



Penelope Gottlieb's art did not start out political. But the two related series she shows this September at Edward Cella Art + Architecture are impassioned environmentalist pleas. "Extinct Botanicals" and "Invasive Species" update the historical framework of naturalist illustration; picking up where pre-Modern gentleman-naturalists left off but with an added twist—the plants and flowers she paints have gone extinct. Primordial and futuristic at the same time, her crazy soup of tendrils, pods, stems, petals, cones, stamens and things downright vulvic is rendered in a supersaturated, slightly off palette of burnt orange, dusty fuchsia, mustard yellow, chilling white, and blue-ribbon blue. And yet, her rootedness in the particular qualities of botanical drawing remains a legible influence even in these daisy-chain riots.

The paintings are intentionally loud, and "impolite," as Gottlieb looks to non-traditional aesthetic strategies—for example, weaponry and Japanese animation—"to convey movement and explosivity. And I wanted to make them mine, to have them belong to the present day." She executes a version of this post-modernism with the "Invasive Species" drawings, a spin-off of the "Extinct Botanicals" in which she starts with vintage Audubon prints, and literally invades the images directly on the page, adding creeping non-native vines curling around a pelican's beak, and the like, to represent another kind of ill-fated plant life. She mocks Audubon's distinctive style, but keeps ambiguity in the narrative by making it seem normal until you work out what's actually going on.

Besides Audubon, she is taken with figures like Basilius Besler (1591-1629) who archived his garden through the seasons and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) who traveled extensively and



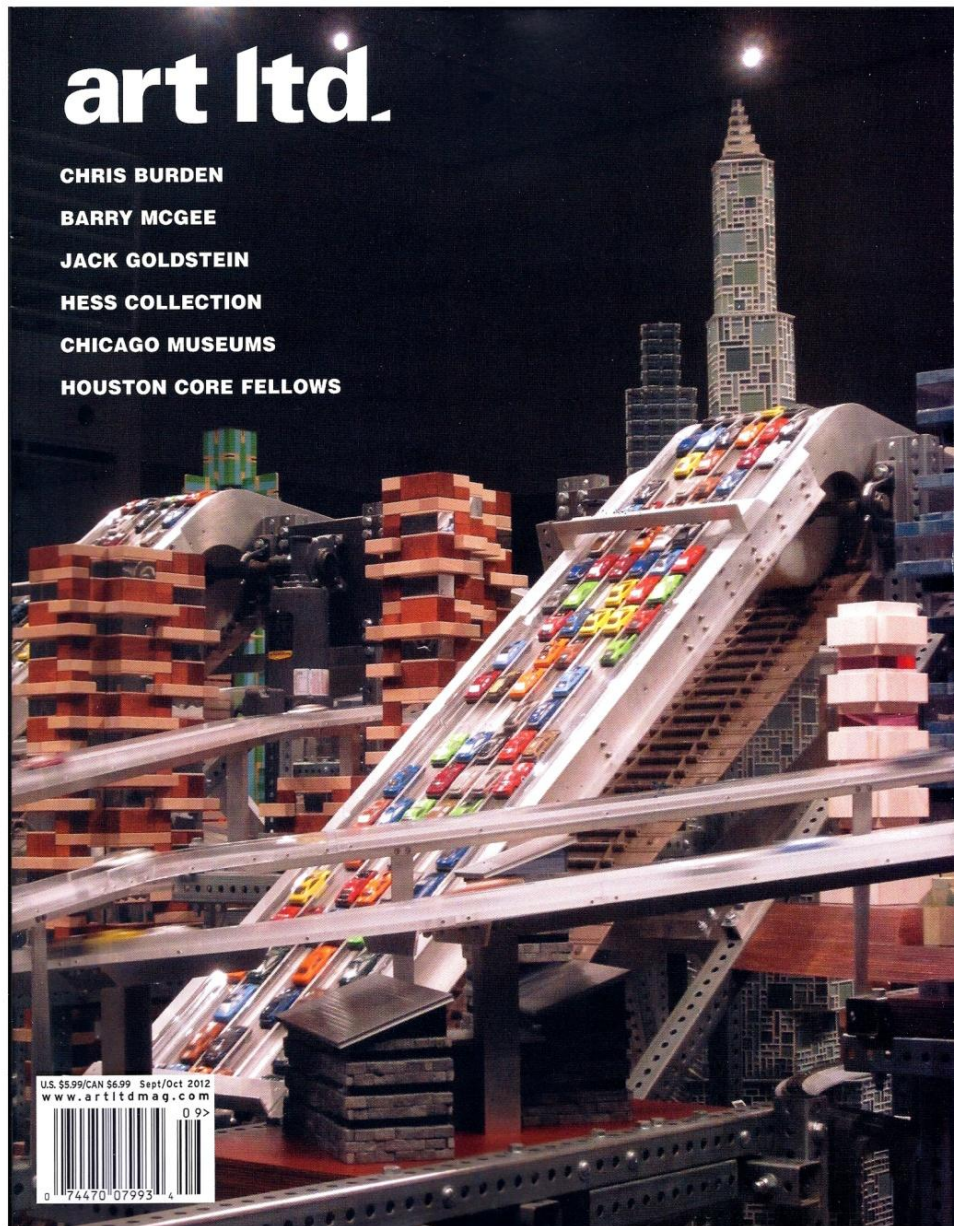
made drawings prefiguring Art Deco in their stylized majesty. "Nature was abundant back then; there was nothing like a concept of it running out." It was lovely and civilized, with farmers and self-styled scientists saving specimens and first-hand observations. Which, it turns out, was not as helpful as it sounds. She portrays real plants, but is forced to imagine much of their appearance. Mostly specimens from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, often the records she finds are words-only, not even sketches. And those words can be vague (noting something as simply "pink" or "blue") or else their meanings have evolved since they were written. Also, there's no central location for accurate information, it's scattered and very localized. Through her work, Gottlieb's art website is nearly becoming that de facto database.

Each painting shows one extinct plant, as well as things from her travels or the garden she keeps in Santa Barbara, where "it's rural. Horses and bougainvillea." Having graduated from Art Center, she moved there about 15 years ago, after which she discovered the attractions of the university's art program and community—which is how she met Edward Cella, who featured Gottlieb in his gallery's 2005 inaugural group show.

Gottlieb often speaks with "alarmed and underfunded botanists" who never tire of pointing out that all planetary life depends on plants. One thing she's learned is that there are documented "extinction cycles" in nature. We are currently experiencing the sixth—and the only one we have caused. In the next century, 50% of all plant life we currently know will be gone. Gone. So as much as this work is about the life and death of the plants, on a wider allegorical level, it's also about what their extinction represents. "They are metaphors for loss; for all the things one tries in vain to retrieve; for anything that's truly gone. My life's work is to research and record the lost plants of this planet. Animal extinctions are big news, but people forget about the plants. I'm doing what I feel I need to do. I want it to make a difference."

—SHANA NYS DAMBROT

"Penelope Gottlieb: Gone" will be on view at Edward Cella Art + Architecture in Los Angeles, from September 8 – October 27, 2012
www.edwardcella.com



OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:

"LYCIUM VERROCOSUM," 2012
 ACRYLIC AND INK ON PAPER, 60" X 40"

"HOPEA SHINGKENG," 2012
 ACRYLIC AND INK ON CANVAS, 78" X 66"

PHOTOS: COURTESY EDWARD CELLA ART + ARCHITECTURE