

# Bloom

By Edward Chell



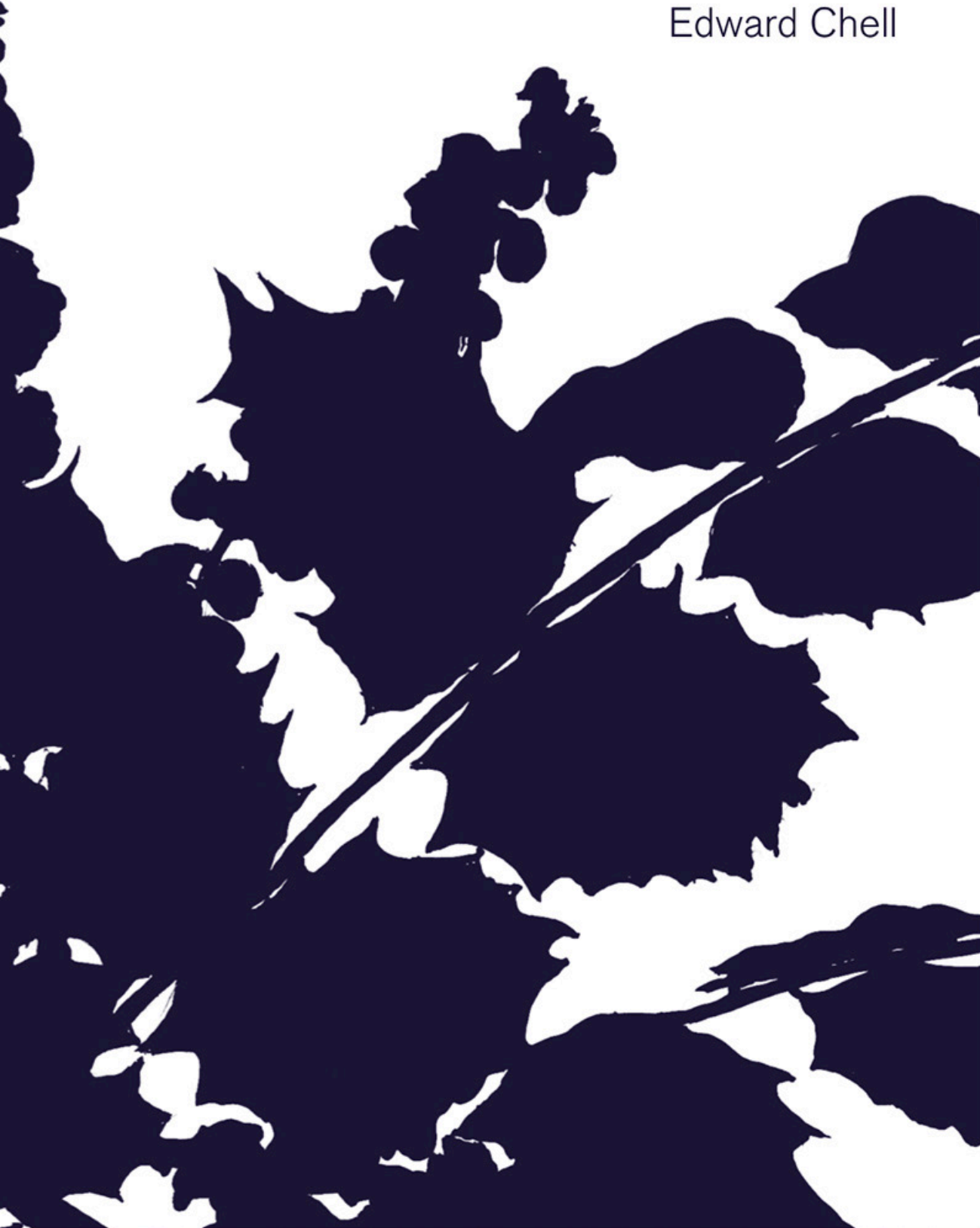
# Project Details

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Name of Researcher:	Edward Chell
Name of Output:	Bloom
UCARO link/s:	<a href="https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Bloom.html">https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Bloom.html</a>
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; curation of exhibition which also included the researcher’s own artworks, with associated book
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>EXHIBITION <i>Bloom</i>, Horniman Museum and Gardens, London, UK, 10 July 2015 - 6 December 2015</p> <p>PUBLICATION <i>Bloom</i> (2015) London: Horniman Museum and Gardens.</p>
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Funding:	<p>Arts Council England - £5,000 Arts Council England contributed through their development of the Horniman Museum and Gardens’ new showing space.</p> <p>Horniman Museum and Gardens - £15,320 In-kind funding from the Horniman included the exhibition space; publicity; production of vinyls; the opening; museum guides; posters, press-release; design and graphics; preparation of gallery and installation/de-installation; invigilation over six months; labels; large print booklets and additional information booklets.</p>

