

HYPERALLERGIC

Billy Anania

Laying Down Roots: Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves's Radical, Botanical Future

According to complex systems theory, common design elements can be observed across natural, technological, and social systems. Order, pattern, and structure can materialize from chaos. In art, this is made evident through the collage; multitudes of disparate images converge within a confined frame. Nature reveals its genius when wildflowers bloom from wreckage. Exploitation, too, can be systemic, yet solidarity can emerge nonetheless.



Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, "CONTEXT" (2021), Chromogenic print with pigment ink pen, 41 ½ x 41 ½ inches (photo by Filip Wolak)

In her art, poetry, and criticism, Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves exceeds these natural and unnatural boundaries. At Artists Space, the interplay between her works results in a vast collage of biodiversity and revolutionary discourse across the gallery walls. Foliage grows from every crevice and corner in *The x in florxal is silent when spoken*, her latest exhibition on view through May 1. The show opened during the Northern Hemisphere's vernal equinox, recontextualizing the art gallery into a site of mutual study and growth. Greaves refers to herself as the "Young Mother" of this expansive venture, which the wall text describes as a "spacious investigative praxis." Here, this praxis is embodied through maps, sketches, live flora, annotated photographs, and site-specific installations.

In bringing together plant life and cartography, Greaves crafts an allegory for elevating voices of the oppressed and envisioning new futures. Each artwork is a reference point, or a network of references, and their proximity forms a bridge across diverse sets of theory and poetics. Greaves invites us into her research process, presenting her personal influences and handwritten notes for all to see. It feels like she is living, breathing, studying, and planning right alongside us.

Anania, Billy. "Laying Down Roots: Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves's Radical, Botanical Future." *Hyperallergic*. April 20, 2021. Online.



Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, "Better homes and gardens back by popular demand" (2021), magazine, artists tape, overall dimensions variable (photo by Filip Wolak)

"I want the peace of complete freedom to sneak up on me / in the soft kindness of oblitative questions," she writes in a poem for *The Brooklyn Rail*. Destruction can be gracious, Greaves posits, particularly for those living in states of subjection and dispossession. For evidence, she looks to the literature of her life. An entire gallery wall displays blown-up photographs of radical texts by the likes of Toni Morrison, Joy Harjo, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Eduardo Galeano — with citations of essential passages scrawled alongside. Their juxtaposition emulates the research process, capturing how minor coincidences can lead to grand realizations. These photos form a basis for interpreting the surrounding artworks, grounding them in a socialist theoretical framework.



Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, "INDEX" (2021), C-trans print mounted on lightbox, 41 ½ x 41 ½ x 5 inches (photo by Filip Wolak)
 Anania, Billy. "Laying Down Roots: Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves's Radical, Botanical Future." *Hyperallergic*. April 20, 2021. Online.

As always, bringing texts into conversation results in unlikely outcomes. In INDEX (2021), which is mounted on a lightbox, the cover of Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary* appears with those of Margaret Baker's *Discovering the Folklore of Plants*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and a book on place-naming in the United States. Greaves writes and circles the word "abstraction" beside the latter, and writes "core/key application" beside Conrad's novella. A small, cutout version of this piece appears on a Russian-language map of Africa that charts the names and locations of "The Peoples of Africa" on the other side of the gallery, hinting at colonial mindsets toward the continent. In this way, Greaves replicates both the visual stimuli of an artistic breakthrough and the quiet of contemplation, leaving behind small stepping stones of consciousness.

On a windowsill, the artist organizes a display of living plants and dried flowers with rose quartz, amethyst, incense and palo santo, jewelry, and brass candlesticks — all underscored with framed pieces of annotated yellow paper along the wall below. A toy knight beside a potted Devil's ivy plant named Hannibal brings to mind the armored portraits of Lorraine O'Grady, while the overall presentation recalls the renewed interest in ecofeminism by conceptual artists. On the catercorner wall, a series of pages extracted from *Better Homes and Gardens* features dozens of pictures of plants and white people — with the aforementioned map of Africa separating the two installations. The latter work, titled *Better homes and gardens back by popular demand* (2021), evokes the insurmountable gardening media that advances gentrification.



Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, "For Aricka, Ayana, Ayodele, Bernice, Chantelle, Charmaine, Cynthia Ch., Cynthia Co., Daphne, Davina, Dawn, Dina, Emily, Erica, Evadne, Frances, Gail, Gwen, Hara, Heather, Imanei, Imani, Janet, Jenny, Kadija, Kahdeidra, kale, Kelly, Kenya (R), LesLes, Lois, Lynnette, Madeleine, Mahogany, Marsha, Maiya, Najela, Nontsi, Ola, Pilar, Queen, RaFia, Ro-Ro, Sandra, Sasha, Serenity, Shana, Simone L, Simone W, Tabitha, Taiyi, Trinity, Uchenna, Vivian, Wangechi, X, Yvette, Zuri (detail)" (2021), living plants: Hannibal (*Epipremnum aureum*) with rose quartz, Gertrude Deuxieme (*Tillandsia xerographica*), Leonie (*Philodendron totem*), Eversley Deuxieme (*Tillandsia xerographica*), Melford (*Epipremnum aureum*) with amethyst; dessicated floral matter (eucalyptus, grass, willow, palm), knight on horseback figurine, brass candlesticks, polystyrene, porcelain and 18 karat gold plates, crystals (various), bamboo earrings, jade, cremains, leather, cork, glass, dragon figurine, sandalwood incense and ceramic holder, palo santo (*Bursera graveolens*), and window; overall dimensions variable (photo by Filip Wolak)

In a recent artist's statement, Greaves asks, "What becomes possible when we begin to center and attempt responses to the slow and

Anania, Billy. "Laying Down Roots: Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves's Radical, Botanical Future." *Hyperallergic*. April 20, 2021. Online.

and silent, active and occluded, voices and spirits of the plant life we live alongside? How might what emerges on the page, in our minds, from our mouths, and out of our hearts parallel what we already know? In the futures that follow, what might verdancy feel like to all of Earth's beings (and to all of cosmos's material and immaterial bodies) when so-called weeds are on the mantle as well as in the crevices?" By making this connection between decolonization and cosmology, Greaves portrays liberation as a communal, imaginative process that can be achieved with instruments already at our disposal — historical texts, personal networks, and lived experience.

Floral development is analogous to spiritual blossoming for Greaves, and her reflections on Blackness and motherhood reveal a philosophy of de-urbanization and public ownership. Here, she creates a welcoming space for meditating on radical possibility, emphasizing that we are all capable of collectively tearing down violent structures and planting seeds in their fertile ruins. It's easy to feel at home among the books and leaves, maps and magazines, and traces of analysis. A prelude to *The Florxal Review*, Greaves's larger project of ethnobotanical literary criticism, *The x in floral is silent when spoken* is thus her initial foray, so that speaking its name may manifest its growth.