

Standing Up for Invasive Species

Artists and scientists are finding ways to highlight troublesome plants and animals, tell their stories and, in some cases, use them as raw materials.



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Reporting from Pittsburgh

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Mason Heberling, an invasion biologist and botany curator at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, crouched down in a woodland park just outside the city and swept away the leaf litter. It was March and the forest looked dormant. The trees were bare, the shrubs brown. But there, under the dry leaves, one plant was already forming perky green rosettes: garlic mustard. It wasn't the cheerful harbinger of spring it seemed.

"It's taking in sunlight and doing stuff before the other plants it's competing with are even awake," Heberling said.

Native to Eurasia, garlic mustard has other advantages over local flora. Caterpillars can't digest it, deer don't like it and the toxic compounds it releases inhibit fungal networks supporting other plants. Aided by climate change, garlic mustard has spread rapidly through the Northeast and into the Midwest. One nature conservancy website calls it an "aggressive invader" waging "chemical warfare" on unsuspecting natives.

And to think, this pitiless conquistador came to North America as a humble kitchen herb, deliberately imported by European settlers for its piquant flavor. Its heart-shaped leaves smell sharp but comforting, like pasta sauce simmering on the stove. "It makes great pesto," Heberling conceded.



An installation view of “Uprooted: Plants out of Place” at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. Camila Casas/ The Warhol Academy

“Uprooted: Plants Out of Place,” a new exhibition at the Carnegie, addresses the human behaviors driving the spread of invasive species and how context shapes our perceptions: a weed here is a medicine there. “Itadori means to take away pain,” said the artist Koichi Watanabe, whose photographs of itadori (Japanese knotweed) feature in the exhibition. In Japan, the plant is sometimes used as a salve for bug bites. Elsewhere, including the United States and Britain, knotweed is widely considered a vegetable plague.

The Carnegie show is the latest expression of a larger surge of interest in invasive species among artists, scientists and historians who are collectively rethinking our relationships with troublesome organisms. Banu Subramaniam, an interdisciplinary scholar originally trained as a biologist, was among the first to suggest that the language surrounding invasives is shot through with fear of the “other.”

“I think part of the reason why they’re so reviled is that we see in them something of our own impact on ecosystems,” said Yota Batsaki, the executive director of Dumbarton Oaks, the Harvard research center in Washington, D.C., where she leads the Plant Humanities Initiative.

In light of this growing awareness, biologists have revised the common names of some invasive species to emphasize traits other than their origins. A wasp formerly known as the Asian giant hornet, a species with a penchant for decapitating entire hives of honeybees, is now the northern giant hornet, a nod to its presence in Washington State.

“Five years ago, I didn’t really see it as that important,” Heberling said of these efforts. “I saw it as more of a distraction.” What seemed like mere semantics took on new urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic, however, when Heberling noticed invasive plants from Asia provoking racist comments. “Making some of these small changes in what we call a particular plant can change how people think about that plant and how people think about the problem,” he said.

Visual artists are introducing these conversations, long confined to scientific papers and scholarly journals, to broader audiences of museum and gallery goers. Some artists say it’s a mind-set problem. What would happen if we saw unkillable weeds as resilient survivors?

“People just don’t know what to do with monstrosities,” said Precious Okoyomon, an artist and poet who frequently grows kudzu, Japanese knotweed and other reviled plants in living installations. “I try and make a lot of space for them because they’re not monstrosities. I believe they’re miracles.”

Invasive species, Okoyomon points out, frequently become scapegoats for human blunders. Before it became known as “the vine that ate the South,” kudzu was embraced as a remedy to the ravages of soil erosion across the former Cotton Belt. “We can’t just use things to try and cover up environmental impacts, and then call them menaces when they don’t work,” said Okoyomon, who uses they/them pronouns.

With projects like “Theory of a Curve,” a garden of invasive and native plants at Cornell University, the artist hopes to dispel the fear surrounding “alien” species. “When we free ourselves from these violent, mythmaking languages and just see things for really what they are, we can start to understand them a bit better,” they said. “We can work with them.”

