to know. To be a thing is perhaps to be a potential hoax. To proliferate ghosts of oneself, unceasingly. There is something grotesque about it. To be a thing is to be a kind of parody.

So when Miljohn Ruperto and Ulrik Heltoft make ghostly images of the ghost plants, they are telling the truth about these weird images and text: nonsense, half sense, encrypted sense—who can tell in advance?

Ghost plants. Nietzsche's Zarathustra says that man is somewhere between a plant and a ghost.

Between a plant and a ghost: Nietzsche means that a human flickers between what she is and how she appears.

Doesn't the idea also suggest a kind of scale in which you could be 30% plant, 70% ghost, or 40% plant, 60% ghost, and so on? Doesn't this in turn suggest the possibility that a plant could be a ghost? And also—there is something not human about being human. When you look at a human, you are looking at a gap between or within a thing.

The ghostly images of plants in the Voynich Manuscript bring out something that is intrinsic to being a plant. A plant's DNA exploits its appearance to attract pollinating insects. A plant's appearance is not a plant, but a plant-appearance for some other being, such as a bee. A plant emits a sort of ghost of itself, an uncanny double.

What is called Nature is a forgetting of this ghostliness, this necessary doubling, the way in which a plant is haunted by its appearance, or the way in which a physical system such as DNA is also a semiotic one, and that there is a strange disconnection between these levels.

Digital images of plants, made with electrons and silicon: mineral monsters. Monsters that are metaphors for humans, wavering between plant and ghost.

In an era in which nonhumans press on our glass windows ever more insistently, get stuck in our machines, caught in our webs of fate—in this ecological age, such a strange peeling apart of the human into its ghostly nonhuman components is necessary.

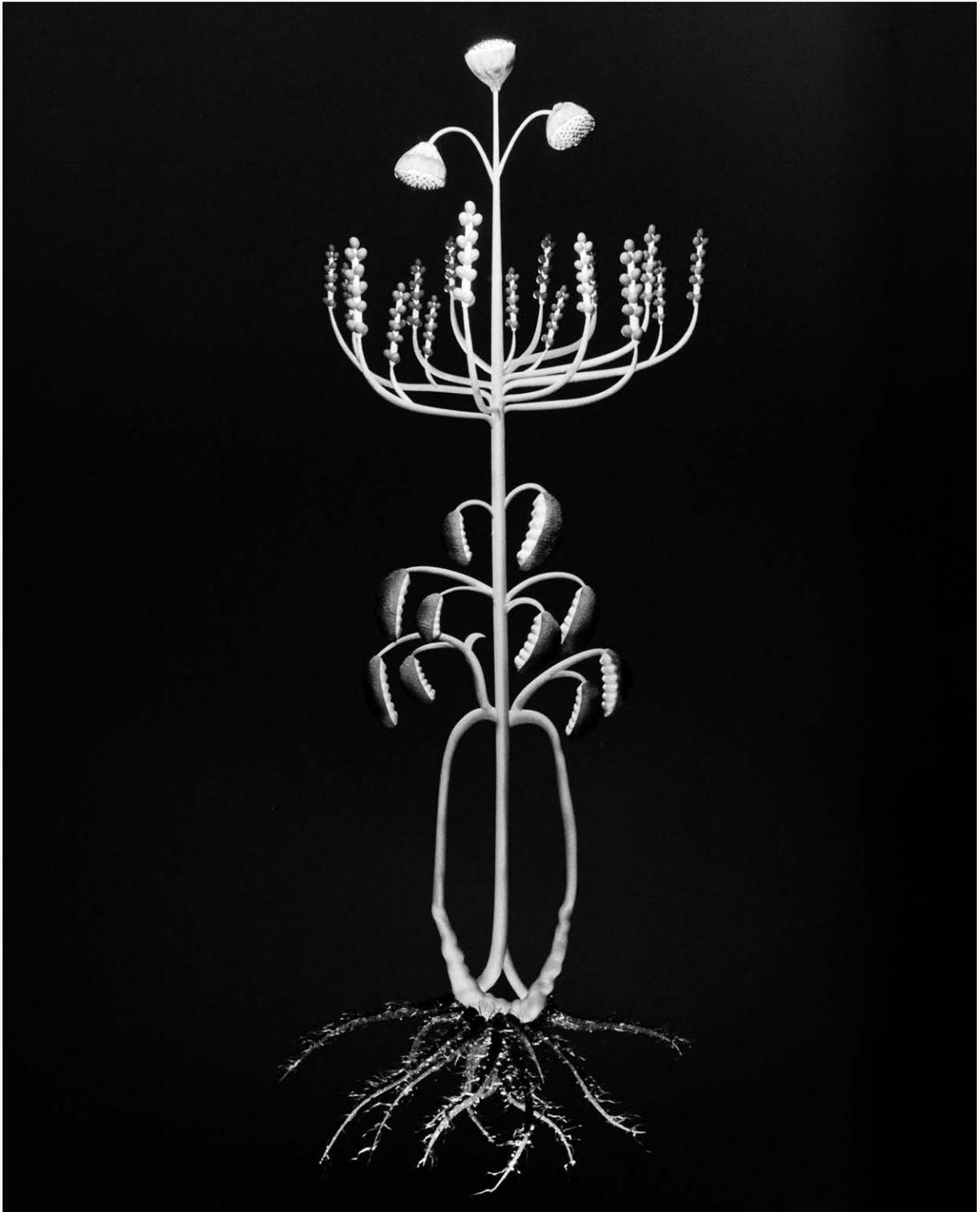
A peeling apart without Nature: without a stable, normative sense of what lies outside—if there is indeed an outside—of human social, psychic and philosophical space. Ruperto and Heltoft's ghost plants haunt us with the specter of life forms without Nature. They tease and threaten, they will not lie still and conform to pre-established categories. This is how plants—and humans, and polar bears—appear to us in an ecological age.

