

Heidi Norton



Plants on the verge of a natural breakdown (and other stories of life and death)

Karsten Lund

Over the past few years a certain tropical houseplant—a dieffenbachia with patterned leaves—has appeared repeatedly in Heidi Norton’s photographs. In *Whitescape*, a large still life from 2009, we find it covered in white paint and placed on a shelf alongside other objects. In a different image from later that year, *Deconstructed (Rebirth)*, the plant’s paint-smothered leaves hang limp, while a single green shoot rises from its center. The dieffenbachia, like many plant species, drops its leaves to allow for new growth, and by 2011, when Norton again photographed this particular plant, it had shed its painted leaves altogether; in *My Dieffenbachia Plant with Tarp (Protection)*, a seemingly new plant appears, huddled behind a sheet of plastic in the light of her studio window.

This tenuous rebirth of the artist’s dieffenbachia becomes an origin story of sorts: the processes she observed led Norton to investigate cycles of change through an evolving combination of sculptural forms and photography and to explore how additional materials can be used to preserve, encase, or display plants.¹ These ideas likewise inform the works on view in *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Heidi Norton*, the artist’s first solo museum exhibition. In these new photographs and sculptures, some made on-site at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the presence of plants as they live and die helps illuminate a broad range of concerns: while addressing themes of impermanence and mortality, Norton’s work invites reflection on cultural attitudes toward nature, modes of display, and how different media register time and organize our sense of space.

Plants have been prized for their beauty and studied for the elegance and variety of their natural forms for centuries. Generations of scientists have collected specimens in herbariums or gathered disparate species in botanical gardens. Hobbyists have long produced albums of pressed plants, sandwiching leaves and flowers between pieces of glass or pages of a book. Houseplants are cultivated on a vast scale commercially, and one by one we bring them into our homes. These activities partially inform the look and feel of Norton’s sculptures and photographs, which in some cases resemble a botanist’s careful arrangements or a hobbyist’s pressed plants, although on a much grander scale. In recent sculptural works, for example, Norton embeds uprooted succulents in colored wax and coats palm fronds in layers of paint or resin in order to bond them to large

¹ “Barbara Kasten talks with Heidi Norton,” *Bad at Sports*, <http://badatsports.com/2011/barbara-kasten-and-heidi-norton>.



Heidi Norton. *My Dieffenbachia Plant with Tarp (Protection)*, 2011. Archival pigment print. 36 × 30 in. (91.4 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.



Heidi Norton. Top left: *Desiccation of an Arecaceae (Fold)*, 2012. Top right: *Desiccation of an Arecaceae (Release)*, 2012. Archival pigment prints. Each: 48 × 38 in. (121.9 × 96.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Heidi Norton. *Explore Every Aspect of the Finite*, 2011. Plants, glass, resin, latex paint, and spray-paint. 37 × 30 in. (94 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

sheets of glass, where they become the central components of formal compositions that highlight their natural colors and repeating shapes.

Some of the earliest photographs ever made were exposures of plants arranged on light-sensitive paper, such as those by William Fox Talbot in the 1830s. In comparison, the act of incorporating actual plants into sculptures, paintings, or installations, specifically as living (or dying) objects rather than pictorial subjects, is a relatively recent tradition. In part, these artistic strategies have spread in the wake of art movements that emerged in the late 1960s, namely land art and arte povera, which redefined the position of the artist in relation to the natural world and advocated the use of organic or common materials in sculpture. Artists in the decades since, from wry conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers, in the 1970s, to painter Anselm Kiefer, beginning in the 1980s, have incorporated living or dead plants into their work as a way to point to the larger world beyond the gallery and as symbols or allegorical elements. Like Broodthaers and Kiefer, Norton is interested in the way certain ideas, belief systems, or collective memories seem to congeal around particular things; this is most evident in Norton's photographic series *New Age Still Life* (2009–present), in which plants, old books, and found objects are displayed on shelves like domestic talismans, alluding to a waning era of alternative spirituality. Generally speaking, however, Norton's work operates in terms of more open metaphors and allusions, which, while aided by evocative titles, leave room for any number of personal or cultural associations on the part of the viewer. In a paradoxical way, Norton herself is simultaneously reverent toward plants and unforgiving in the ways she treats them, mirroring a range of cultural attitudes and societal tendencies in which nature is both revered and exploited, protected and destroyed.

Other artists who use plants as the very substance of their work, such as Joseph Beuys, in the 1980s, or, more recently, Agnes Denes, have planted trees in large-scale public efforts to reunite humankind with nature.² Norton's work, in contrast, operates on a more personal level and is tied to the private care of houseplants, our occasional failures as stewards of botanical life, and individual reflection on what it means to be implicated in something larger than one's self. Despite her grounding in a domestic or studio setting, for Norton, plants become a way to observe natural cycles, to make visible larger forces at work. What Norton shares with Beuys, then, is mostly an understanding of sculpture as impermanent and susceptible to change. For both artists this idea finds expression in the use of materials that discolor, decay, or dry up.³ While Norton's photographs capture houseplants in a particular state, her sculptures locate plants in the physical world, where they are subject to the laws of nature. If you return repeatedly to her exhibition at the MCA, you may notice the works changing over time: green leaves gradually turning brown and starting to wither. Yet these changes are occurring imperceptibly at any given moment, even as we observe the works, just as our own bodies age day by day and in time meet a similar end.

² For instance, Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982–87), in Kassel, Germany, or Denes's *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule* (1996), in Finland.

³ Joseph Beuys, *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America: Writings by and Interviews with the Artist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 19.