# BLOOM

Edward Chell



# Synopsis

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*Bloom* is a research output by Edward Chell comprising an exhibition at Horniman Museum and Gardens and an accompanying publication. The research celebrates the (re)discovery of the nineteenth century botanist and pioneering photographer Anna Atkins' work at the Horniman. Sharing Atkins' 'fondness for botany', Chell's interdisciplinary practice uses drawing, writing, painting, sculpture and photography to investigate the discrepancies and overlaps found between creative expression and scientific investigation.

In *Bloom* Chell responded to Atkins' work through an installation of forty new painted panels portraying both live plants from the Horniman Gardens and pressed specimens from the museum's herbarium. Chell's work spotlighted diverse narratives surrounding natural history and ecology, bringing

into question the values and emotions that emerge when we make images of plants. Chell also created an accompanying display drawing on the museum's collections and conceived as a Cabinet of Curiosities. Carboniferous fossils, eighteenth-century ceramic plates imported from China and one of Atkins' rare folio volumes were displayed alongside several pairs of car silencers, etched by Chell with roadside plants. An accompanying colour illustrated publication, also titled *Bloom*, presented essays by Chell, Anna Ricciardi and Hugh Warwick.

This portfolio of supporting contextual information outlines the project's underpinning research context, aims and methods and includes images of the exhibition. It also includes a PDF of the *Bloom* publication in addition to information on funding and visitor numbers.

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*The forty gesso panels of Bloom,  
the Natural History Gallery,  
Horniman Museum and Gardens*

# Context

Chell's long-standing fascination with collecting and classification led him to the Horniman's rare folios of cyanotypes by Anna Atkins (1843-1853), only recently re-discovered, in 2014. Chell's exhibition and book took as their starting point the exquisite 'sun prints' made by Atkins. One of her rare folios documenting British seaweeds forms part of the exhibition and is at the core of the publication. *Bloom* explores the tension which emerges in Atkins' work between the scientific drive to define, understand and control, and the aesthetic impulse to capture the unruly gorgeousness of natural life.

While Atkins recorded newly discovered species, such images are understood very differently in a contemporary context. This theme had been developed within Chell's previous work, such as *Eclipse* (2013), in which he reflected that 'museums contain lots of objects that have come from other places and belong elsewhere. "Dead" objects. Museums reify acquisition. They're about storage, they're about curation. They are about holding onto something and making it still – forever. The difference between today's categorisations of plant species, compared with the Linnaean explorations of the eighteenth century, is that so much more is premised on conservation rather than discovery. Recording extinction even'. *Bloom* thus threw a spotlight on diverse narratives connected to natural history, ecology and the history of collecting.

The research explored ecological themes relating to the future through narratives of the past, an approach connected to the AHRC theme 'Care for the Future: Thinking Forward Through the Past'. *Bloom* was exhibited at the Horniman alongside *Plantastic*, an exhibition organised by the Museum of the World (Liverpool Museums Service). *Bloom* formed a sympathetic and apt contextual point of reference for this exhibition, and highlighted key artefacts from the Horniman Museum's collections, ranging from the folios of Atkins' cyanotypes and the museum's blue and white ceramic wares to the living plants in the surrounding gardens.

In the *Bloom* book, Anna Ricciardi explores a rich and discursive narrative combining photographic history and the work of Atkins as a pioneer photographer against a backdrop of turbulent cultural change and the collecting fetishes of individuals and museums, describing how this underpins Chell's installation. Chell's illustrated essay also sets *Bloom* in a historical and cultural arena. The essay describes how the installation alludes to a much larger cultural framework of commodity exchange, situating Cabinets of Curiosity and the formation of museums alongside the display of wealth and the ecological fallout of such collecting. Hugh Warwick offers the standpoint of an ecologist. Describing Britain's colonisation of new plant species through trade and garden vanity, he sets out to describe how some of these species 'leaped the fence', occasionally becoming an invasive problem, sometimes beneficial, always with an ecological footprint.

