



Unseen Worlds : An Introduction to the Glass Garden is written by Elana Morris. This booklet explores the process and work of artist Gloria Fan Duan. Photography Matthew Bruinooge. Design Thomas Trasser.

Gloria Fan Duan's

UNSEEN WORLDS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE

GLASS GARDEN

an essay by Elana Morris

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Fig 1
Partial cast of an orchid plant
Resin
8 x 5 x 2 inches

Introduction

Death is impenetrable and impossible to hold. And yet in our attempt to understand it, we knock incessantly on a sealed door. We fashion keys for a lock that does not open. And we do it again, and again, and again.

In Gloria Fan Duan's "Glass Garden," we do not feel this futility. Rather, with Duan's assistance, we look through a pinhole into an imagined representation of this realm. Through her glass-like floral models, Duan fashions a self-contained botanical world, that in its ever-smaller components, creates an illusion of endlessness. In the "Glass Garden," Duan has created hundreds of hyperrealistic plant sculptures. They bear the crystalline appearance of glass, or water stopped in time—a look achieved through detailed resin casts.

The resulting exhibition engenders a feeling of calm in the viewer that belies the exhaustive processes involved in their creation. Pinned against inky black velvet and suspended in reflective jars of perfumed water, these objects inspire intentional contemplation. Their colors, ranging from milky white to translucent celadon, are serene, even sedate.

In the "Glass Garden," Duan offers the looker the opportunity to see into a secret room, filled with an eternal array of objects that reach beyond what we know. They are mesmeric in their detail. They imagine what we would see if we could pierce the veil.

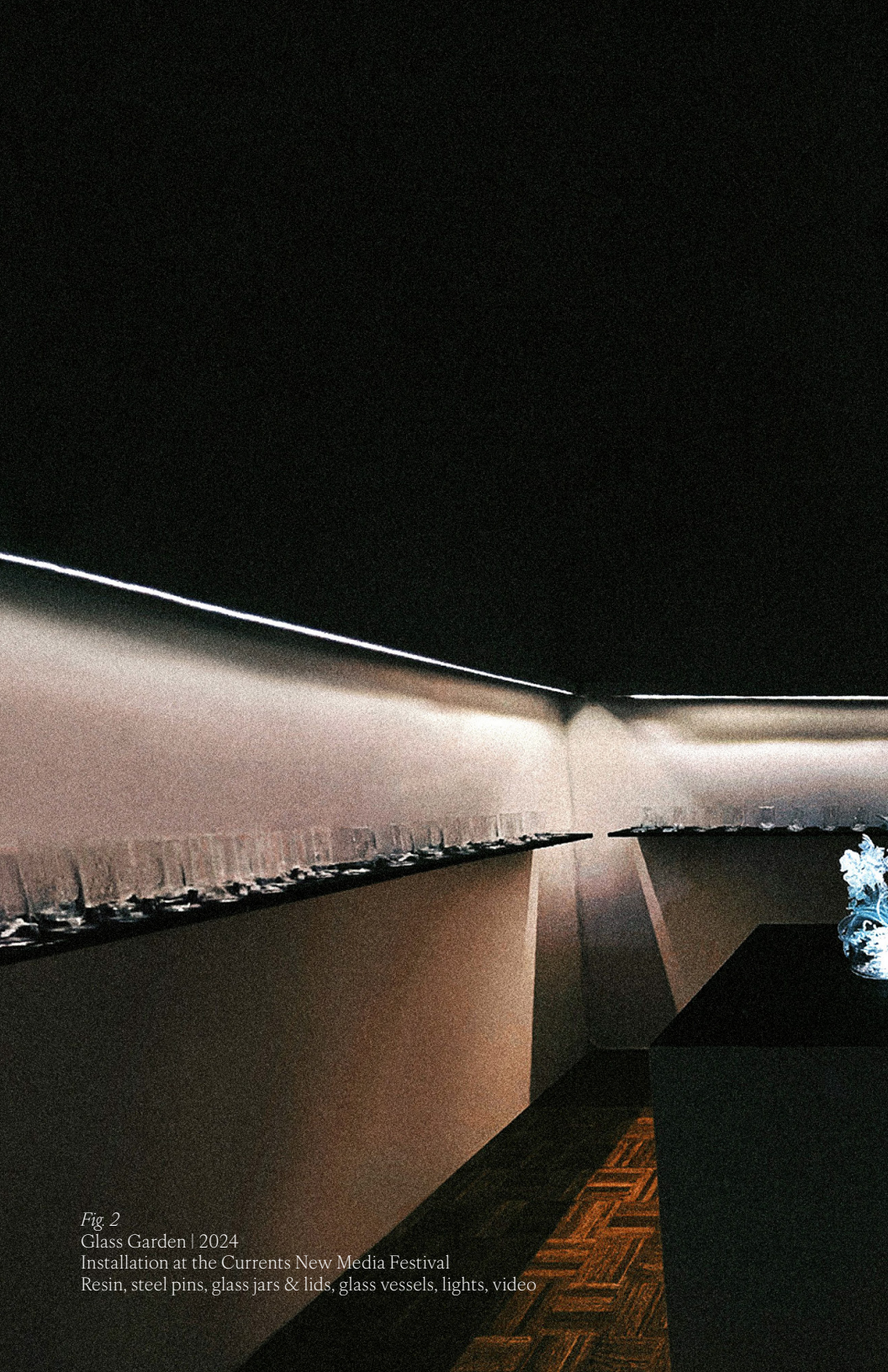
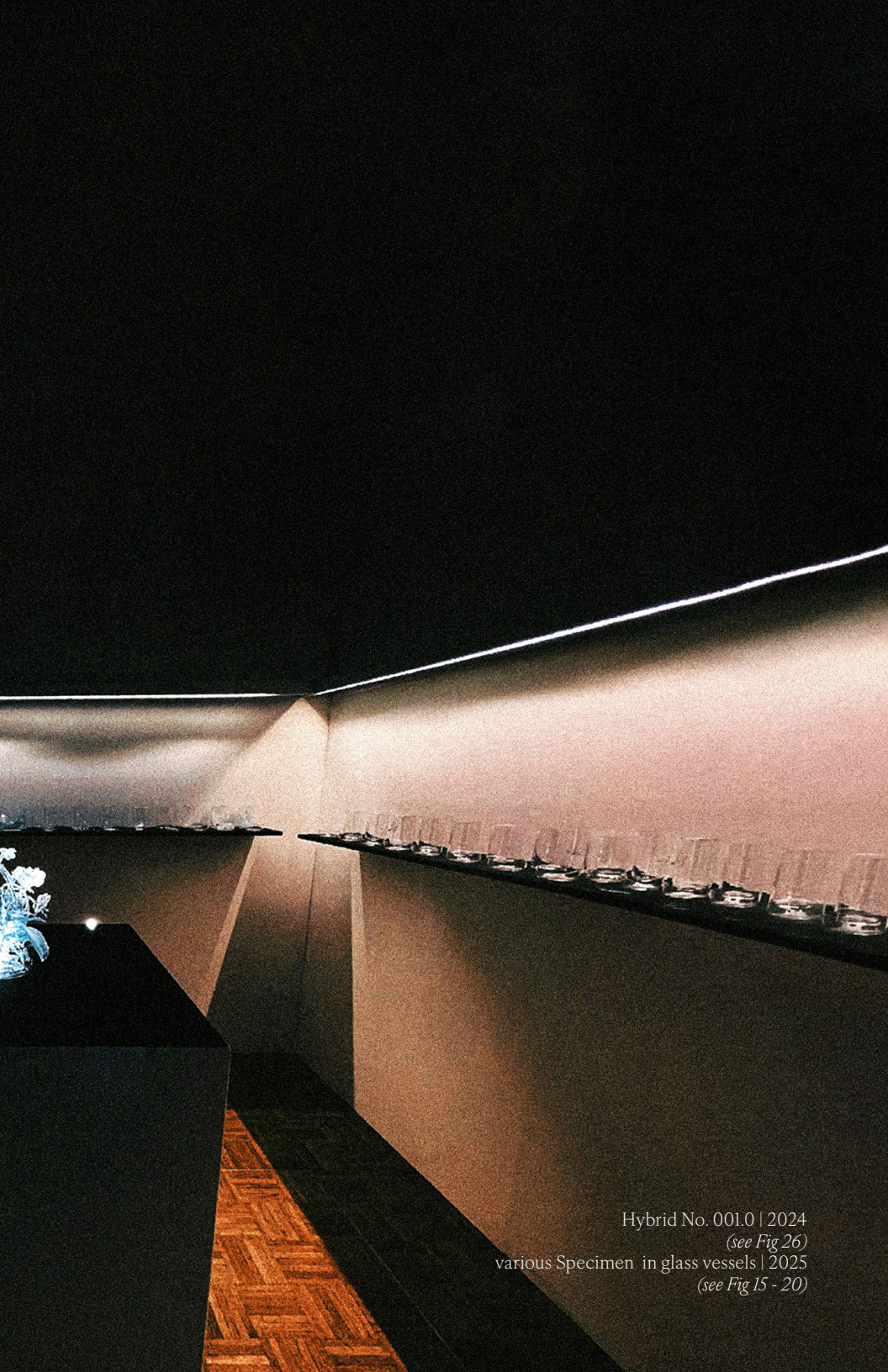


