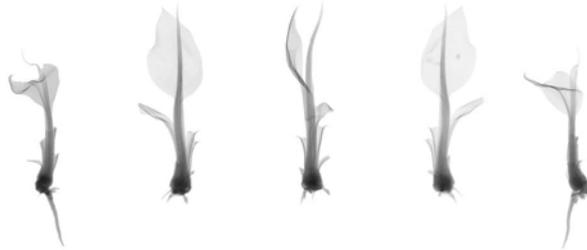


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Museums Review

## In the galleries: 'Archiving Eden' exhibition sprouts interest with macro photos



Dornith Doherty. "Banana Clones," 2009.  
(Dornith Doherty/Holly Johnson Gallery and Moody Gallery)

By **Mark Jenkins**

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Pondering its stark exterior, observers might guess that the modernist Norwegian citadel photographed by Dornith Doherty is some sort of prison. Not exactly. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault is designed to preserve humanity by maintaining its ability to grow food. The Arctic structure is the most futuristic place the artist chronicled for "Archiving Eden," on display at the National Academy of Sciences.

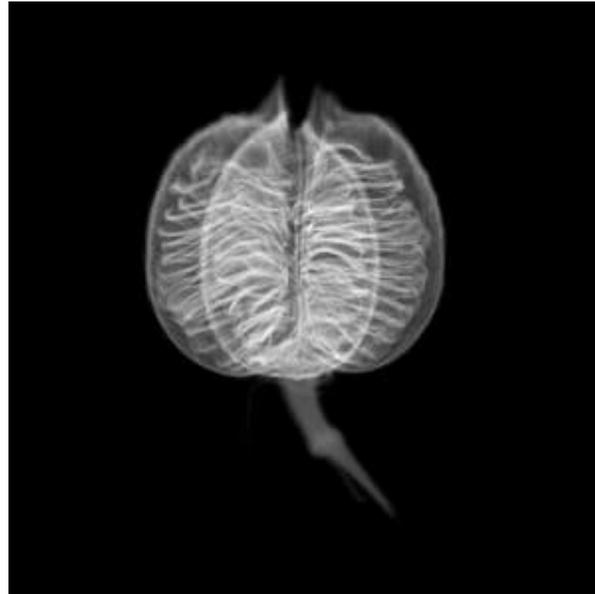
The project began at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Texas, where Doherty lives. It led her to a Brazilian agriculture facility and the Vavilov Institute for Plant Industry in St. Petersburg, where antique wooden drawers hold the barley collection. (The Russian storehouse has a grim history: Botanists starved to death rather than plunder the seed reserve during the Nazi siege of the city then called Leningrad.)

Scientific buildings aren't the only structures Doherty documents. Borrowing X-ray equipment used by the repositories to monitor their collections, the photographer also makes ghostly macroscopic images that reveal the architecture of seeds, pods and sprouts. Some of the pictures are straightforward and unmanipulated, while others are arranged into intricate arrays. Both kinds are ethereally beautiful, while hinting at narratives.

One multi-plant collage signifies the "Columbian exchange" of species across the Atlantic after the arrival of European colonists. A row of five cloned banana sprouts reveals how quickly identical

organisms grow into diverse individuals. Arranged into a seemingly pulsing orb, masses of epiphyte seeds conjure an entire universe.

Several of the macroscopic pictures use lenticular printing to achieve a 3-D effect. Thus “1,400 Ash Tree Seeds” isn’t just a memorial to the tree, devastated in North America by an invasive Asian beetle. It also illustrates in simulated motion how the seeds change color during the preservation process. Even when flash-frozen for posterity, nature is in flux.



Dornith Doherty. "Red Yucca," 2011.  
(Dornith Doherty/Holly Johnson Gallery and Moody Gallery)

A solitary structure, much smaller than the Svalbard vault, features in Phillip K. Smith’s “From Lucid Stead,” the academy’s other current exhibition. Smith turned a 70-year-old homesteader shack in the Mojave Desert into a temporary installation, outfitted with mirrors and interior LEDs. The artist did and undid the project in 2013, but it survives in photographs, prints and a small sculpture that includes a fragment of the house.



Phillip K. Smith III. "Lucid Stead," 2013, Joshua Tree, Calif.  
(Phillip K. Smith III/Courtesy The National Academy of Sciences)

Like Doherty, Smith infiltrates natural processes. The artist, who grew up in the Mojave, meant to highlight “the quiet and the pace of change of the desert,” according to his statement. His installation was designed in accord with the sun’s movement, so the structure’s aspect changed throughout the day. At night, the LEDs took over, projecting blocks of simple, bright colors into the dark.

The artist’s photos of the installation gaze at and past the partly transformed shed, whose alternation of wooden slats and mirrored bands made it appear to be sliced into strips of solidity and openness. The “Chromatic Variant” prints replicate the effect of the installation with single-color horizontal bars. The sculpture consists of two lengths of weathered siding, flanked by a light that slowly cycles through the visible spectrum.

Missing from this iteration of “From Lucid Stead” are the sun and a natural mirror: the desert’s reflective surface. Still, the photos provide a strong sense of the structure’s eerie power. The pictures depict a building that looks as absent as it is present, floating above terrain as empty as the gaps between the slats.

***Dornith Doherty: Archiving Eden, through July 15; From Lucid Stead: Prints and Works by Phillip K. Smith, through Sept. 13 at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Ave. NW.***