

# Plants as Objects: Challenges for an Aesthetics of Flora

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This paper presents the conceptual challenges to an aesthetic model of living plants based in embodied interaction with flora through smell, taste, touch, sound and sight. I argue that the science of aesthetics is deterministically visual. Drawing from theories of landscape aesthetics put forth by Carlson and Berleant, I outline four primary obstacles to an embodied aesthetics: plants as objects of sight, plants as objects of art, plants as objects of disinterestedness and plants as objects of scientific discourse. A multi-sensorial aesthetics of flora requires auto-centric proximity and degrees of intersubjectivity between the appreciator and the appreciated plant that raise important philosophical questions about aesthetic experience of the natural world.

*Keywords:* aesthetics, philosophy, environment, plants, Berleant, Carlson, embodiment

## 1. Introduction

Many narrative or technical accounts of plants are disembodied; traces of the body of the author and the bodies of the plants are plainly absent. Sensation has vanished. An aesthetics of plants, based in sight, fastens the value of botanic habitats to appearances. A kind of visual regime factors into some contemporary scientific studies of biodiversity conservation. For instance, in Western Australia, the Lesueur Management Plan includes a study of landscape character that identifies vegetation of high, moderate and low scenic—or aesthetic—value. Areas distinguished by the colour and patterns of the vegetation are privileged in the conservation practices of Lesueur—a biodiversity hotspot of international accord. Perspectival contrasts identify exemplary plants that stand out in an otherwise undifferentiated flora. Focal point trees or shrubs are high scenic quality, and include the “windshaped, gnarled or dwarfed vegetation unusual in form, colour or texture” (Department of Conservation and Land Management 60). Of moderate and low aesthetic value are plant communities without distinguishable scenic characteristics of texture, form, colour and structural variation (Department of Conservation and Land Management 60).

This paper theorises an aesthetics of plants with emphasis on places where our embodied selves may come into contact with living plants. There is a continuum among wild, semi-cultivated and domesticated contexts in which the aesthetic perception of flora figures prominently. These range from national parks, garden plantings, wildflower shows and the interior space of a home. Unlike a single flower in a vase, however, wild plants form habitats with other creatures where there are often few demarcations of the geometric orderliness valued by management plans. Moving shorelines and scarps define the perceptual field in which a plant is situated. The scene is not composed but *decomposing* before our eyes through the processes of ecology, including the

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weathering of natural features through temporal progression. Depending on rainfall, habitat disturbances or the season of the visit, the prominent colours of flowers may be missing. Eyes gaze expectantly across the landscape, in search of familiar affections of sight, but disorientation may characterise the experience. Traditional notions of beauty may be disrupted—or hopefully redefined—because of the mutable qualities of living places. In contrast, crafted arrangement is at the centre of an aesthetics of domesticated plants. Gardens impress us because of the somewhat fixed qualities of patterns, shapes, colours, textures, scales and species numbers. Plantings are composed into a portrait, each flower becomes a constituent brushstroke framed by manicured borders and other formal design elements. Correspondingly, a wildflower show brings plants into venues such as churches and community centres. During a wildflower show, species are displayed harmoniously to accentuate their artefactual beauty.

This discussion begins with the complexities of aesthetics in Western thought, then moves towards the application of aesthetic concepts to the natural world and finally arrives at a concept of botanical aesthetics and its limitations. The paper contends that an aesthetics of flora, if conceptualised as an extension of environmental aesthetics, is inhibited by four modes of objectification: plants as objects of sight, plants as objects of art, plants as objects of disinterestedness and plants as objects of scientific discourse. To begin with, a visual regime problematises an aesthetics of living plants that are eaten, tasted, smelled, heard and felt while also changing through patterns of seeding, flowering, fruiting, emerging and dying. In Western aesthetics, multi-sensoriality has been relegated to a bottom rung in the hierarchy of the senses with vision and hearing, given cognitive authority over the more intimate bodily faculties of smell, taste, touch and kinaesthesia. With an emphasis on panoramic distances rather than the plants under our feet, the field of landscape aesthetics has yet to sufficiently theorise the experience of the diminutive bodies of nature. Secondly, the appreciation of art conflates the appreciation of living plants. Despite the forward-thinking attempts of environmental philosophers Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, the diction of artistic objects has been the pre-eminent vocabulary for appreciating the natural world. Finally, the ocularcentric tendencies of botanical science have been aligned to a concept of aesthetics in which perception is about the processes of thought and the ordering of the natural world rather than corporeal immanence and the emergence of bodily experiences.

In outlining the limitations of landscape aesthetic models, the discussion looks towards a variety of environmental aestheticians, but dialogue mainly with two influential contemporary theories—Arnold Berleant's engagement model (1993, 25; 2005) and Allan Carlson's natural environmental model (2000). Carlson and Berleant are conscious of visuality as a cultural mode of enframing plants as the object-oriented desideratum of tourism. They theorise classic aesthetic concepts—disinterestedness, beauty, sublimity, the picturesque, perception, cognition, detachment, visualism and embodiment—in the appreciation of landscapes. However, neither the natural environmental model nor the engagement model offers landscape aesthetics multi-sensoriality positioned viscerally in the guts and sinews, not distantly in a landscape vista. After identifying the shortcomings of contemporary concepts of landscape aesthetics, the end of this paper points to the works of Thoreau and Heidegger in further theorising botanical aesthetics as an embodied aesthesis of plants.