Fig 2

Glass Garden | 2024

Installation at the Currents New Media Festival

Resin, steel pins, glass jars & lids, glass vessels, lights, video



Hybrid No. 001.0 | 2024

(see Fig 26)

various Specimen in glass vessels | 2025

(see Fig 15 - 20)

Taxidermy and The Question of What Is “Natural”

The twin practices of taxidermy and collection are essential themes in Duan's "Glass Garden." Taxidermy is commonly associated with the stuffing and preserving of animal skins for observation and study. Duan taxidermies plants by creating hyper-realistic resin casts of leaves, roots, and other disparate plant parts that maintain the physical structure of their once-living twins down to the minute detail. However, unlike those live plants, Duan's resin imitations last for an extended period of time.

In using resin, a man-made plastic material often regarded as toxic, Duan explores the contrast between technology and nature. Resin becomes a kind of taxidermic material for imagining and observing plant matter, while also posing questions to the viewer on the permanence of objects.

Can we hold once-living things whose movement has ceased? How can we think about death and the space between life and death differently? Can technology exist in tandem with nature?



Fig. 3
Specimen No. 004.2 | 2024
Resin, video
6 x 5 x 0.25 inches



Cabinets of Curiosity

The desire to see into the unknown — to pull back the sheet that separates us from the dark — is an instinct at the essence of speculative art.

The 19th century Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke was obsessed with the idea of the unseen and the boundaries of the metaphysical world that exists between life and death. His ten poems, “The Duino Elegies,” posit an existence in which benevolent yet voiceless angels watch humans from another, more perfect realm.

