Penelope Gottlieb:

Even as a child, I was fascinated by popular culture and the seductive power of its imagery. I drew cartoons. I was constantly absorbed in visual observation and synthesis that my parents chalked up to too many comic books! I filtered my world through the illustrations I drew. The image became a conduit for the real, and to me the image was just as salient and immediate, if not more so, than the reality of the world I observed. To my impressionable mind everything was visual, everything was saturated with content for my drawings. Even when I was a kid, the images I drew seemed to tap into the irreverence of an unexpected twist or a wicked element of surprise. I loved the subtle powers of subversion available to the illustrator, something I could wield through my own hand and summon with my own imagination. I drew my parents' dinner parties, my mom's beauty salon, people grocery shopping, innocuous every day observations I could transform into imagery and narrative. I eventually pursued a fine art education and completed my undergrad at the Art Center in Pasadena, CA. I then received my MFA from UC Santa Barbara, CA. The power of the image has never lost its seduction for me.

The 22:

Penelope Gottlieb:

Yes, she was. My mother was a puppeteer and my father an architect. As a child, I grew up in a household full of creative activity and making. My mother always had some fun project she was working on, and my friends were totally envious of me. The puppets were these fascinating creative objects I got to observe my mother at work on, indelibly linked by association to the potential of storytelling. I am sure it was no accident that I developed such a penchant for visual narrative. My grandmother was also an amazing artist, she was an oil painter and was actually the one who guided me towards painting. I grew up surrounded by these familial ambassadors of the creative disciplines, they all influenced me to some extent. Our house was also filled with great art books, a veritable mine of content for a kid with my visual appetites.

The 22:

Penelope Gottlieb:

I grew up in Los Angeles, but moved to Santa Barbara about 13 years ago. I love being outdoors, and my lifelong love of observation has always found great aesthetic ground there. I have about 25 quail that come to me for breakfast every morning when I whistle for them, which is a pretty bucolic image in and of itself. I have a garden and really enjoy this proximity to nature and botanical life. Its closeness to my every day has certainly sensitized my sensitivity to and appreciation of it. I also glean imagery directly from my environment and often incorporate plants from my own garden into the work.

The 22:

Penelope Gottlieb:

When I was growing up, I lived next door to “Mt. Olympus” in the Hollywood hills. I witnessed a track development
being implemented into the rural landscape. To see how this development, and the invasive introjection of its urban planning, displaced and disrupted the surrounding environment was really poignant for me and affected me very deeply. I think it really piqued an early sensitivity and sadness in me at the sight of environmental vulnerability and distress. Recently, the destructive wild fires in Santa Barbara, fueled and exacerbated by non-native grasses, are another brutal reminder of how invasive ecological changes can catalyze the speed of terrible destruction. Witnessing destructive natural phenomena is both humbling and terrifying, it makes you realize how fragile the balances really are.

THE 22: Much of your work deals with mutations and evolutionary roles (invasive species, extinct botanicals). Tell me a little about how these series began and what the fascination is with the “fantasy” of evolution?

PG: My interest in extinction evolved literally from spaces of absence. My interest in, and concern for, what I had heard was an extinction list increasing at an exponential rate, started a personal process of research and excavation. I found that there were no cohesive accounts of loss. It was difficult to find reliable extinction lists; they lacked detail and information. These plants were often itemized without imagery (in the form of botanical notes). Many had never been photographed or illustrated and in the complete absence of visual information or definitive accounts, my fascination with representing loss began. I decided to begin my own “list.” Since much of the time I was relying on textual description alone, the process of fleshing out these lost species resulted in an imagined taxonomy of loss. Because I knew my visual list would never be correct, the inevitable proliferation of its inaccuracies became a source of fascination. This process of imagining loss became a further illustration of the finality of extinction to me. I knew that I could never recover what was gone and lost to me forever. This activity of imagining recovery would ultimately erode my imaginative powers, and would always resist resolution. My work is very much about these irreconcilable spaces between loss, language, and imagination.