It isn't a question of “Back to Nature.” It's a question of allowing ourselves to become susceptible to a realm that seems eerily paranormal.

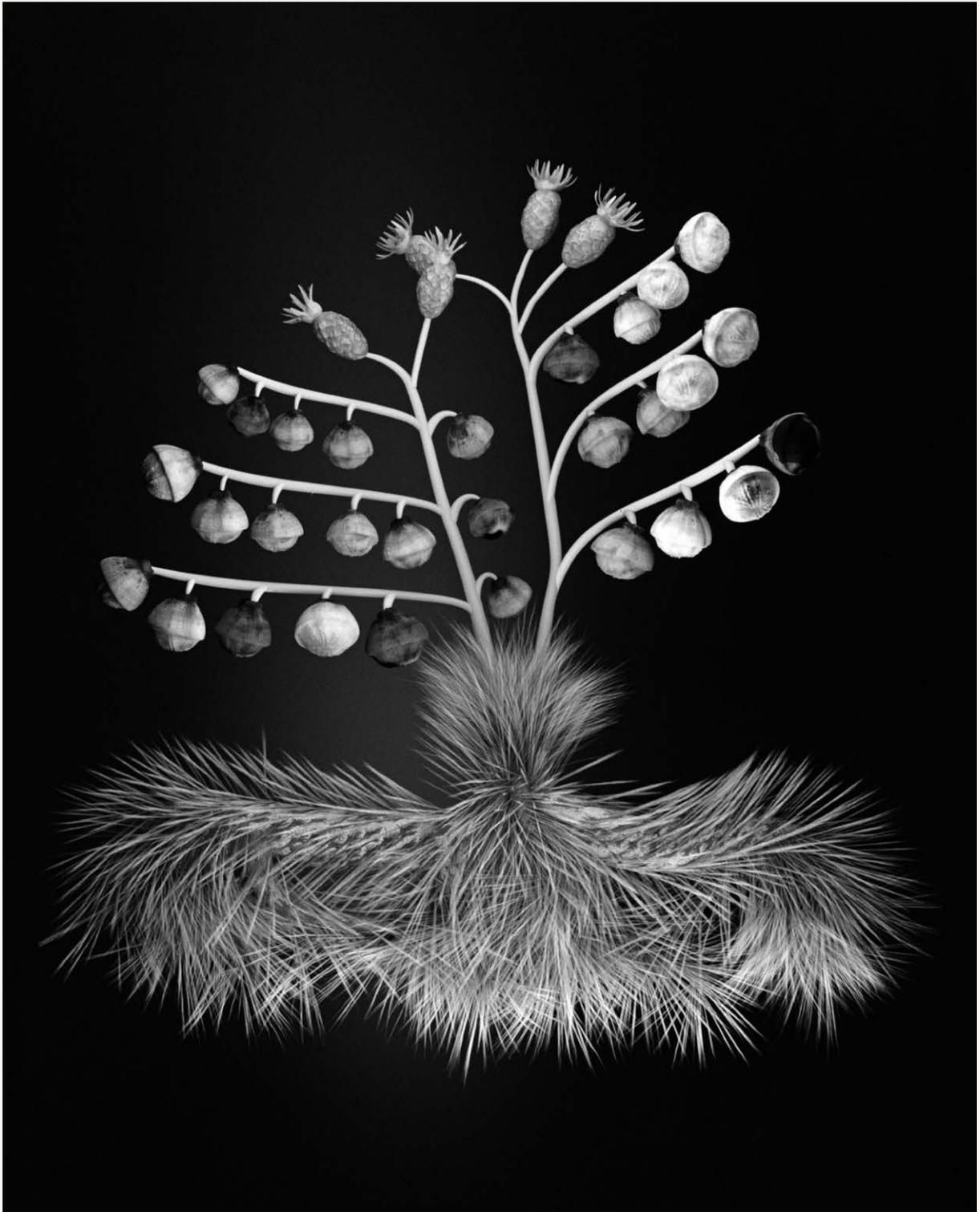
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