In Rilke’s view, these angels, and the world they inhabit, are shrouded in such grandeur, such beauty, that we humans could not deign to look directly at it. In our birth and our death, we are closest to that realm— which, consists, in his view, and Stephen Mitchell’s translation, as “joints of pure light, corridors, stairways, thrones, space formed from essence, shields made of ecstasy, storms of emotion whirled into rapture, and suddenly, alone, mirrors...” In his elegies, Rilke pays particular reverence to nature and its cyclical processes, as well as the speechless objects that inhabit the natural world.

Duan’s “Jewels,” (Fig. 4) small jewelry-box sized displays of individual plant castings, and “Specimens,” (Fig. 15 through 20) glass water jars that hold larger casts, recall Rilke’s impossible unseen worlds, as well as the blanketing silence that separates those worlds from our own. Each jewel box and jar imagine a tiny contained sphere of resin and light.

Rilke’s understanding of nature as a collection of individual, austere worlds, is reminiscent of Duan’s specimens. Duan’s resin models can be interpreted as a kind of physical poetry of nature. Rather than offering a conclusive statement about the meaning of the environments they imitate, the plant casts allow the viewer to behold the metaphysical within a vacuum— to look at it as if through a slide-viewer. Each slide offers a new question: What about this world? And this one? And this?

There are innumerable steps involved in Duan's creation of the components of the "Glass Garden." They include the following: Collecting plant specimens from sidewalks and backyards; growing bonsai from those gathered specimens; casting molds of each part of the gathered plants, removing the organic matter from those molds and pouring resin into them; decellularizing the plants using detergent and acetone; recasting the decellularized plants; and allowing the resin to set in a controlled and ventilated environment to counter the fumes it off-gasses while changing form.

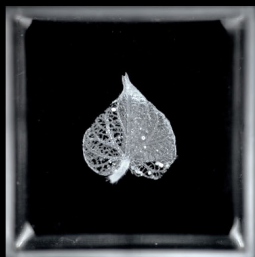
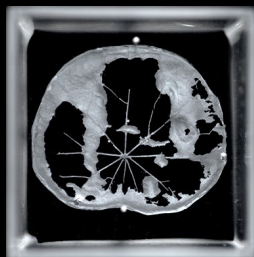
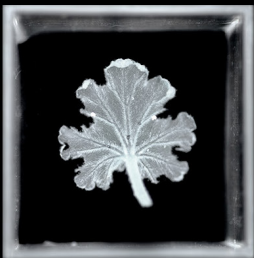
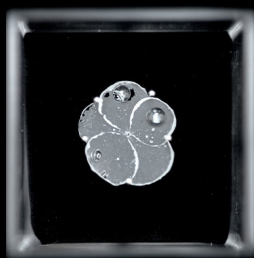
These steps speak to the impossibility of the created plants themselves. They are symbols of a false, more perfect nature, created using human chemicals and human labor. Yet this perfection comes at the cost of movement— that uncontrollable entropy that allows habitats to heal themselves from the outside in, fauna to live and die, and humans to continue to bind to each other, despite their finite existence.

Fig. 4 opposite page

Twelve types of 300 Specimen commissioned by the Pratt Institute | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video

2 x 2 x 2 inches



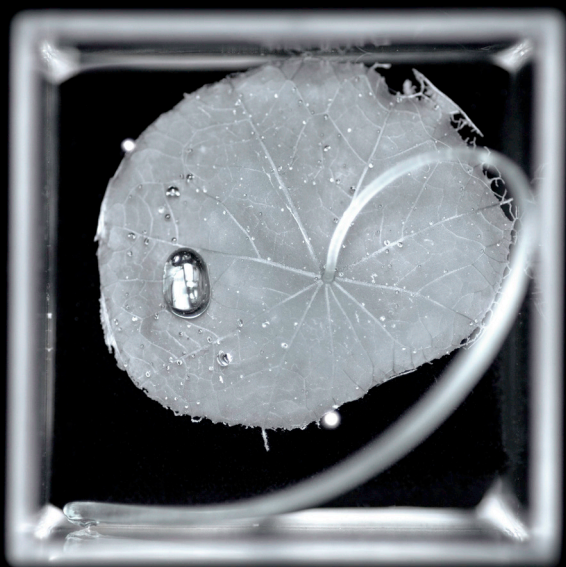


Fig. 5 & 6

Specimen No. 010.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video
2 x 2 x 2 inches



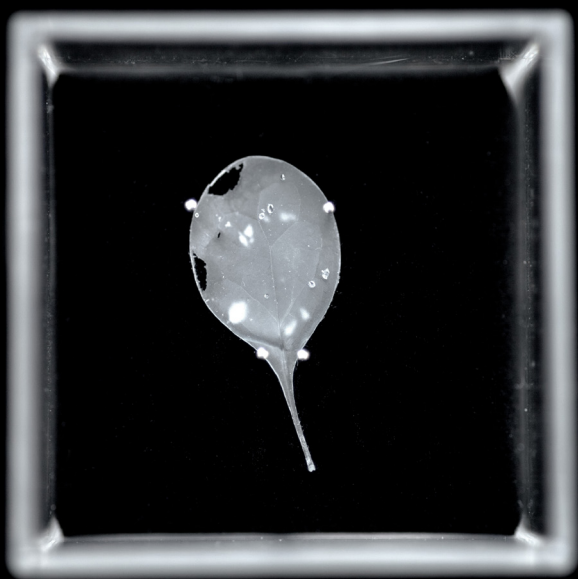


Fig 7 & 8

Specimen No. 023.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video
2 x 2 x 2 inches