## **2. Plants as Objects of Sight: From Visuality to Sensation**

The literature of aesthetics threads in and out of philosophy (Berleant 2005; Carlson 2000; Hepburn 2004, first published in 1966), cultural theory (Eagleton 1990; Giblett 2004), psychology and the social sciences

(Averill, Stanat, and More 1998), anthropology (Shelton 1994), the visual and literary arts (Schroeder 2010), architecture, regional planning and urban design (Porteous 1996), and advertising and marketing (Baisya, and Das, 2008). Depending on the particular discipline from which the question of meaning is approached, there is a remarkable variety amongst definitions of aesthetics and aesthetic experience. Yet, most disciplines concur that sensory perception and the experience of pleasure are connected to aesthetics. As a mode of perceiving the world, aesthetics is concerned with human experience through sensory apprehension that becomes desirable. Averill, Stanat and More assert that “most theoreticians and laypersons agree that aesthetic experiences are in some way pleasurable or enjoyable” (154). Aesthetics, as such, is not concerned with general experience of the everyday world, but with the rarefied moments of pleasure.

As a means of analysis, aesthetics concerns the qualities that make an experience enjoyable or otherwise. Carlson defines aesthetics as “the area of philosophy that concerns our appreciation of things as they affect our senses, and especially as they affect them in a pleasing way” (*Aesthetics and the Environment* xvii). Not all experiences will be aesthetically pleasing. Some experience will affect us greatly by impressing, moving, inspiring, invigorating or captivating us. What actually counts as aesthetic experience and the varieties of sensory apprehension are the core questions of philosophical aesthetics. As a branch of aesthetics, environmental aesthetics comprises natural and cultural experiences of pleasure. Rather than environmental aesthetics, the term *landscape aesthetics* furthermore describes the perception and appreciation of living places (i.e., deserts, forests, heathlands or oceanscapes). Environmental aesthetics is an inclusive term for various theories of appreciation of built and natural environments, whereas the term *landscape aesthetics* is applicable to natural places: “Within the genus of environmental aesthetics fall a number of different species, such as the aesthetics of nature, landscape aesthetics, the aesthetics of cityscapes and urban design, and perhaps the aesthetics of architecture” (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* xx). Thus, landscape aesthetics refers to the philosophical analysis of the sensory perception of the natural world. However, this discussion will use *aesthetics of nature* when possible rather than landscape aesthetics; the development of the concept of *landscape* is linked to the picturesque as two-dimensional physiographic space rather than multi-dimensional interactive place (Cosgrove 1998).

In Western aesthetic philosophy, pleasurable experience engages vision as the primary mode of perception (Berleant 2005; Heidegger 2009, first published in 1938; Jay 1993). An aesthetics of flora would attend to pleasing visual perception of plants as artistic objects. To consider something as an object of aesthetic discourse is to assess it as optically beautiful and hence, desirable, by virtue of its surface features of grace, harmony, symmetry, smoothness and colour. Jay comments that “the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes” (9) have given rise to the pre-eminence of sight and the attendant marginalisation of the other senses. An image-focused culture can pictorialise the workings of the world in the mind only insofar as it can construct an image in words. Visualism has a close functional association with language, entailing specialist vocabularies affirming the morphologies of visual pleasure (Jay 9). Specialised perception requires the development of canons of formal beauty linked to language and the exclusion of the less quantifiable bodily senses. As specialists, aesthetic appreciators demarcate the appropriateness of objects; some objects will be beautiful, whereas others deserve no special consideration. Aesthetic taste comes to imply the two-dimensional attractiveness of an artistic object as judged by an aesthetic subject. The object becomes aestheticised. A caption beneath the photo of a mountainscape refers to the limitations of images in expressing

the character of landscapes, summed up by Porteous as “visual aesthetics only; other senses elude representation” (40).

Whereas aesthetic perception has its locus in a perspectival point *out there*, corporeal appreciation has its hexis in bodily sensation *in here*. The framing of an aesthetic object implies a distanced mode of perception and a gap between bodies. *Aesthetics* is a neologism first proposed in 1750 by Alexander Baumgarten in *Aesthetica* (Bychkov, and Sheppard xi). The term derives from the ancient Greek *aisthesis* for open sensory perception that is multi-sensorial (visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory and tactile) and meta-sensorial (topaesthetic and kinaesthetic). Since Baumgarten, aesthetics has evolved into a narrowing of the experience of perception towards a closing off of the object from its matrix of relations. Closed sensory perception comprises visual denomination, essentialism and resistance towards the natural world as bodily affective. As the exploration of “perceptual complexity” through corporeal immanence, *aisthesis* has been eroded from the contemporary meaning of aesthetics by the privileged role of the “aesthetic subject” in determining artistic beauty (Singer 14-15). Whereas *aisthesis* denotes broad apprehension and bodily sensation, aesthetics has come to mean the pseudo-scientific apprehension of an artistic object as “a sensible image of perfection”, in Baumgarten’s terms (Caygill 53). Moreover, Caygill stresses that Kantian aesthetics extracts pure forms from sensation: “Some aspects of Kant’s [*Critique of Judgment*] are anticipated by Plato in *Timaeus* when he relates *aisthesis* to pleasure and pain, but this was no part of Baumgarten or Kant’s concern” (Caygill 53-54). In contradistinction to aesthetics as the appreciation of objects, *open multisensoriality* would explore bodily aisthesis by engaging the “diffuse, inchoate, transient, and emotional” senses (Tuan 117).