Other artists do just that, harvesting invasive species as raw materials. In the past year alone, there have been exhibitions from the artist Lisa Jevbratt, a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara and her collaborator Helén Svensson, who dye wool with fennel, wisteria and other overabundant species on Santa Cruz Island, and the emerging New York artist Kay Kasparhauser, who derives pink pigment from the wings of spotted lanternflies, a species government officials say to squash on sight. Other artists have transformed honeysuckle, phragmites, tamarisk, reed canary grass and other invasive plants into handmade paper.



Honeysuckle is among the invasive plants that artists have transformed into handmade paper. Mason Heberling/Carnegie Museum of Natural History

The sheer abundance that makes invasives environmentally problematic is what makes them attractive to artists interested in sustainability. When Hyemin Son, a founding member of the South Korean artist collective Rice Brewing Sisters Club, visited Hawaii last year, she saw opportunity in the enormous heaps of gorilla ogo — an invasive seaweed from the Philippines — blanketing stretches of the Oahu shoreline. Gorilla ogo forms dense mats on Hawaiian reefs, killing the coral and driving away fish and other animals, including tourists.

When she was invited to create a project for the Hawaii Triennial art exhibition (through May 4, at venues on three islands), Son partnered with Ikaika Bishop, a Native Hawaiian cultural practitioner and education specialist, to see if they could use the seaweed as a sculptural material. “It’s so available on the seashore, we wanted to do something with this as a resource,” Son said.



Hanging sculptures made by Hyemin Son and Ikaika Bishop with gorilla ogo, a seaweed considered invasive in Hawaii. Courtesy of the artists and Hawai'i Contemporary

“In Hawaiian culture, nothing is trash,” said Bishop, who’s been trying to promote gorilla ogo as everything from a fertilizer to a food source. In the Kumulipo, the Hawaiian creation story, one of the earliest creatures is seaweed (limu). “And so that’s why for me it was uncomfortable viewing something like gorilla ogo as savage, invasive, unwanted. Because if you listen to the story and you believe in it, it’s one of our oldest ancestors.”

Son and Bishop mixed gorilla ogo with wheat paste and molded it onto chicken-wire forms to create undulating abstract sculptures. Suspended in the Davies Pacific Center in Honolulu, they form a lattice filtering the light streaming through the windows into dappled patterns on the floor.

Invasive species are often seen as economic blights. The U.S. government spends tens of millions of dollars every year poisoning plants, electrocuting carp, shooting feral pigs and culling other invasives to protect crops, fisheries and endangered wildlife.

Robert Zhao Renhui, a multimedia artist based in Singapore, is fascinated by the ethical complexities of exterminating one species to protect others. In 2018, Renhui traveled to Taipei, where he joined a brigade of volunteer citizens who spend their evenings trapping invasive lizards and frogs. “What was interesting for me is that the people doing it genuinely love nature,” he said. “They believe that this was needed to restore the original ecology of a native frog. I was interested in how the killing and the love were kind of mixed in together.”

Perplexed by the violence, Renhui nonetheless remains neutral. “I try to be really Zen,” he said. Each situation is so different, he added, there’s no one-size-fits-all solution.

Other artists, like Okoyomon, oppose these programs on practical and philosophical grounds. Eradication is rarely successful, they said: “It only begets more and more violence for us.” Okoyomon favors the introduction of other species, such as the insects that eat invasive plants in their native ranges, a method known as biocontrol.

Among scientists, the wave of artistic projects on invasives has prompted mingled gratitude and unease. Heberling, the botanist in Pittsburgh, emphasized his “immense respect” for various artists, but he worries that viewers might leave some exhibitions thinking invasion isn’t an issue. “I feel like some artistic and humanistic explorations of invasive species minimize the environmental concern,” he said.

These woods could lose wildflowers, birds and other animals if invasive species spread unchecked, he said, gesturing to the forest outside Pittsburgh. Behind him, the garlic mustard simply kept doing what it does best: grow.