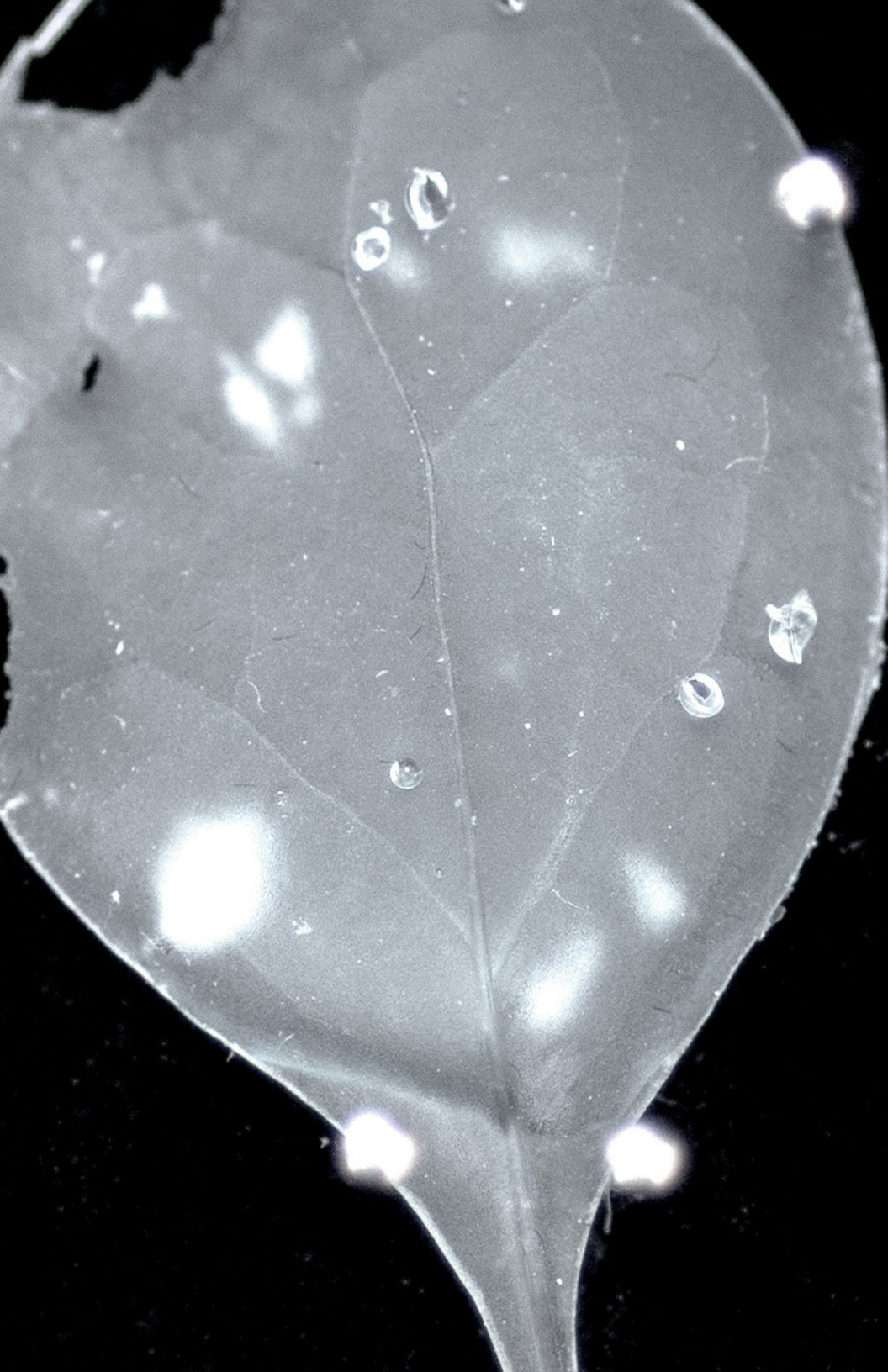
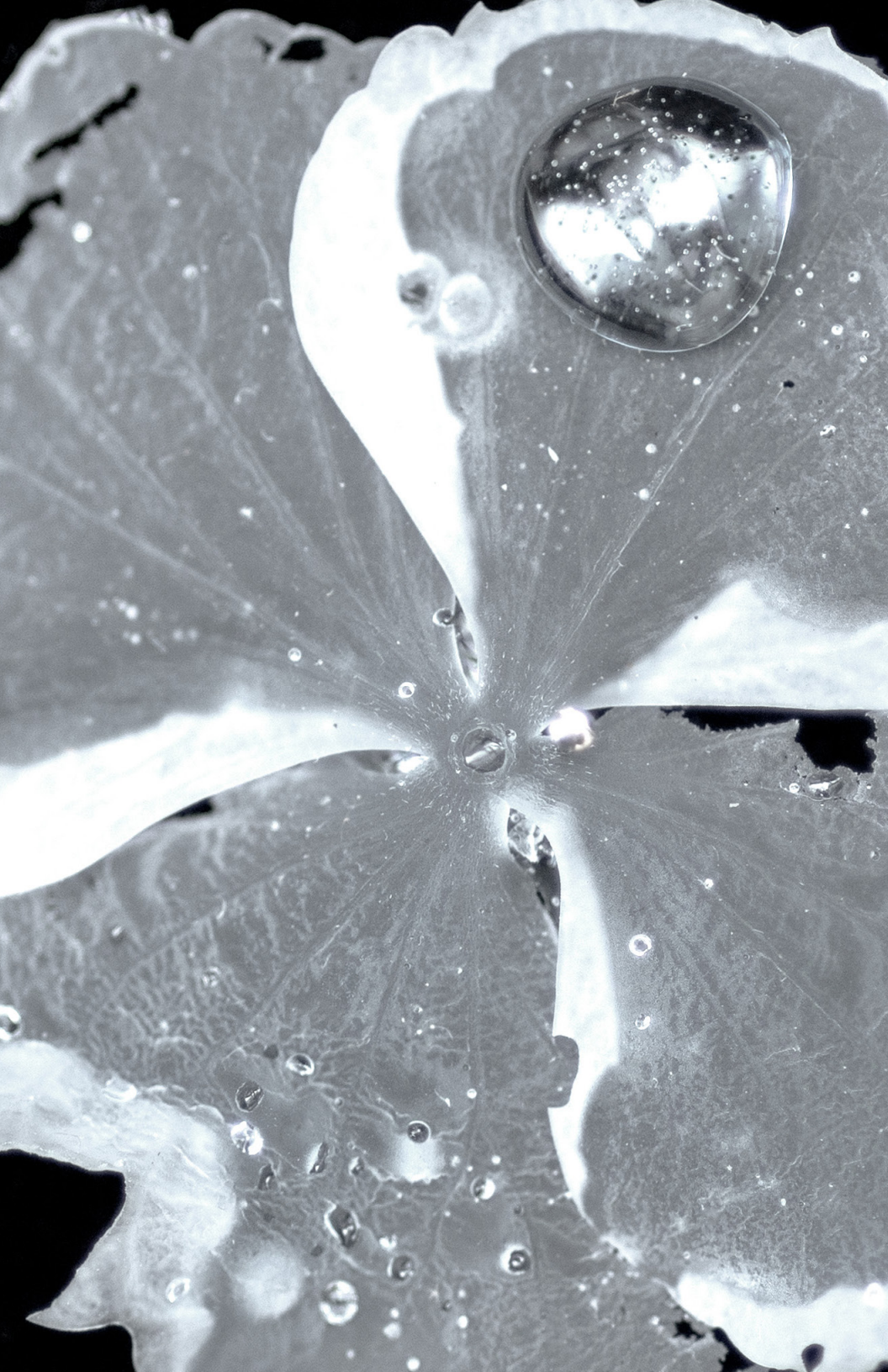