A visual aesthetics reinforces the idea of an unknown landscape as foreign and threatening, and as a place alienated from human inhabitants and theorised into an appreciable aggregation of objects rather than a complex place of sustenance. In order to minimise the potential of harm, a landscape or plant that could be dangerous may be approached through the safety and distance afforded by sight. For all of its practical benefits, sight may inhibit participatory engagement. Porteous (31) notes that *perception* almost always refers to the intake of visual stimuli, and that the non-visual or auto-centric senses, such as smell, have been reduced both in cultural importance and perceptual significance. He goes on to differentiate between auto-centric (subject-centred) and allocentric (object-centred) senses. Vision is the primary allocentric sense and is associated with the qualities of cognition, detachment, distance and maturation, while auto-centric senses, such as hearing, smell, touch and taste, are typically physical, primitive, emotive and immediate, occurring in close proximity to the human appreciator and intrinsically expressed by children (Porteous 31). Visual appreciation requires an object of perception, whereas the auto-centric senses bring the object closer and arguably reduce or even eliminate the appreciative divide. The consumption of wattle seed requires that the seed become incorporated in the body through the processes of mastication, swallowing and digestion.

The predilection for sight in the contemporary tradition of aesthetic philosophy is acknowledged by Berleant, who opens his most recent volume on environment and aesthetics with what seems like an apology for the visualistic tendencies of the field: “Aesthetic perception is usually described in visual terms: we are given not an aesthetic of *experience* but an aesthetic of *appearance* [emphasis added]” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 3). Sight affirms cognition and thus, perception becomes intellectual in character and the appreciator, a rational subject. Berleant further argues that the Western tradition of aesthetics has privileged “sight, along with the other distance receptor, hearing, [as] the only senses traditionally admitted as legitimately aesthetic” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 3). Through an emphasis on the perception of the surface qualities of

landscapes, aesthetics has been a “triumph of a pure visuality, concerned solely with formal optical questions” (Jay 160). Whereas vision allows the analysis of formal qualities in a distanced landscape, the smellscape, for example, is “an enveloping, unstructured, often directionless space” (Porteous 36). Vision constructs uniformity between perceptions and a predictability of form, and balance and symmetry that enable the systematising of taxonomy. Smell and taste seem too immanent for a science of perception.

Aesthetics has been defined as an analytical field or the “science of sensory knowledge” requiring consistent visual parameters (Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 3). Aesthetic judgments are made objective and communicable through the gap of perception in which reason mediates the experience of pleasure. Yet, contemporary aestheticians have endeavoured to redeem the narrowing of aesthetics into a science for privileging objects by emphasising the appreciator as the discerning subject. In response to the perennial question of what constitutes aesthetics, Stolnitz remarks that “any object at all can be apprehended aesthetically, i.e. no object is inherently unaesthetic”, and that “one needs only to adopt an ‘aesthetic attitude’” (83). In positing the aesthetic attitude, Stolnitz broadens the demesne of appreciation towards greater inclusivity in which aesthetics is restricted neither to specific occasions nor to privileged environments. Something is aesthetic insofar as it is judged as such by a discerning subject in a certain context, such as an art gallery, wildflower show or botanical reserve.

However, Stolnitz’s concept of the aesthetic attitude privileges sight and the separative function of visual perception, reinforcing the dualisms of object and subject, consciousness and matter—thought to have reached an apotheosis in the seventeenth-century philosophy of Descartes. Stolnitz’s theory posits an axis between the appreciator and the natural world through the unconstrained power of the human subject to determine perceptual merit. Inherent to the positioning of an aesthetic subject are the perceptual object and the accompanying philosophical problems of disembodiment, sensory distance and visual speculation as the tools that constitute aesthetics. Constructed by the human gaze, a perceptual object will be held as separate. What happens when the object of appreciation becomes absorbed into the viscera of bodies, collapsing the distance required to maintain power structures between an aesthetic subject and an object of art? This would be the case in the appreciation of the quandong fruit of Western Australia, for example, through the subversive act of eating them. If perception transgresses the allocentric receptors to engage immanent sensation, has the aesthetic attitude been foiled through the (dis)integration of the aesthetic object?

### **3. Plants as Objects of Art: From Artefacts to Habitats**

The previous section attempted to connect aesthetics, as it has been theorised since Baumgarten, to the creation of a perceptual object posing the problem of distance between the appreciator and which is being appreciated. The recurring conundrum faced by landscape aesthetics is that art has been the pre-dominant framework for the enjoyment of the natural world. However, how do we experience plants outside of the appreciation of manufactured objects? Visual apprehension serves the evaluation of human-made objects, but sight alone limits the appreciation of living flora for their multi-sensoriality. Carlson (2000) suggests that the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is made untenable when a plant or animal is separated conceptually from the human appreciator as a remote object of perception. The emphasis on visual experience of scenery, focal point specimens or wildflower imagery narrows the overall experience of flora. An embodied aesthetics of plants will not revolve around sight alone. Visual aesthetics may even degrade the cultural value of flora when plants depart from aesthetic values generated in other places.

In addition to visuality, the extension of art appreciation to the perception of landscapes is an impasse to the fuller disambiguation of the appreciation of art from the appreciation of nature. The artefactualisation of the natural world into a series of well-designed objects is a core issue faced by contemporary environmental aestheticians, as well as conservationists as the Lesueur Management Plan reveals. Plants *in situ* are not dead scenes but living entities forming communities with other life forms capable of alterity and becoming. A multi-sensorial aesthetics of flora disengages the appreciation of plants from the appreciation of visual artefacts. In this respect, the “non-aesthetic model of nature appreciation” argues nihilistically “that aesthetic appreciation is paradigmatically appreciation of works of art and is minimally appreciation of artifacts, of that which is human-made” (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 8). Aesthetics, as the theory maintains, is the science of perceiving art, not the natural world. Carlson (2000) recognises that the non-aesthetic model addresses the core complication of distance of the Western tradition of aesthetics. Carlson holds that the appreciation of art and the natural world are two very different experiences, the former manufactured through the creative intent of a designer and the latter generated through ecology: “To aesthetically appreciate the natural world, we do not need to actually make it, as we make works of art; nor do we need to conceptualize it in artistic categories” (*Aesthetics and the Environment* 9).