## REFERENCES

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*Bloom installation, the Natural  
History Gallery, Horniman Museum  
and Gardens*

# Research Aims and Questions

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## Research aims:

To disentangle the complex relations between museum artefacts, specimens and stuffed animals that are simultaneously exhibited as 'alive' in quasi-natural settings and yet are completely dead and static

To interrogate the underlying taxonomic properties of the Atkins folios, their relationship to museum acquisition and the larger questions/problems of material consumption in the contemporary world

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## Research questions:

How can the visual worlds of Linnaean plant categorisation, increasingly prevalent in 18th and 19th century England, be exploited in sculptural object/image combinations to reflect ecological and environmental questions in new ways?

How might this reflect and comment on the micro world of ecology and the macro world of commerce?

How might such combinations of object and image interrogate the production of 18th and 19th century luxury goods and throw new light on today's legacy of commodity fetishism?

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*Sweet woodruff, Asperula odorata*



# Research Methods and Process

Chell's exhibition responded to and incorporated Atkins' folios with a view to opening and celebrating their aesthetic and material properties and cultural resonances. Atkins was a naturalist and whilst the images she produced are exquisite, her objective was to document and understand natural genera. Through this process she generated repeated motifs, patterns and silhouette forms that resonate with the decorative arts of her time, for example Willow Pattern china, floral wallpapers and Wedgwood's blue and white *Jasper Ware*. *Bloom* explored this interface between the scientific impulse towards collection and classification, with its desire for control and definition, and the unruly, sumptuous gorgeousness of natural life. Indeed, the word 'bloom' was chosen as the title as it conjures images of both extravagant floral beauty and toxic algal growth, bringing to light the tensions between beauty and corruption, surfeit and depletion, discovery and loss.

In order to explore these tensions Chell produced 40 painted panels based on his photographs of a range of plant specimens from the Horniman, both live and dried. These photographs formed the basis of images which were of identical scale to the Atkins' originals and which were painted on the panels. The panels were tablets finished by lacquered gesso that was painted and re-lacquered in order to give the appearance of ceramic. Painting the images rather than simply photo-transferring them greatly enhanced this effect. Twenty of the flower images were 'live' and painted as positive images (silhouettes – blue on a white background) and twenty were dead specimens and painted as negative

(white on a blue background) looking like cyanotypes that took on the appearance of x-ray images.

The silhouettes, hand-painted in a palette of midnight blue, resembled inkblots on paper, rather like a Rorschach test. This is apt given that the silhouettes of these gesso panels are so richly associative. They bring to mind eighteenth-century portraiture used in lockets or other portable mementoes that, prior to the advent of photography, served to keep the memory of loved ones near, in heart and mind. At the same time, the positive and negative silhouettes permit a taxonomic reading. Such images thus accommodate the co-existence of very different thought and value systems that are often at odds, as silhouettes evoke both Atkins' original desire to record novel species and a more contemporary sense of memorial in the face of extinction.

Chell also approached the history of museum collections which have roots within Cabinets of Curiosity or 'wonder rooms', popular in Europe in the 16th to 18th centuries, that in many ways represented the world as a microcosm. These cabinets would display rare and exotic artefacts in an expanding milieu in which a taste for the exotic found room to grow. The increasingly popular Grand Tours and the British East India Company's imports of Chinese porcelain and other artefacts fostered this growth. To engage with this history Chell displayed painted artefacts that were unusual in both their configuration and making process, taking on qualities that simultaneously alluded to both photographic and ceramic processes.

From top left clockwise: Privet,  
*Ligustrum ovalifolium*; Milk  
thistle, *Silybum marianum*; Dyer's  
chamomile, *Anthemis tinctoria*;  
Blue gum, *Eucalyptus globulus*



# Research Contribution and Recognition

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## Research insights and contribution:

The *Bloom* exhibition makes clear just how intimate and sometimes uncomfortable some of the linkages between the historical narratives of collecting, wealth and museological concerns actually are. The work set out as a somewhat quirky looking chequerboard of highly glazed paintings that mimicked porcelain but it quickly became apparent that these objects also contained other narratives connecting environment, mortality and loss with beauty, situating the work in a complex set of discourses. The accompanying publication provides a further exploration and articulation of these insights.

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## Dissemination:

### EXHIBITION

The Horniman collection of artefacts and natural history is of nationally recognised significance and this interpretative installation had a wide reception. The visitor numbers for the Horniman over the period of the exhibition (9 July – 6 December) were in the region of 600,000.

### BOOK

The *Bloom* book was launched at an event on Saturday 14th September at the Horniman Pavilion. 400-450 copies have been sold.