Fig. 9 & 10

Specimen No. 019.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video
2 x 2 x 2 inches



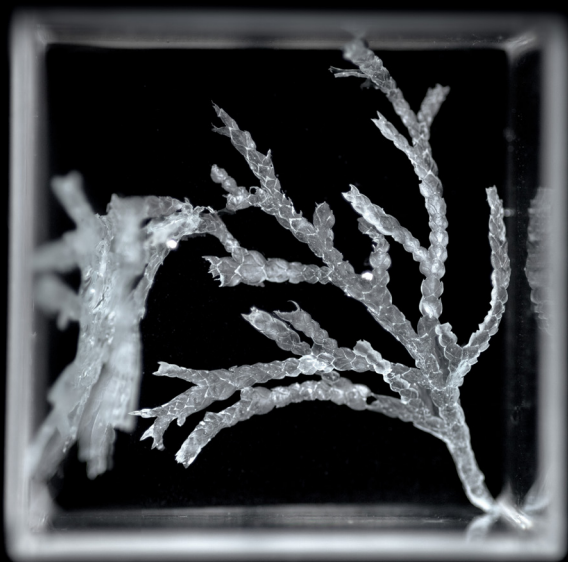
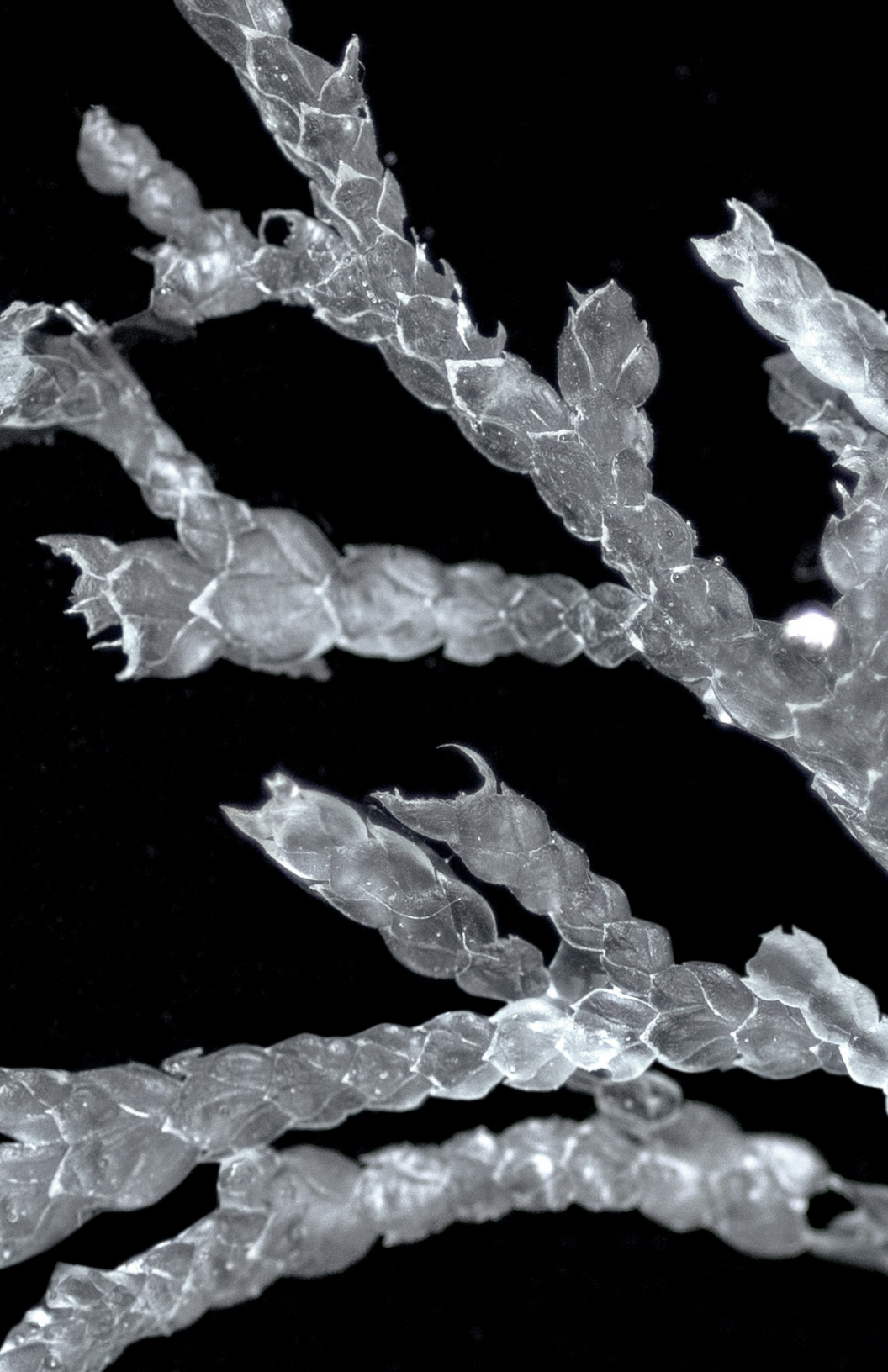