In aesthetic philosophy, the theorising of the difference between the appreciation of art and the appreciation of the natural world has occurred concertedly in the last 45 years. Hepburn’s essay “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” (2004, first published in 1966) argues for the role of multi-sensorial experience of living places in contrast to the static appreciation of objects of art. Hepburn (2004) affirms the differences between artistic pieces and living environments. Since a forest surrounds an appreciator, models of disengaged viewership are restricted. The sensation of immersion encourages interactive physical experience that brings the distant tree, stone, herb or bird into bodily proximity. The appreciating subject is incorporated into the object of appreciation through symbiotic acts of moving, eating, tasting, smelling, touching and feeling. The kino sap of the marri tree might be likened to blood rather than paint. In Southwest Australian Nyoongar culture, marri kino has been used as an antiseptic topical treatment for burns, stings and other skin wounds (Moore 1978, first published in 1884). The visual aesthetic appreciation of marri differs considerably from embodied networks of sustenance. In Hepburn’s view, unlike works of art, natural objects are without frames that bound perception through defined edges. Hepburn stresses that, in contrast to fixed works of art, natural environments must be approached through change and multi-sensoriality.

Since Hepburn, one of the projects of contemporary eco-aesthetics has been to distinguish between the appreciation of artistic objects and natural environments, considering the differences of immersion, viewership and framing. The question of whether there should be one aesthetic model encompassing both art and nature or separate accounts for each is taken up by Berleant, who states that “few would deny the possibility of obtaining aesthetic satisfaction from both works of art and from nature” (“The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” 228). The *contemplative model* of aesthetic experience balkanises an object of art from its surroundings in order to project visual focus towards the object. According to Berleant (*Aesthetics and Environment* 4), the contemplative model has been axiomatic in modern aesthetics and rests upon an attitude of disinterestedness, which Stolnitz defines as “disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone” (80). Berleant regards disinterestedness as a “doctrine of separation and distance” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 5) that creates an objectified space for ordering everything animate and inanimate within it. Liberated from practical interest or utilitarianism, a disinterested attitude ensures that aesthetics is a

product of intellectual discourse alone.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934) departed from the contemplative model of aesthetic experience to argue for experience of the living world that reduces the perceptual distance of art appreciation. Rather than a model of viewership, an *active model* or an aesthetics of pragmatism, as suggested by Dewey, envelopes appreciation of art objects in human experience: “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance” (Dewey 3). Dewey argues that the interaction among the object of art, the appreciator and the environment reinstates “the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature” (Dewey 25). An organism participates in an environment towards the creation of aesthetic experience towards perception that “is not exclusively visual but rather somatic: the body energizes space” (Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 7). Whereas plants have aesthetic qualities shared by artistic objects, they lack the creative agency of the artist. Living objects retain internal creative agency linked to a web of ecological relationships. Carlson (2000) evidences a concern over the distinction between the appreciation of art and the appreciation of the natural world. Whereas a visual object of art is dimensionally fixed, typically immobile and sensorially limited, “in our aesthetic appreciation of the world at large we are confronted by, if not intimately and totally engulfed in, something that forces itself upon all our senses” (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* xviii). Carlson intimates that the world at large is temporally and spatially unbounded, defined by movement and change and well-suited to the non-visual appreciation of life through music, poetry, fiction and even food.

Despite somatic emphasis, the pragmatics of Dewey valorises art as the foundation of aesthetic experience and “the living and concrete proof that [humanity] is capable of restoring consciously” (Dewey 25) the union of the senses through experience. The *live creature* is a trope for the object of art mediated through experiential space towards greater union between an appreciator and the object. But, a live inanimate creature of art will differ inherently from a living creature in a habitat. An experience of Michelangelo’s *David* might engage the conditions of the gallery, the mood of the appreciator, the journey of arriving, foreknowledge of the work of art through study and anticipatory feelings of viewing a great piece in the history of art. The statue is positioned in a gallery environment that, with the materiality of the statue itself, creates a narrow scope of aesthetic possibilities. Similarly, Andy Goldsworthy’s *Neuberger Cairn*, a stone obelisk created in 2001, is part of an outdoor environment. Yet, both *David* and *Neuberger Cairn* differ in obvious ways from a plant; a statue is inorganic stone or dead organic wood, whereas a plant lives. An appreciator can neither interact bodily with a statue through exchange of life nutriment nor receive a response from the object. Plants are not static objects temporally fixed into position, such as the statue *David*. As ever-changing, self-determining and responsive organisms, plants might not fit canons of beauty based upon visual criteria. A vocabulary of art objects constrains aesthetic appreciation of plants from expanding to embodiment and multi-sensoriality.

The installations of contemporary Australian artist Gregory Pryor use physical immersion, including sound and renderings, to convey the urgency of indigenous species decline in the Southwest (for example, see Marchant, 2005). However, despite the ethic of conservation of some botanical art forms, a visual depiction will always offer less than the experience of plants in the field through phases of variability and sensuality. Berleant distinguishes between the living creature and an object or rendering by rejecting “the ethnocentric assumptions of modern Western aesthetics that restrict art and the aesthetic to carefully circumscribed objects and occasions of museums, galleries, and concert halls” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 108). As Berleant argues, aesthetic appreciation is broader than the gallery space and the viewership model, it extends to diverse

environments and settings: “The occasions on which aesthetic appreciation can develop are unlimited and can involve any objects whatsoever... aesthetic involvement need not be rare or restricted” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 152). An immersive gallery space is evocative, yet mediated, whereas a living plant in the botanic field engages direct experiences. In the field, an appreciator may enter into a wide circle of associations and perceptual configurations between bodies. Two very different aesthetic experiences occur; neither the gallery space nor the botanic field substitutes adequately for the other. Indeed, the skill of the artist and the particularities of the exhibition hall may accentuate certain aesthetic qualities of a plant that go undetected by the senses alone. For instance, Pryor’s renderings elicit shared congruities between the structures of different species of indigenous flora through a tableau of shadowy images.

