

***Myriad (Tulips)*. By Anna Ridler. C-type digital prints with handwritten annotations, magnetic paint, magnets. 2018.**

***Secret Garden: Our Stories Are Algorithms*. By Stephanie Dinkins. Three-channel interactive video projection with six-channel audio, depth cameras, computer. 2021.**

Anna Ridler's *Myriad (Tulips)* is mesmerizing in its scale: it displays ten thousand photographs of tulips that she purchased, stripped, photographed, and categorized by hand over a summer in residence in the Netherlands (fig. 1). They were the raw materials for training a generative adversarial network (GAN) to generate artificial images of tulips for its companion artwork, *Mosaic Virus* (2018). But as she categorized each photograph by qualities, such as color, that grew only more difficult to discern over time—is it white or light pink?—she began to dream of tulips and even see stripes. The experience, Ridler reports, both recalled the origins of classification in Linnaeus—who ultimately decided color was too subjective to include in his taxonomies—and suggested how creating databases is quite literally a craft: we assign far too much creative value to the users and authors of algorithms rather than to the ones who build databases.

Ridler's interest in tulips is part of a longer project exploring how nature has been measured and quantified; she has categorized seashells and produced GAN-generated flower clocks. Here, however, she explores the speculation of the Dutch Golden Age, when the unpredictability of the tulips' delicate streaking and flaring of color—a result of a mosaic virus, rather than natural selection—made them especially fickle commodities. Purchasers bought tulip futures in the fall, well

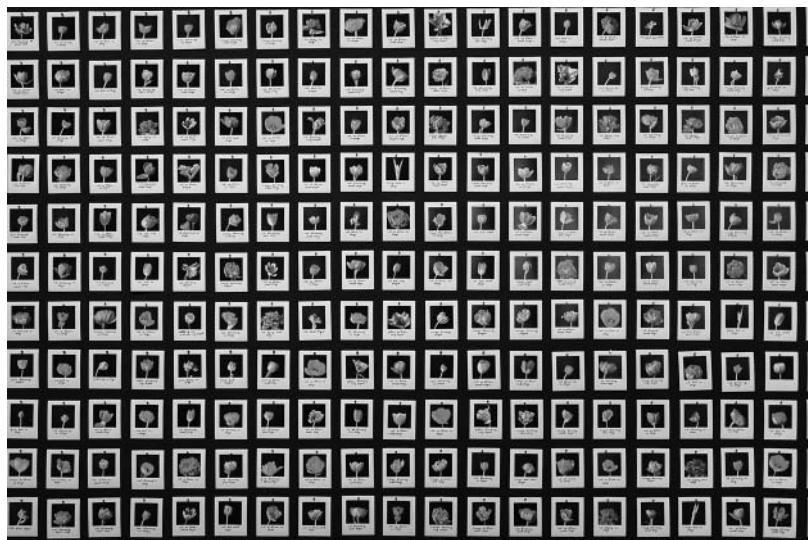


Figure 1 Anna Ridler, *Myriad (Tulips)*. Installation view (detail), *AI: More than Human* exhibition, Barbican Centre, London, May 16 to August 26, 2019. Photograph: Emily Grundon

before the flowers finally bloomed in the spring, often with drastically changed or disappointing color. The virus itself weakened the flower's roots and eventually caused it to become extinct—its own source of scarcity. As Ridler has written, GANs likewise tend to suffer from “mode collapse,” but here collapse means producing the same or similar output over and over instead of anything new. In this way, *Mosaic Virus* becomes a wry comment on how today's attempts to produce collectible assets through artificial rarity can become as repetitive as a stuck algorithm. While the artist makes an explicit connection to today's boom-and-bust economy by linking the tulip stripes to the price of Bitcoin, I find the real historical parallel to be how a voracious appetite for novelty turns the world into content.

A still life with flowers by Hans Bollongier, painted in 1639 after the crash of the tulip market, appears to be a faithful naturalistic reproduction. But roses and carnations and tulips bloom in different seasons. As media scholar John Durham Peters has written, Bollongier's painting suggests how many different moments of time have been collaged into one seemingly seamless image. It was “‘a theoretical composite’ . . . that could never appear in a single moment; it anticipates the summarizing power of a very different form of presentation: statistics” (Cmiel and Peters 2020: 39). Naturalistic illustration and



Figure 2 Stephanie Dinkins, *Secret Garden: Our Stories Are Algorithms*. Installation view, *On Love and Data* exhibition, Stamps Gallery, Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor, August 31 to October 23, 2021. Photograph: Eric Bronson, Michigan Photography

even seeing in general, argues Peters, were already a matter of learning to abstract and classify to produce a general idea out of individual variations. Even before the “science of state” had become formalized in the following two centuries, visual culture had become statistical.