Fig. 11 & 12

Specimen No. 006.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video
2 x 2 x 2 inches



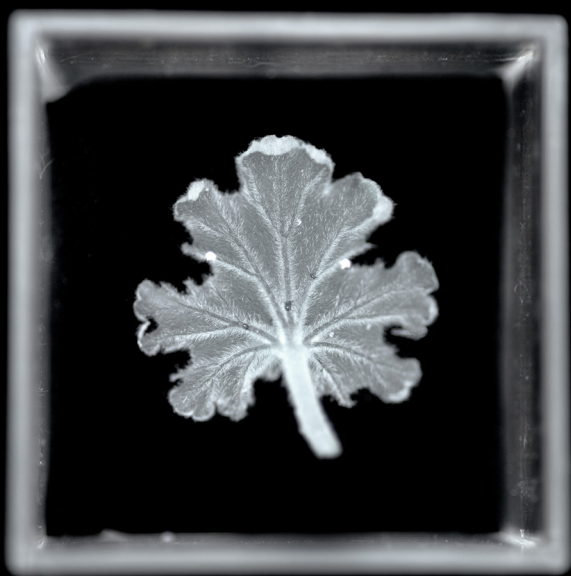


Fig. 13 & 14

Specimen No. 002.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, foam, velvet, acrylic box, video
2 x 2 x 2 inches