The models of Carlson and Berleant respond to the central challenge of landscape aesthetics to distinguish between an object of artistic appreciation and a living organism. Therefore, an embodied aesthetic model of flora would respond to the tendency to construct plants as artistic objects, in which perception comprises dichotomies between visual and corporeal ways of interacting. An aesthetics of flora would need to address the scenery cult (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 32) of picturesque detachment and the formulaic canons of beauty in which certain species of plants might be labelled inconsequential scrub. Carlson goes on to describe the scenery cult of nature as linked closely to landscape paintings and postcards in which “form-constituting elements, resultant overall form, and formal qualities such as balance, proportion, and organization are of considerable importance” (*Aesthetics and the Environment* 32). An aesthetics of plants would respond to the tendency to appreciate plants as objects of art, as well as the taxonomic perspective that posits a living plant as interchangeable with its two-dimensional architecture or creative rendering.

#### **4. Plants as Objects of Disinterestedness: From Detachment to Engagement**

The previous section argued that aesthetic disinterestedness parallels the project of objective scientific knowledge about the natural world. This section examines the concept of disinterestedness as it appears in the aesthetic modes of the sublime, beautiful and picturesque. Through the perceptual gulf accorded by disinterestedness, an environment would be made to feel safe, whereas, in close proximity, it would seem hostile or repulsive. A threatening plant would endanger the body directly through noxious smell, bitter taste or stinging sensation of Prickly Moses, Hakea, Grevillea and other schelorphyllous species. Through vision, the potential danger or discomfort of the bush may be averted. Whereas the auto-centric senses bring plants into the bodily sphere, vision positions aesthetic experience distantly in a perspectival point. Disinterested appreciation of plants is unhinged by the facts that we eat, drink, smell, taste, touch, consume and wear plants regularly, as suburban dwellers or homesteaders. In his disputatious account of the origin of aesthetics, Robert Dixon (80) maintains that the term “aesthetics” is a corruption *aesthesis* for “sensible”. The invocation of aesthetic taste splits perception and cognition, and bodily senses and intellectual reason. Sense has come to denote cognitive recognition in which rationality is sense. In Dixon’s view, the ancient Greek notion of sensibility, in contrast, embeds reason in sense experience. In other words, aesthetics before Baumgarten marked the attainment of knowledge through the auto-centric bodily senses, rather than through the allocentric senses entirely. Dixon maintains that aesthetics, as it has been theorised since its inception, “signals a great philosophical crime, an expulsion of the carnal body from the garden of knowledge” (80).

Contemporary environmental aestheticians return multi-sensoriality to aesthetics through critiques of the role of disinterestedness in the sublime, picturesque and beautiful. Whereas the beautiful is the appreciation of



the form of human-scale objects, the sublime involves places or objects of formless magnitude, height and volume. The sublime is contingent on disinterestedness to create a perceptual chasm between the appreciator and the appreciated which is bridged by reason. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke (1990, first published in 1756) propounded aesthetic ideas in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that associate the sublime with terror and awe as bodily sensations invoked by the inability of vision to frame the scene. Kant (1974, first published in 1798) distinguishes between the beautiful as pleasure evoked through well-formed objects and the sublime as pleasure and pain experienced through the immensity of formless objects. Expanding Burke's concept, Kant deepened the sublime through two phases. Firstly, pleasurable experience of the sublime depends on the ability of reason to comprehend size or force where that formlessness eludes the sensory faculties. Secondly, the distance between the appreciator and the sublime object transmutes the initial experience of terror into comfortable pleasure. The Kantian notion of the sublime depends on the intellectual conversion of terror into pleasure through rationalising the experience of perceptual unboundedness. As Kant argues, where vision fails to frame the natural object as the beautiful, the faculty of reason modulates the experience of sensory overwhelm. In this regard, Kant distinguishes between the mathematical and dynamical sublime in order to argue for the power of reason over the natural world (*The Critique of Judgment* 71). The former is invoked if the subject is overwhelmed by physical magnitude, whereas the latter occurs if one is overwhelmed by force, but both forms entail a mastery of the natural world through the mind—an aesthetic project well-aligned to classical science.

A sublime experience of flora may occur in an old growth karri forest or on an open *kwongan* heathland plain. In both of these instances, scale and size affect the appreciator firstly with terror, pain, disorientation and anxiety. These botanical habitats may overwhelm an individual through their potential to overpower reason, but ultimately the intellect reigns. The sublime figures into the engagement and natural environmental models. For Carlson (2000), the sublime is characterised by disinterestedness, which excludes from aesthetic experience a range of economic, moral and personal investments, including bodily needs. Carlson (2000) links disinterestedness to both the sublime and scientific objectification, both of which have the power to subdue physically threatening places. In contrast, Berleant asserts that the sublime marks the movement of the aesthetics of nature away from the appreciation of artistic objects through “the capacity of the natural world to act on so monumental a scale as to exceed our powers of framing and control, and to produce in their place a sense of overwhelming magnitude and awe” (“The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” 234). For Berleant, the sublime is the hallmark of an aesthetics of nature, because it signifies the impossibility of disinterested contemplation of the natural world through the “experience of continuity, assimilation, and engagement” (“The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” 235). For Carlson, disinterested contemplation is central to the sublime, whereas for Berleant, the sublime undermines disinterested appreciation of nature.

As another mode of aesthetics, the picturesque theorised by William Gilpin (1786) describes the painterly qualities of a scene. The term “picturesque” literally translates to “picture-like” and aims to distil the natural world into artistic frames governed by the ideals of landscape painting and imagistic poetry (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 4). The beautiful depends on smoothness and symmetry for creating the experience of pleasure, whilst the sublime entails slippage between discomfort and pleasure as moderated by reason. The picturesque, however, may be defined by the contrasts of roughness, irregularity and abrupt variation against the smoothness of background elements such as the placid surface of a lake (Brady 40). The picturesque has as its basis the empiricist thinking of early eighteenth-century British aestheticians who maintained that

landscapes that resemble works of art are most appealing (Carlson 2000). Desirable works of nature are composed to dramatise the assemblage of pictorial elements. The picturesque mode is inherent to most forms of nature tourism and its affiliated desiderata of photos, postcards, brochures and web pages (Andrews 1989; Urry 2002). The picturesque is also identified with panoramic prospects or scenic outlooks that are visually distanced ways of appreciating—and indeed formulating—landscapes.

The picturesque, sublime and beautiful, as Rod Giblett argues, are the three philosophically valid aesthetic modes in which the remote senses are activated (*Postmodern Wetlands* 48). A sublime experience of flora would entail the fearful, yet pleasurable, sensation of being engulfed in a looming karri forest or isolated on a vast sprawling *kwongan* plain. The sublime exceeds the sense faculties, leaving reason to accept our position within enormity or below monumentality. Giblett observes the perceptual differences between these three aesthetic modes: “The sublime is evoked by looking up at monumental, formless, phallic and patriarchal object... the beautiful involves looking down at small, well-formed, feminine objects lying before one; the picturesque entails looking out across feminised pleasing prospects” (*Postmodern Wetlands* 56). A discrete natural object may become an artistic object, whereas a landscape prospect is framed pictorially as the picturesque. Along the Southern Ocean through the Fitzgerald River National Park in Western Australia, sublime experience of flora comprises the expansiveness of the prospects and the tumult of the sea. Encountering the drooping red flower of the Qualup Bell, we experience an aesthetics of the beautiful through the perception of a well-formed blossom.

The uncanny confounds the visuality of the beautiful, picturesque and sublime by injecting the resonance of which lingers, and the unseen perceptibility of smell—after-taste, drifting, and unlocalised odour (Giblett 1996; 2004). Whereas the beautiful and picturesque are pleasing visual modes and the sublime entails physical unease converted into intellectual mastery, the uncanny engages the immediacy of smell. Walking in the Fitzgerald River National Park, the odour of a rotting flower evokes the uncanny, especially, if the source of the smell is not visibly identifiable. The uncanny may be displeasurable experience that contradicts visually pleasing categories (Sibley 2001). Uncanny or displeasurable experience may transmute into pleasurable or beautiful perception as plants undergo changes over seasons or lifespans. A beautiful Qualup Bell flower will have an uncanny post-flowering phase in which it decays back to the earth. Enrapturing perfume decomposes to pungent detritus, which engenders the possibility of the flower again. Alterity points to the fluidity of aesthetic experience, shifting between modes of perception comprising these kinds of changes through the seasons.

The uncanny is significant in relation to Berleant’s model of engagement. The beautiful, sublime and picturesque occur through disinterestedness in order to achieve bodily separation between an appreciator and nature. However, the uncanny engages the sense of smell and confounds sight. Passing the rotting Qualup Bell flower, we search for the source of the nauseating stench. Smell eludes visual depiction. Berleant calls, not for disinterested contemplation, but for an aesthetics of engagement, “a sensory immersion in the natural world that reaches the still uncommon experience of unity” (“The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” 237). Participatory engagement responds to the aesthetics of the beautiful, picturesque and sublime based upon discreteness and order, symmetry and regularity. Berleant broadens the aesthetic character of natural places beyond that which is visually validated: “The attraction of a spreading patch of bunchberry or a stand of wild columbine on the forest floor [lies in its] color, shape, poignant simplicity, delicacy and, as much as any anything, its gratuitousness and profusion” (“The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” 237). According to Carlson, the engagement model emphasises “the contextual dimensions of nature and our multi-sensory experience of it... in an attempt to obliterate

traditional dichotomies such as subject and object, and ultimately to reduce to as small a degree as possible the distance between ourselves and nature” (*Aesthetics and the Environment* 6). To some extent, an engagement aesthetics involves the absorption of the appreciated into the appreciator.

Despite its emphasis on multi-sensorial experience, an aesthetics of engagement is unclear about how it would engage the non-visual senses in the appreciation of flora. The attraction of a spreading patch of bunchberry lies furthermore in its promise of edibility, the subtle fragrance of flowers or the sounds of ice flakes on bunchberry leaves. Berleant goes on to advocate “an aesthetics of engagement [that] encompasses both art and nature” (*Aesthetics and Environment* 241), aligning nature and art again even though works of art are dead while nature is living. Objects of art cannot be tasted, smelled, heard or sometimes cannot even be touched although contemporary participatory art may attempt to engage a viewer in multi-sensorial ways (Almenberg 2010). By encompassing the appreciation of nature and of art within an aesthetic of engagement, Berleant marginalises the immanence of living creatures in distinction to the mediated experience of artistic objects. The essential difference will always make the appreciation of art different from the appreciation of nature: Art aesthetics is the experience of inanimate objects, whereas nature aesthetics is the appreciation of life. Through an aesthetics of engagement, a plant becomes an object of artistic discourse in which visual attributes supersede embodied experiences. Although Berleant challenges disinterestedness, his model provides uncertain ground for a corporeal aesthetics of plants.

### **5. Plants as Objects of Scientific Discourse: From Reason to Embodiment**

With emphasis on multi-sensorial experience, the engagement model responds to the “dichotomising metaphysics” subtending the aesthetics of art and nature since the 18th century (Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 152). The epistemological differences between cognitive and non-cognitive ways of appreciating the world pose another issue confronted by contemporary aesthetic models of landscape. The debate stems back to Kant (Kant 1974, first published in 1798) who trifurcated perception into the senses, reason and imagination. Through the principle of *sensus communis*, Kant argued that recollection or imagination are not appropriate foundations for an aesthetics because they do not allow the standard of communicability between individual appreciators that a science of perception does (Brady 2003). Hence, a Kantian view of aesthetics aligns sense experience to the intellect. Challenging the precedence given to science in apprehending the environment, contemporary environmental aestheticians argue for the non-cognitive faculties in aesthetic experience (Hepburn 2004, first published in 1966).

The cognitive debate in contemporary landscape aesthetic theory reinforces destabilising Cartesian fragmentations between knowledge and intuition, bodily experience and intellect in the appreciation of plants. In Berleant’s engagement model, aesthetic experience occurs through interaction between all modes of perception. For instance, the ecology of the Qualup Bell, along with its colour and the tactile memory of its stiff leaves, the stories of Nyoongar and colonial European histories which surround it, and imaginative recollection of a trip to the Fitzgerald River alchemise to produce a syncretic aesthetic of engagement with the plant. Scientific understanding is the preeminent epistemological model for knowing plants, but it does not substantiate direct and multi-sensorial experience. The episodic movement of aesthetic experience involves splicings, interruptions and punctuations between cognitive and non-cognitive faculties of perception. Science may instead complement the non-cognitive faculties, augmenting sensorial engagement towards aesthetic narrative streams.

The relationship between scientific knowledge of plants and their appreciation is emphasised by Carlson's natural environmental model of environmental aesthetics. However, Carlson's model inherits the sublime tradition of Kant in which the validity of bodily sensation is judged by reason. For Carlson, science is sufficient for an aesthetics of the natural world because rational knowledge dispels inappropriate aesthetic judgments: "When we cast the conceptual net of common-sense and scientific understanding over nature we do enough to it to make possible its aesthetic appreciation" (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 9). Casting a conceptual net involves capturing, which subjugates by conceptualising something into pieces. Carlson (2000) is concerned with the distinction between the *designed object* of art and the *ordered object* of nature and the particular narrative that informs the natural world. In order to distinguish the aesthetics of nature from art appreciation, cognitive theorists argue that natural science comprises the appropriate structures for appreciating the natural world (Carlson 1993; 2000). The natural environmental model asserts that the natural sciences enable a distinction between the designed object of art and the ordered object of nature. Whereas the designed object of art appreciation can exist on its own, an ordered object, such as a rock or plant, does not stand apart from its story of creation (Carlson 1993; 2000). Through scientific understanding of nature, the model governs multi-sensorial experience to avoid distorting the "objects for what they are and... the properties they have" (Carlson, "Appreciating Art" 219).

The natural environmental model requires the probity of aesthetic experience and the narrative of taxonomic botany in the appreciation of plants. For instance, the appreciation of Patterson's Curse, an aggressive purple-flowered exotic plant in the Southwest of Western Australia, would be constrained by the understanding of its growth habits and its tendency to displace indigenous species. Similarly, Carlson approaches an aesthetics of wildflowers with the example of knowing the science of diminutive plants of an alpine meadow. Understanding that the flora of the meadow adapts and survives according to the limitations of an intense high altitude climate, the appreciator is less inclined "to overlook miniature wild flowers" (Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* xix-xx). This aspect of the natural environmental model is especially pertinent to the aesthetics of Western Australian plants, which often contradict expectations of floral form, colour and behaviour inherited from Europe. Botanical knowledge of plants may augment their appreciation, instilling admiration that stimulates physical engagement with plants over time. Knowing the colonial history of a plant, such as the Western Australian zamia palm, can entice an enthusiast into the field to locate the plant, even if it is out of flower. Someone in the field could then attune to the species, taking note of each time he or she encounters it and perhaps planning future occasions to visit it—an approach perfected by the American Henry David Thoreau in his field studies of flora.

However, the main difficulty with the natural environmental model is its basis in science rather than the body. Science relies on the visual denomination of living forms through a mode of disinterested detachment, despite scholars of science, such as Felix Driver (2004), who argue for the corporeal production of scientific knowledge. Sensation is traditionally excluded from scientific discourse for its variability and subjective character. Recalling the scepticism of Thoreau observing science as the grub "nestled in the very germ of the fruit" (242), a multi-sensorial aesthetics of plants would reinstate the value of bodily knowing over objectivism. Thoreau's healthy scepticism is a model here: "Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (qtd. in Walls 40). Indeed, Thoreau's experience of plants transgresses the paradigms of art appreciation and scientific knowledge through the acts within bodily space, not disinterested space. Closely related to Thoreau's position on science is Heidegger's challenging of objectivist paradigms through the concept of

*Ge-stell* or enframement, linking visual apprehension to technological domination (Heidegger 1977).

## 6. The Problems of Union

An embodied aesthetics of flora, which encourages and engages the many senses with respect to plants, raises important philosophical questions about human experience of the natural world. As this paper has stressed, the visual paradigm of appreciation is inherent to conservation management practices at vital places of botanical heritage in Western Australia such as Lesueur National Park. The natural world, as such, is posited as a source of visual enjoyment and an object of ocular pleasure. Conversely, the non-pleasurable visual and non-visual aspects of the flora tend to be excised out of an aesthetics regrettably. *Distance*, afforded by sight, sustains *desirability* and *controllability* in these instances. However, an aesthetics of nature incorporating the active tenses of tasting, smelling and touching puts an appreciator in auto-centric proximity to living plants. In such instances, sense immanence fosters more complex, perhaps more intense, and certainly less rationalistically cohesive appreciation through the intricacies of physical contact. The smells of plants, for instance, can produce all-enveloping sense immediacies that confound the orderliness of visual perspectives.

Yet, why should proximity and possible union between an appreciator and the appreciated be of concern? Does closeness and intermeshing axiomatically enhance the pleasure of aesthetic experience? Before attempting to broach these questions, it is instructive to consider a Heideggerean perspective of union as intimacy that “obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*” (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 199). Union implies the difficulties of identity loss. Heidegger’s notion, in contrast, suggests intersubjective intimacy—a dialogic continuum between subject and object in which each moulds the other through continual sense reciprocity: “I consume the quandong fruit”; “I walk away”; “I spit out the pit”; a new quandong grows in a new place, providing an array of sense experiences for myself and others, human and non-human. The quandong affords sweetness, piquancy and sustenance through its substance that enters “my” body and is assimilated into “my” flesh; the nut remains a *dif-ference*, a symbol of the prevailing separation through which the world proliferates, through which ecological processes happen and through which seeds disperse.

This kind of intersubjectivity holds promise to make experience more beneficial and more pleasant than detached contemplation of forms and colours. As this paper has been arguing, visual distance offers only a narrow scope of aesthetic possibilities. Bodily intermeshing, represented by the act of eating the quandong, brings about a new set of aesthetic connotations. The pleasure of eating the quandong enhances the experience of seeing the ruddiness of the fruit. Importantly, however, multi-sensorial appreciation of flora is not axiomatically more beneficial in all instances. Some plants will be repulsive to taste, but pleasing to touch; or their leaves might be drastically toxic and their flowers highly nutritious and delicious. Furthermore, the fruits might be dangerous and unpalatable at certain times of a year or when not processed beforehand. For example, the Zamia Palm of Western Australia produces a sustaining nut that has been a staple food for Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years. Yet, the nuts need to be detoxified by time-tested practices before consumption. Otherwise, potentially fatal poisoning, known since the settler era as the Zamia staggers, will take effect. The proximity necessitated by multi-sensoriality needs to be guided and moderated by traditional or scientific knowledge in these examples, but not made contingent upon cognitive foreknowledge, as boasted by Carlson’s natural environmental model. The abolition of distance can contribute to aesthetic experience, not in simple, fixed or absolute terms, but rather in complex ecological ways.

Most importantly, the decline of distance and a return to corporeal appreciation contribute to the exploration of aesthetics as sensation rather than disinterested speculation. As such, broadened sense experience opens aesthetics to greater engagement with the natural world through somatic acts of tasting, touching and smelling. Rather than being set in opposition, both the allocentric and the auto-centric senses enhance experience synergistically. In such a context, the Lesueur Management Plan, alluded to in the beginning of the paper, would consider human bodily interactions with flora. How can the aromas of wildflowers during the spring be taken into account? Educational tours into the park might introduce intimate moments of tasting, touching and smelling, squatting down beside and looking closely at wild plants as modes for enhancing appreciation.

Rather than *union* or *symbiosis* in which the appreciator and the appreciated dissolve into an untenable whole, this paper has chosen to describe proximity as *intersubjectivity* in which both entities retain autonomy yet interweave through sense extensions and entwinements. Indeed, problems can emerge and can interfere with aesthetic enjoyment when all the senses are activated. The poisonous *Zamia* Palm nut was consumed by explorers of Western Australia, often with disastrous consequences, yet it was relished by Aboriginal peoples who would stash nuts in caches for future retrieval during long foot journeys. The stashing helped to detoxify the nut, but it also aided the spread of the plant itself. The relationship between the *Zamia* nut and Aboriginal peoples was one of intersubjective modulation, in which both appreciators and the appreciated received benefits through nutrition and distribution respectively. This historical example reminds us that sensory closeness, as intersubjectivity and intimacy, unfolds a raft of philosophical problems that need to be explored as thoroughly as visual distance that has been theorised since the modern inception of Western aesthetics.

## 7. Theorising a Corporeal Aesthetics of Plants

This paper has presented contemporary eco-aesthetic theories to argue for an embodied aesthetics of plants. However, the shortcomings of the theories of Berleant and Carlson in particular may replicate traditional aesthetic concepts of plants as objects of vision, objects of art, objects of disinterestedness and objects of scientific discourse. Visual aesthetics positions experience of flora outside the appreciator towards a distanced locus of attention. The faculty of vision enables disembodied apprehension of plants that is coterminous with the project of scientific knowledge production. The point of contact between the appreciator and the appreciated occurs intellectually through the recognition of form, colour, symmetry, exposure, vista and other visual qualities beyond the intimate spheres of bodies. However, what if an aesthetics of flora situates the nexus of perception in the tissues and fibres, in the contact between bodies created by multi-sensorial experience? This aesthetics would hold the body as a plenum of contact with plant life through the faculties of smell, taste, touch, hearing and movement. An embodied aesthetics of flora would close the perceptual gulf between the appreciator and the plant, bringing bodies closer to one another rather than holding them at bay.

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