THE 22: Why did you choose to use Audubon prints for the invasive species?

PG: I had a few Audubon prints in the studio that I had bought at a thrift shop, intending to re-purpose their frames. I kept looking at them and one day got the idea to “invade” them. Non-native invasive species are one of the top three reasons for botanical extinction. The other two are loss of habitat and global warming. I wanted to address this subject visually in my work, but wanted the series to have a different feel from the extinct botanical paintings. So, I decided to “invade” the existing Audubon prints with the addition of invasive vines enveloping and strangling the birds in the images. It became a very powerful visual for me: the literal invasion of an existing image, and the violence of incapacitating a vulnerable subject. The process of making the work mirrored the environmental violence of the phenomena. By appropriating these vintage reproductions, and ultimately staging my invasive interventions within them, I could enter into a dialogue with a historical representation of nature and insert my own voice and contemporary perspective directly.

THE 22: Any thoughts on the work of Audubon? Pro, cons?

PG: Nature was looked upon differently in Audubon’s time. It was there to be subjugated and colonized for the advancement and enjoyment of “man.” Audubon’s consumption of nature literally knew no bounds. He is quoted as having said: “A day without killing 100 birds is a day wasted.” He is a complex figure in that he genuinely loved the birds he meticulously rendered and catalogued, but also loved killing them. At that time, of course, there was no concept of extinction in the contemporary sense, nature and wildlife were abundant and seemingly inexhaustible. It was not seen as a fragile thing, but rather a vast and limitless frontier. His work lives on today because he captured the spirit and animation of birds in a unique way, so it is a conflicted question. It was an age in which loving something and killing it were not seen as irreconcilable impulses. “The Birds of North America” is an amazing archive.

THE 22: Tell me a little about the bold, at times comic, style of your botanical work? Any trends or traditions you were trying to push here? Tell me a little about the stylistic choice to combine more traditional “low-art” (comic, illustration) with more “high-art” (oil, botanicals, still-lifes).
I wanted to make very bold, colorful paintings to capture a very important subject. I wanted their aesthetic to convey the anxiety and perilous nature of their content, and to succeed in securing the viewer's attention. The work is informed by a number of visual influences and recombinations. I have always loved botanical illustrations and the work certainly speaks to that. These sorts of illustrations are typically etched line drawings, which are then hand tinted with watercolor. I actually invert this process by painting first, and then working a very graphic line over the painting at the end. I think of these paintings as animation cells, they have a lot of movement and violence in them. They are active and animated, rather than static, and the line drawing, an element found in cartoons and graphics, is important to conveying this dynamism. Visual energy is integral to the overall effect of the paintings, they are neither calm nor quietly contemplative. I think of them as capturing the last moments of life, when the plants are literally fighting to exist and are being torn apart. This is an active portrayal of nature's demise, and I find the appropriation of different visual languages an effective means of conveying this contemporary anxiety. The paintings look like a combination of cartoon and traditional European botanical paintings. Upon closer inspection, you'll also see that they contain a lot of secondary iconography. I sometimes include weaponry and other symbolic objects in keeping with the tradition of vanitas, to allude to yet another historical tradition in still life painting. They are syntheses of historical and contemporary visual languages.

In "Extinct Botanical's" you reference vintage renderings, as well as species on the "confirmed extinction" list. You did a lot of research for both of these and in some sense, you become both an artist and a botanical researcher at the same time. You mention now that it's become your life's work to catalogue these fading species as well as commemorate them. Why do you think this is important? How does it help you resolve the current environmental situation?

In the past, botanical artists created archives by painting living specimens as they were discovered. They were able to observe them and render them from life in their studios. Since I am only left with descriptions, my work is to catalogue in reverse and to produce from absence. I reconstruct from research what might have been, what may have been, but cannot capture what was. I now think of my series "Gone" as an archive in reverse. The work is heavy with ghosts, and speaks to something very spectral. I feel it is important because the irreversible nature of loss is a subject that eludes direct representation. Exploring these difficult spaces can draw attention to the terrible vulnerability of the world in which we live. To some extent my work is about the impossibility of recovery, but I hope that it incites a desire to preserve.