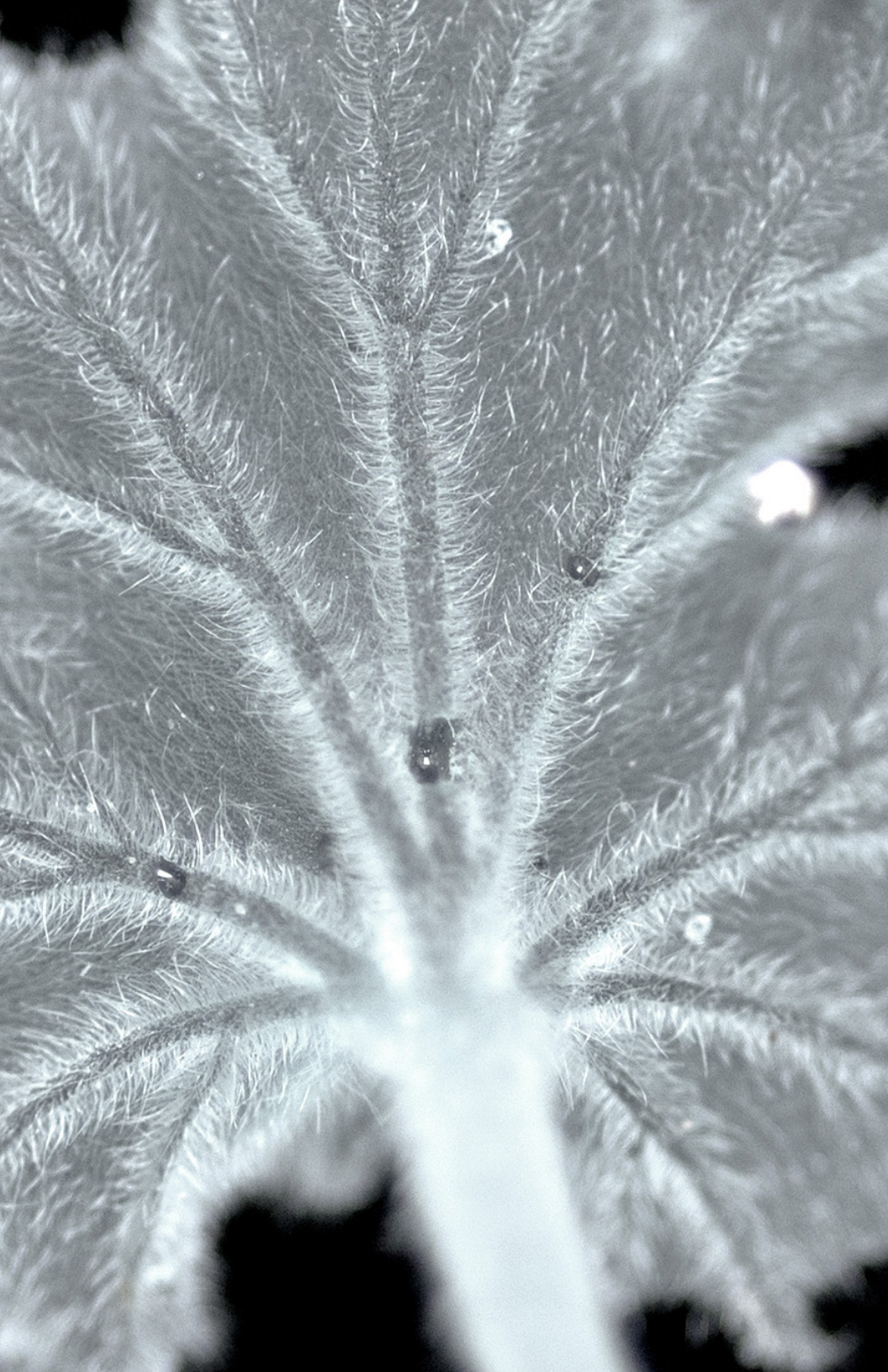




Fig 15 & 16
Specimen No. 010.4 and 010.5 | 2025
Resin, glass jar and lid, video
4 x 3 x 3 inches

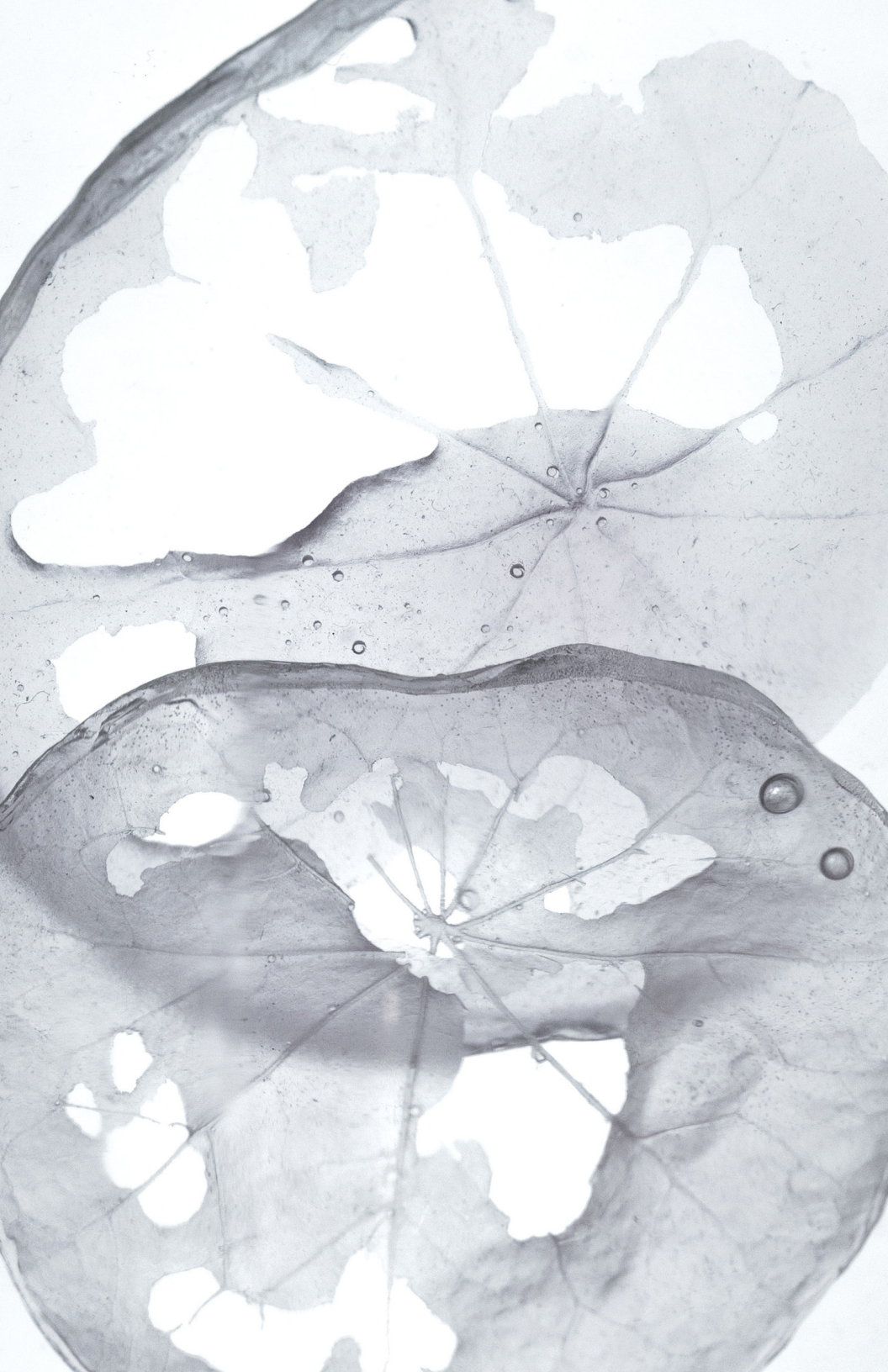




Fig 17 & 18
Specimen No. 021.4, 021.5, and 021.6 | 2025
Resin, glass jar and lid, video
4 x 3 x 3 inches