Whether for trade or for science, the classification of tulips and spices, colonial subjects and human cargo, proceeded with world-ending violence. But fugitive technologies are embedded in those same moments of history. This is the suggestion of Stephanie Dinkins’s *Secret Garden: Our Stories Are Algorithms* (2021), a room-size interactive installation of flowers and other crops, within which six Black women from across time—including one “artificially intelligent” woman—offer stories to their visitors (fig. 2). It’s certainly possible to see the human figures (rendered as tableaux vivants) as the main attraction in the installation. Dinkins nevertheless insists on the equal importance of the natural world, too: as she relates, there are “artistic images of roses, pansies, flowers my grandmother loved, but also sugarcane, cotton and okra, plants that have hurt, sustained and grown with us through the ages” (Smith 2021). On the web installation (<https://secretgarden.stephaniedinkins.com/>), a visitor moves at ground level, the eyeline pointed above the pansies and below the

cotton bolls: the effect is as if visitors are four-legged animals, rabbits or dogs perhaps. The flora are themselves cutouts that swing open, like doors, when the visitor walks through. The goal is not the highly rendered, off-the-shelf realism available from “digital asset” companies such as SpeedTree (Chang 2019) but something like the story-book experience of being invited to get lost inside of a backyard that seems, for a child, to go on forever.

Dinkins’s stories contrast with how the natural world has been traditionally represented or narrated in the West, for example, in landscape painting and pastoral poetry, as a space that either is devoid of or consciously excludes Black people. From an enslaved person who remembers the shade of the baobab tree and despairs that “there are no trees to help me here” (see transcript at https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/sg_texts.html) to a woman who remembers her grandmother’s meticulous garden in the 1920s among her white neighbors as making “a make-a-way a place, a home, out of no way” (see transcript at https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/sg_texts.html), the relationship between her narrators and nature is shaped by pain. Yet this ambivalence is vital for “investigating the alignment between man and nature . . . for a people who have been classified as entirely separate,” as the poet Camille Dungy (2009: xxii) writes in her introduction to the anthology *Black Nature*. Quoting from Carl Phillips’s poem “White Dog”—“She seems a part of me, // and then she seems entirely like what she is: / a white dog”—Dungy argues for acknowledging both the limits of humanness and the limits of what human knowledge can represent (xxiii).

I find a similar modesty in *Secret Garden*, which questions the premise that artificial intelligence must have anything to do with silicon or programmers. Dinkins’s earlier work includes *Conversations with Bina48* (2014–), an ongoing conversation with the Bina48 robot, who was designed as a Black woman, and *Not the Only One* (2019), an AI chatbot trained on oral histories of her family. As those artworks indicate, Dinkins has increasingly focused on the “small data” embodied as stories and oral histories. Their smallness makes it easier to keep such data situated within the communities that produce them, rather than as another site of extraction. (It’s no coincidence that maintaining personal and communal spaces on the internet is often referred to as “digital gardening.”) But these kinds of small data can reorient and retrain AI systems, because AI systems are ultimately, in the words of one narrator, “your rememory: your progeny” (see transcript at https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/sg_texts.html). In contrast to

global prescriptions for revolution, these techniques make a virtue of incremental change, as Dinkins (2020) describes it in a manifesto titled “Afro-now-ism”; each day improves slightly on the last.

I have always found it interesting that, in German media theory, the field of *Kulturtechniken* (cultural techniques), now dominated by studies of networks and computational technologies, was first established in the nineteenth century as a professorship in agricultural cultivation (Geoghegan 2013). *Myriad (Tulips) / Mosaic Virus* and *Secret Garden* expand that metaphor of how media work by discovering multiple kinds of speculative potential from natural history. In doing so, they offer a very different perspective from an art market that is trying to cash in on the question of whether an AI-generated image is art or not. Wrong question, these artworks say: AI is, at the heart, a practice of cultivation, as painstaking and as ordinary as tending a garden.

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