ERIN JOHNSON: UNNAMED FOR DECADES
This exhibition was made possible by the support of the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation. Erin Johnson is the second recipient of the Ellis-Beauregard Fellowship, awarded by jurors Michelle White, Senior Curator at the Menil Collection in Houston, TX; Marshall Price, PhD, Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University; and Marcela Guerrero, Assistant Curator, Whitney Museum, N.Y. The award reflects the vision of the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation founders, artists David Ellis and Joan Beauregard, to support artists with the precious gift of time, and to encourage, expand and sustain the courageous and imaginative dialogue that is fundamental to the arts.
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 param-
teers 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 funda-
tmentally 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
“and yet” or “or an impasse”—it is the death of all thinking and the end of
hope within a given system. Both Halpern and Gilligan, as interlocutors between femi-
nist critique and the hard sciences, interrogate the “universals” whose gendered
quality reveal them as non-neutral. If we heed their voices, we can see other
aporetic spaces within conventional structures of knowledge and thereby under-
stand and appreciate the significance of the disruptant and the marginalized.
Through Johnson’s video, which tenderly explores the metaphorical afterlife of
this work, aporia becomes fertile territory for

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 slip-
ing 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
plants and its inhabitants as just as biodiverse as their natural environment, poised
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Based on the image, the PDF text appears to be a mix of natural and machine-generated content. The sections that seem to be machine-generated are marked with square brackets and are predominantly composed of bullet points. The natural text is a coherent piece of writing discussing topics such as quantum field theory, the role of touch in art and science, and the significance of the exhibition "Unnamed for Decades". The text also includes references to Karen Barad's work on touch, clairvoyance, and the interplay between science and art. The overall theme of the document revolves around the concept of touch as a form of communication and its implications in various fields.
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 plastisexum lab
Voice-over: Farah Al Qasimi
Lake (Skowhegan, ME), 2020
single-channel video
Edition of 4
Directed and Produced by: Erin Johnson
Director of Photography: Erin Johnson
Editor: Matt Nelson
Sound Design and Mix: Matt Nelson
Featuring: Shani Ben Simon, Anika Cartterfield, Elizabeth Flood, Maria Fragoso, Nikita Gale, Philipp Guffer, Chaye Hall, Namin Hantehzadeh, Kamron Hazel, Ranee Henderson, Jack Hogan, Ariel Jackson, Tomashi Jackson, Kat Lyons, Jeffrey Mania, Rehan Mirako, Kanthiy Peng, Zuqiang Peng, Bryson Rand, Gonzalo Reyas, Youngsoo Sohn, Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, Maria Tineut, Jake Troyli, Audra Wist

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 Baz, Pat Blecher, Ally Caple, Anika Cartterfield, Nicole Chaput, Azza El Siddique, Asad Elkaisi, Maria Fragoso, Nikita Gale, Philipp Guffer, Chaye Hall, Namin Hantehzadeh, Kamron Hazel, Ranee Henderson, Jack Hogan, Ariel Jackson, Tomashi Jackson, Kat Lyons, Jeffrey Mania, Rehan Mirako, Kanthiy Peng, Zuqiang Peng, Bryson Rand, Gonzalo Reyas, Youngsoo Sohn, Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, Maria Tineut, Jake Troyli, Audra Wist