Fig 19 & 20
Specimen No. 039.2 and 039.3 | 2025
Resin, glass jar and lid, video
4 x 3 x 3 inches



A Botanical Utopia

The anthropocene — this era of nature in which humans shape the tides of nature, often to its detriment — is a word that has gained momentum in scientific circles and popular media in recent years. The use of the phrase is attributed to atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and diatom researcher Eugene F. Stoermer. They have proposed that we are living in a new epoch characterized by humans' effect on the earth. Rapid technological advancement, soaring carbon emissions that have contributed to the warming of the planet, and the extinction and endangerment of native habitats and their animal inhabitants are the conditions that make up this era.

Duan's work does not take a firm stance on this environmental shift, however. Rather, the "Glass Garden" asks a more observational question about the way that humans exist alongside natural environments. By using resin to execute her botanical vision, Duan elevates a maligned material into something delicate and essential. It asks the ways beauty can exist alongside and in opposition to nature.

Duan's botanical vision recalls the Japanese art of floral arrangement known as Ikebana, or "the way of flowers," in which flowers and stems are meticulously positioned in homage to nature's elegance and power.

There is a potential sense of irony in these floral arrangements. They trace their beauty from the meticulous and considered hand of the arranger herself. Ikebana, and the related art of bonsai, which is also referenced in Duan's specimens and larger bonsai sculptures (Fig. 22 and 23), is inherently contrived: it requires repetitive, diligent human intervention.

The patience required to arrange flowers and to grow bonsai is an experiment in delayed gratification. To care for flowers and bonsai is to understand that in order to maintain balance, we must work in tandem with nature, at its pace rather than our own. We must be collaborators, rather than takers.

Duan's "Ecotone" series, which is a category of work under the "Glass Garden" project, explores the idea of botanical utopia more specifically. These larger works combine many of her smaller pieces by populating spacious black canvases with a variety of different "Specimens." This grouping creates the appearance of flat gardens that draw stylistic inspiration from traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Here, Duan explores her ancestral identity while subverting the recognizable visual harmony created in placing native plants (i.e. florae that are local to one habitat) together. Instead, the disparate samples, living side by side, create new, previously impossible gardens. They may be interpreted as mournful, in their exploration of diaspora, or as hopeful, in their vision for cultivating new states of being.

Fig. 21 opposite page

A mixture of resin specimen used to create the *Hybrids* and *Ecotones*
Resin



A Botanical Utopia



Fig. 22 & 23

Hybrid No. 004.0 | 2026

Resin, steel pins, monofilament, perfumed water, glass vessel, video
24 x 18 x 18 inches



The Ghost in the Machine : Separating the Soul from the Body of the Plant

In our approximations of the metaphysical world beyond the material one, we are drawn to transparent images. Ghosts take the form of misty, shifting images. Silver and white, they haunt the edges of the living realm.

Duan has created “ghosts” of plant specimens by decellularizing plant structures. This is done through removing the nuclei and organelles from the original plant structure. The result (Fig. 24 and 25) is a nearly transparent figure which approximates the shape and structure of the plant, but not its living processes — not its breath. Finally, Duan makes a second resin mold of the decellularized plant— an imitation of an imitation, which in its iterative transformation becomes an entirely new plant: one that exists in a different realm from our own.

Duan’s endless floral copies contain no part of the original plant. The idea of simulacrum— the representation of a model that does not connect back to reality— is at the heart of Duan’s work. In addition to creating castes of decellularized plants, Duan has rendered these pieces in digital time lapses. In some clips, Duan’s specimens undulate and change form; the edges of the leaves soften and disintegrate. In others, the specimens draw closer and closer to the viewer, bringing new details of the molecular form into view. Droplets of dew roll off stems and out of frame; plant fibers burst into sand-like grains. Duan juxtaposes these short clips with a collection of ambient sounds: the muffled echo of motion through water, the ring of a telephone, or the static of an abandoned television channel. These clips serve to expand the fantasy of Duan’s specimens— to build an ever-more speculative world.



Fig. 24 & 25
Experiment No. 000 | 2024
Decellularized leaves, alcohol, 100 mL glass beaker
7 x 5 x 5 inches



Making the Speculative Concrete

The “Glass Garden” primarily asks questions about nature in the abstract— but Duan is interested in using insights gleaned from this work to seed an ecological project that extends her research beyond the studio and into living habitats.

Together with her brother, Jonathan, Duan is experimenting with the use of mushrooms to remove heavy metals from soil. Their goal is to create general computational models for gardens in New York City that have benefited from the restoration of a more livable mineral balance and are thus able to bear fruit far into the future. This project, though nascent, is Duan’s way of bringing her practice back to its source. These garden models are the tangible result of Duan’s “Ecotone” series, which explores new modes for organizing and paying homage to nature. Through art and technological innovation, Duan hopes to create new models for thinking about the way that humans and nature coexist. Her work seeks to bridge the gap between the real and the imagined— and thus to realize the botanical utopia imagined in her work.



Fig. 26

Hybrid No. 001.0 | 2024

Resin, steel pins, monofilament, perfumed water, glass vessel, video
24 x 18 x 18 inches