### REVIEWS

The book and exhibition have been substantially covered in external reviews, including:

Ben Miller, 'Exquisite 19th century sun prints illuminate the Horniman's Natural History Gallery', *Culture24*, 11 November 2015 (<https://www.culture24.org.uk/art/painting-and-drawing/art541132-edward-chell-statement-horniman-anna-atkins>)  
An artist's statement providing further insight into the creation and realisation of *Bloom*.

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**Dissemination:**

Joan Key, 'Review of *Bloom*', *Third Text Online Journal*, Vol.30 Dec 2016 (<http://thirdtext.org/bloom-joankey-review>)  
Key described how 'Bloom's Joycean title suggests a serendipitous coming together of intense observation marked by time passing. Chell has also focussed on the importance of something overlooked, the connection of Atkins' blooms and the late nineteenth-century cabinet of curiosities which is the Horniman. Careful consultation with experts at the museum and co-ordination with other contributors have helped reveal the significance of the work of Atkins'.

Jane Hutchinson, '*Bloom* Book Review', Leonardo on-line, 3 March 2016. Hutchinson writes that 'by fostering new connections between objects and people, *Bloom*, was for few months, one amongst many precious and provocative items in the cabinet of curiosities that is the Horniman museum' and that the 'publication is an appropriate commemoration of it.'

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**Follow-on-activities:****CONFERENCE**

The project was followed by a related conference at the Horniman on 17 March 2016. The conference, 'Museums, Artists and Universities Working in Partnership', included a range of speakers and was chaired by Horniman curator Tim Corum. It explored residencies/artists' collaborations within museums. Chell's contribution was on the nature of these relationships.

**RESEARCH CLUSTER**

The event was associated with the nationally based Museum research cluster 'New Expressions' set up by Claire Gulliver.

**EXHIBITIONS**

Ultimately *Bloom* also acted as a primer for future exhibitions and projects by Chell, such as *Phytopia* in 2017.

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*Carlina vulgaris*



University for the Creative Arts  
Research Portfolios

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Graphic Design:

Studio Mothership

*FRONT COVER*  
*Bloom installation, the Natural*  
*History Gallery, Horniman Museum*  
*and Gardens*

*BACK COVER*  
*Bloom publication*



Gathering specimens and other activities with a woman Victorian painter as depicted by William Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Great Central Railway*, a reproduction of October 1844. (Turner, c. 1844)

states that women behaved for the most part within dominant Victorian ideas about sexual difference, separate spheres, and gendered activities. They were actively cautioned, though, from learning too much about science, out of concern for their unhappy categorization as pedantic, masculine, unmanageable, and unmarriageable.<sup>17</sup>

Did the and flower painting had been practiced within the home by women of social standing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, proof of their accomplishment and worth as ladies of letters. Gaining a feminist reputation as the hobby genre of the amateur, this form of aesthetic engagement with plant life broadly functioned as a leisure activity of instruction and distraction, considered less petty and pretty for art historical or cultural recognition. The feminization of this genre hinged upon the convention of brothers or fathers teaching female artists how to paint, their tutelage combining with a moral codification to ensure that feminine respectability was properly performed within the family.

<sup>17</sup> Ann D. Dowd, *Collecting Women: Gender, Science, Power, Religion, and Empire in England, 1760-1840* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 28.



Mounts of specimens gathered in Jersey and dating from the 1830s. (Turner, c. 1830s)

It is of significance that British Alpine gardens where it does so a timeline of natural scientific discovery. From the shattering revelation in Carl Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, published in 1735, that plants reproduced sexually, to the work of naturalist Charles Darwin would receive for his theories on evolution in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, dominant ideologies and the harmony of social order were perceived as being under constant threat from scientific thought. Just as the poetic symbolism was being shaken out of flora and fauna, much to the displeasure of the Romantics, flowers had lost the heart of their devotees, becoming less safe or suitable choices for women's study or attention.

Paradoxically, while exceptional in many ways, Albert was by no means the only lady alchemist, as O'Brien writes. Others, such as Margaret South Gatty and Mary Wortley Montagu, compiled and traded volumes of nature prints and mounted specimens of seaweed that they themselves had collected. Like the trade for exotic ferns, seedlings to hunt for "scarce flowers" were highly fashionable in the early 1800s. Without professional validation, these amateur botanists nevertheless created indispensable correspondence networks, trading rare information through to one another, but also transmitting valuable information