In talking about "Extinct Botanical's" you say: "Whereas older traditions of botanical art and still life painting involved calm, studio-bound reflections of natural beauty and visual order, a new paradigm seems appropriate in the more fragile condition of the world in the early 21st century. We're in a state of accelerated change, possibly teetering on some sort of Apocalyptic brink. We naturally feel a sense of anger. The plants I am painting are under assault. They're being attacked. They're being blown up." Do you feel there is a future or hope for the vegetation of the earth or that we're already moving too fast and gone too far to do anything? What are these plants under assault from in your mind? What makes you angry? Do you feel as an artist, or even a human being, that you can do anything to change this?

I am not feeling very optimistic. It is not a very uplifting subject of study. Throughout the course of my research I have learned from scientists and botanists. The general consensus seems to be that unless things change pretty rapidly, 50% of all plant life will be extinct within this century. Since all life depends on plants for survival, this is a pretty scary realization. It's easy to feel ineffectual as an artist. You're just alone in your studio painting pictures . . . there are times when I wonder what difference I can possibly make.

What do you think of art as activism? Do you view your work as environmental activism, or more of a commentary?

I make art, so painting is the form my activism takes. This is what I want my work to be about. I don't want to make pretty pictures of flowers, this is why the work is not easy or docile, it is intended to be violent and contentious, and distressing at times. I want my work to powerfully express my feelings, and fears, with regard to the seriously afflicted state our natural world is in. They are big, colorful, dynamic, and fraught in your face paintings. They are not meant to
be quiet, discrete objects.

THE 22: Both botanical and human environments play a big role in much of your work. In your previous series, “No $ Down,” in which you created colored pencil drawings of attractive homes, some had catchy text like “Location Location Location!” Is there any connection between “Gone” and this previous series in terms of how we as humans treat our environment?

PG: Well, I was not really thinking about the environment in “No $ Down,” but the suggestion of there being a correlation is certainly a good point. When I was making those drawings, I was thinking about the dream of homeownership, and our covetous desire to own. This fetishistic need to express one’s self through ownership, through class ascension, and societal “belonging” is actively conveyed through the seduction of advertising. The titles were taken from the Los Angeles Times real estate section, as were the images. While the work is not about environmental destruction, it is about the way in which visual language can dictate our consumption, and self-identification. I started that series way before the subprime loan disaster, but now that series seems all the more pertinent following the economic collapse. The desire to own certainly lead to the crisis of an ecosystem, so to speak.

THE 22: If you could remedy one environmental disaster (oil spill, housing crisis etc etc) what would it be?

PG: I would have to say the world’s population explosion. We are the worst of the invasive species, and the planet is having trouble sustaining our exponential increase.

THE 22: I noticed some of the profits from your work go toward environmental charities, would you like to talk a bit about those?

PG: Last year I had an exhibition where a portion of the proceeds went to Lotusland in Santa Barbara. It is an amazing garden and conservatory and their mission statement is focused on plant preservation. They also have the only living extinct plant I have ever seen. Encephalartos woodii, there are only three males left in the world so it can never reproduce.

THE 22: What are some upcoming projects you will be working on?

PG: My work will continue to document each plant that becomes a confirmed extinction. It feels like what I must do right now, it’s an ongoing project that sadly will never be at a loss for material. Right now I am preparing for an upcoming exhibition, GONE, that will open September 8th, 2012 at the Edward Cella Gallery in Los Angeles. I will be exhibiting new work from both series. New work is also being exhibited in a group show The Confluence of the Birds, an exhibition by the Cynthia Reeves Gallery in NY and NH. I am also featured in a traveling exhibition Ignite! The Art of Sustainability that examines natural and human forces that have shaped the landscape of California. This exhibition will travel CA Museums 2012 through 2015. A new Invasive Species painting will also be appearing in the limited edition of Beautiful Decay: The Seven Deadline Sins 2012.