The uncertain fate of Norton's plants is just one testament to principles of change and mutability in her practice. She also often recycles the inorganic portions of her artworks. Fragments of work from past exhibitions—the skeletal imprint of a palm leaf in resin, for example—become the basis for new photographs or are grafted onto new glass slabs. Among the selections in her *Chicago Works* exhibition, Norton presents a group of small photographs of resin-coated shards of glass, their jagged edges appearing as emerald lines. Salvaged from earlier sculptures, this material is itself reinterpreted through different artistic processes: a three-dimensional sculpture broken to pieces and reincarnated as a two-dimensional image.

Norton's work is animated in this way by encounters between photography and sculpture, manifested both in her exhibitions and within individual works. Many of Norton's photographs depict objects that she has carefully set up in her studio, the camera flattening these protean sculptural arrangements into fixed pictures with their own sense of order. Influenced by artists like Barbara Kasten—whose photographic work since the 1970s has underlined both the image-making process and the manipulation of tangible materials such as Plexiglas—Norton uses the camera to play with our sense of space and other perceptual aspects through the rendering of color and light and the visual compression of discrete objects. Interestingly, Norton's sculptures featuring panes of glass can be rather easily mistaken for photographs at first (although they share as much visually with traditions of abstract painting). Viewed from certain angles, these works resemble flat, glossy images, their unruly materials (plants, resin, paint) corralled into a perfectly resolved view within the bounds of the glass—at least until you peek around the towering form and see the rougher, sculptural verso, as if your previous impression of the work had been a mirage.

In Norton's *Chicago Works* exhibition, glass plays a newly heightened role, both as a recurring material and as an added conceptual reference point. Critic Roland Barthes writes in his seminal book *Camera Lucida* (1980): "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."⁴ The same might be said of glass, whether it takes the form of a window or a museum display case. Drawing attention to these functional similarities, Norton invites us to consider the basic qualities of her chosen media and how each can address, on its own terms, questions raised by the others. You might look straight through the glass on the face of one of her sculptures, gazing at the forms plastered to the other side, but as you walk around the gallery the physical attributes of the glass become hard to overlook: its insistent rigidity and sheer size, or its semi-reflective surface upon which your own image might appear, or, paired with Norton's delicate photographs of broken glass nearby, the material's inherent fragility.

The ubiquity of glass and its standard uses, from windows to vitrines, attests to longstanding cultural mentalities about preservation and the visual ordering of space. Since she began making still-life photographs, Norton has often reflected on conventional modes of

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 6.



display. In her exhibition at the MCA, she directs these inquiries toward the fundamental activities of museums. To create a number of the sculptural works in this exhibition, Norton repurposed large panes of glass found in the MCA's storage areas, the remnants of display cases from a 2009 exhibition of work by Liam Gillick. In this gesture, Norton points to standard methods of preserving and presenting vulnerable objects in a museum while subverting this material infrastructure to her own creative ends. And yet in doing so she also echoes other settings where plants are systematically collected and displayed, such as natural history museums, herbariums, or botanical gardens—places where you would more typically find plants behind glass.

In the end, Norton's work embraces impermanence, challenging the precepts of museological practice. (Museums strive to preserve artworks forever, although the very existence of conservation labs speaks to the steady pull of decay.) Some of Norton's sculptures may last for decades; others shatter into pieces or dry up in a matter of months. Any good student of nature knows, however, that destruction is a vital phase in cycles of regeneration. Certain fir trees spread their seeds only when a forest fire coaxes their reticent pinecones open. Plants lose their leaves so that new ones may grow. By reusing display glass, Norton approaches the museum as another possible site for these kinds of regenerative processes, in parallel to the workings of the natural world and the cycles evident within her practice.

Karsten Lund is Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Heidi Norton. *Herbarium Specimens-An Intersection*, 2012. Glass, wax, mirror, resin, cactus, and fern. 43 ½ x 61 x 8 ½ in. (110.5 x 154.9 x 21.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

220 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
312.280.2660
mcachicago.org

Chicago Works 04

BMO Harris Bank

Heidi Norton was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1977. She is an instructor of photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she also received her MFA. Norton has recently had solo exhibitions in Chicago at Johalla Projects (2012) and Northeastern Illinois University (2011), and her work has been featured in group exhibitions at Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; the Knitting Factory, New York; and the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, among others. In 2011 Norton co-wrote a series of articles, titled *Mantras for Plants*, for the visual art blog *Bad at Sports*.

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Heidi Norton*, presented from August 7 to October 23, in the Sternberg Family Gallery and Rabin Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and curated by Karsten Lund, Curatorial Assistant.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Association of Museums. MCA Chicago is generously supported by its Board of Trustees; individual and corporate members; private and corporate foundations; and government agencies, including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Museum capital improvements are supported by a Public Museum Capital Grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The Chicago Park District generously supports MCA programs. Air transportation is provided by American Airlines, Official Airline of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

AmericanAirlines®

Official Airline of
MCA Chicago

Produced by the Design, Publishing, and New Media Department of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Designed by James Goggin, Director of Design, Publishing, and New Media; Scott Reinhard, Senior Designer; Alfredo Ruiz, Designer; and Ria Roberts, Design Intern. Edited by Kate Steinmann, Director of Publications and Senior Editor; Sarah Kramer, Associate Editor; Molly Zimmerman-Feeley, Editorial Assistant; and Shauna Skaltzky, Editorial Intern.

Printed in the United States.
Typeset in CMCA Schulbuch.

© 2012 by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopy, recording, or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover: Heidi Norton.
Snake Plant Skins in Wax and Resin (detail), 2012.
Archival pigment print.
60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist.