

Chroma Botanica: Ellie Irons & Linda Stillman

The Arsenal Gallery
April 28–June 15, 2016



NYC Parks



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Curated by Jennifer Lantzas,
Deputy Director of Public Art, NYC Parks

Chroma Botanica: Ellie Irons & Linda Stillman showcases the work of two artists who use plant pigments in their artwork to explore wild and cultivated environments, as well as the layered relationship between people and plants. The exhibition includes the artists' ongoing personal work in contrasting species, as well as new companion pieces that incorporate plant life gathered in New York City parks over the past year.

Ellie Irons created a series of drawings for the Arsenal Gallery that reflects the role of weeds, or “spontaneous plants,” that grow and reproduce without human support in city parks. Irving Square Park, Grover Cleveland Park, Central Park, and Great Kills Park are several sites she harvested for colors. She crushed flowers, leaves, and berries to create watercolor paint used in her charts and drawings about the city’s unintentional flora.

Last summer Linda Stillman worked with Central Park Conservancy staff and volunteers to gather pruned flowers from the Conservatory Garden for a series of work based on the park and famous garden. She rubs flower petals onto paper to make flower-stain drawings that focus on the passage of time in nature, specifically the life and death of plants and how we preserve the memory of their fleeting beauty.

The artists joined staff from NYC Parks, the Central Park Conservancy, and the New York Botanical Garden on site visits to learn how NYC Parks implements garden design and documents plant species, among other horticultural needs. They visited the Forest Park Greenhouse, Greenbelt Native Plant Center, Conservatory Garden, New York Botanical Garden, collected seeds in Marine Park, and accompanied the Central Park Flora Project. These trips were integral in the development of the exhibition and directly informed the production of new artwork by both artists. In *Chroma Botanica*, Irons and Stillman offer unique interpretations of the complex relationships between plants, our public spaces, and those who use them.

–Jennifer Lantzas, Deputy Director of Public Art, NYC Parks

Photo: Linda Stillman flower-staining process



This page from left:
 Ellie Irons, *Dot Array: Weeds & Herbicides*, 2016, Graphite and plant pigments on paper, 4" x 6", Courtesy of the artist

Ellie Irons, *Invasive Pigments Color Wheel (Spring-Fall 2015)*, 2016, Graphite and plant pigments on paper, 4" x 6", Courtesy of the artist

Opposite page from top:
 Linda Stillman, *Field Trip*, 2015, Flower stains on paper, 11" x 14", Courtesy of the artist

Linda Stillman, *Walk in the Park*, detail, 2015, Salvia flower stains on paper, 22.5" x 30", Courtesy of the artist



Organic Minimalism: Ellie Irons & Linda Stillman

Essay by Gabriel de Guzman

Arsenal Gallery, Central Park, New York

“Geometry is man’s language, Le Corbusier once said, and I am happy to have a garden that speaks in that tongue. I know better now than to think a less tended garden is any more natural; weeds are our words, too.”¹

-Michael Pollan

Ellie Irons and Linda Stillman use naturally sourced botanical pigments as their medium, applying them in grids, geometric abstractions, diagrams and charts to create simplifying systems for understanding our complex and shifting relationship to nature. The formal and conceptual aspects of the artists’ processes and presentations can be described as “Organic Minimalism.”² As proposed in this essay, the term implies the contrast of stark geometry, structure, and reductive ideas of Modernism with organic forms and materials found in nature. In their work, Irons and Stillman are restraining and containing the natural and wild, attempting to get a handle on the uncontrollable (*Fig. 1*).



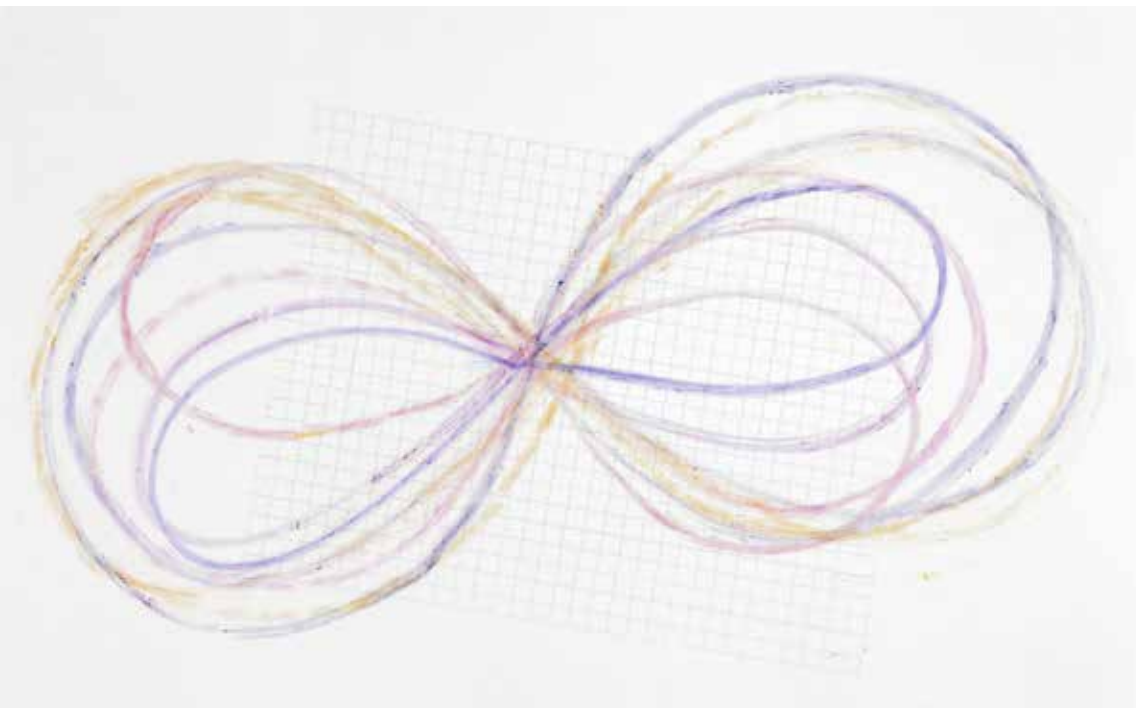
Fig. 1: Stillman, *Ring Around*



Stillman uses cultivated flowers like those tended in gardens, while Irons harvests pigments from unintentional or “wild” plants found in urban environments, including weeds sprouting in sidewalk cracks and city parks. While Stillman is interested in the cultural value and industry surrounding flowers, Irons is concerned with the complicated history and impact that globalism and human interventions have had on non-human species (Fig. 2). As evidenced in *Chroma Botanica: Ellie Irons & Linda Stillman*, this exhibition of recent works in NYC Parks’ Arsenal Gallery, both artists are making work that draws inspiration from the Minimalist and Conceptual Art period of the 1960s and ‘70s, while sharing a deep fascination and commitment to flora and to exploring the interdependence between people and the natural world.

Although the work of the Minimalist era can be characterized by its pared-down, organized elements, reduced geometries, and repetition, art historian James Meyer observes that no single definition would suffice to describe a clear style.³ Indeed, such terms as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Systemic Painting, Cool Art, and Primary Structures were used to describe a wide view of the art of that time.⁴ Meyer includes Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Anne Truitt, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris among those who represent Minimalism’s object-based sculptural discourse.⁵ The grids, squares, and geometric objects of these artists can be seen as salient examples. Taking Meyer’s cue, a less strict definition is employed for the parameters of this essay. Irons and Stillman carry forward aspects of Minimalists’ vocabulary of essential shapes and serial repetition, while adding color to their black, white, and gray forms, and using mediums made from organic material, as opposed to the industrial elements of 1960s sculpture.

Fig. 2: Irons, *Pokeweed*



Adding to Meyer's list of artists, Agnes Martin and Eva Hesse should be included. Stillman has cited both of these artists as influences.⁶ They loosened Minimalism's restricted forms and softened its grid. Martin revealed the evidence of the artist's hand upon closer inspection of her square works of acrylic and thinly drawn graphite lines on canvas, making symmetrical, overall arrangements that fused grid and monochrome.⁷ Hesse also worked within a Minimalist language, using industrial materials and serial repetition; however, her abstract, roughhewn pieces evoked corporal and organic forms, moving away from Minimalism's hard geometries.⁸ Stillman's *Infinity Grid* (Fig. 3), which superimposes figure eights on top of a lattice pattern, illustrates the inspiration of Martin and Hesse. Irons's small, multi-colored grid piece, *Transect* (Fig. 4), also discloses the lineage of these earlier artists.

Left to right: Fig. 3: Stillman, *Infinity Grid*, detail; Fig. 4: Irons, *Transect*, detail





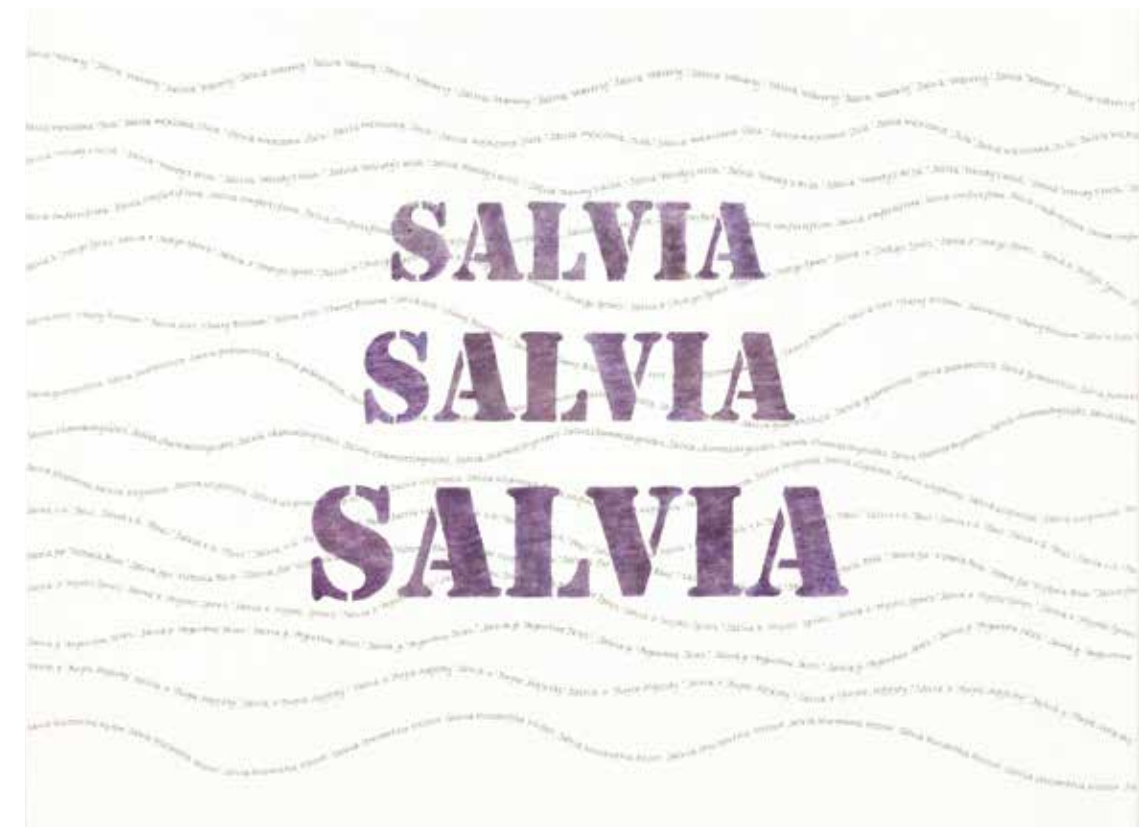
Irons and Stillman also draw from Conceptual Art practices, where the form is often secondary to the idea of the work. LeWitt was an early precedent; the instructions for his wall drawings create a systemic method for executing lines, grids, and shapes that can be produced by assistants on any wall.⁹ Ed Ruscha, On Kawara, and Mel Bochner are other early conceptualists who would use seriality, systems, archiving, and marking the passage of time.¹⁰ During the yearlong planning stages for *Chroma Botanica*, both Stillman and Irons joined park staff on site visits to collect and catalogue pigment samples from plant species that they found in New York City parks. The inventory cards that they compiled during this process are on display in the exhibition (Fig. 5). Unlike the Conceptual artists, Irons and Stillman do not attempt to reduce aesthetics in their art; instead, their conceptual strategies are used in conjunction with images to enhance our understanding of how art, life, and nature are inextricably linked. Irons says that painting this way prompts “questions of artifice, naturalness, care and stewardship, both among and between humans and other life forms.”¹¹

Stillman’s work reveals not only the influence of color field and stain paintings by artists such as Kenneth Noland, but also the interrelationship between form and idea that Minimalist and Conceptual artists were addressing. Stillman explains, “My research into flowers, gardens, weather, time, and art history inform my work. All artists build on the work of the artists of the past. I am inspired by conceptual and minimal artists such as On Kawara, Eva Hesse and Agnes Martin, as well as collage artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Joseph Cornell and Jiří Kolář.”¹²



Stillman focuses on cultivated flowers, looking at how we take natural plants and reproduce them on a mass scale based on traits that we value as humans; for example, cultivating plants for ornamental or functional reasons that are beneficial for people. Her process involves collecting flowers from gardens and rubbing their petals directly onto paper to transfer the pigments. Often these stain drawings are presented as a grid and are a visual representation or diary of what is in bloom at a site over time (Fig. 6). Stillman quotes Matthias Winzen to relate her motivation for collecting, “...to derive subjective meaning from inanimate objects, to ascribe vivid power and new significance to the material: these are central moments of creative work, especially when artists collect objects as traces, memories or documents.”¹³ Conceptualists Kawara and Hanne Darboven are early precedents of artists who employed a daily practice, exploring unique ways of contemplating and representing time.¹⁴ Stillman’s *‘August’ Garden Scroll* (Fig. 7) was a breakthrough for the artist in 2002. The mixed media work on paper follows the growing season of Stillman’s garden, itself plotted as a grid, at her upstate New York home from spring to fall. The scroll is a calendar that shows the simultaneous commitment of artist and gardener, as she meticulously records her process of planting and nurturing flora by collaging scans of dried blossoms, drawing flowers and adding stains throughout. The structural rigor of the project brings together the organic, the linear, and the conceptual.

Clockwise: Fig. 5: Stillman, *Inventory Cards*; Fig. 6: Stillman, *Pre-frost Flower Chart 1* (not in exhibition); Fig. 7: Stillman, *‘August’ Garden Scroll*, detail



In several works, Stillman creates hard-edged, geometric shapes, as in her *Conservatory Garden: Collate* (Fig 8), in which Stillman represents in a circular chart the blossoms she collected from Central Park's cultivated garden. It recalls typological artists like Ruscha; his *Stains*, a 1969 portfolio of 76 stains made from various substances from tap water to beet juice. Text based works like *Salvia x 3* (Fig 9) also recall Ruscha, especially his word paintings. In Stillman's work, the word repetition calls attention to the plant genus name, making it curiously present (because its petals are rubbed onto the paper) and absent at the same time (because the plant is not recognizable in text form). Robert Smithson and Hamish Fulton worked in the textual mode of earth art in which the art object was displaced from the original site and presented as text, as a signifier of someplace else.¹⁵ Stillman's *Walk in the Park* shows flower-stained foot prints drawn with petals from the Conservatory Garden to represent the artist's wandering in the park. That conceptual act shares kinship with Fulton and how he represented his landscape walks.

Left to right: Fig. 8: Stillman, *Conservatory Garden: Collate*; Fig. 9: Stillman, *Salvia x 3*



Irons's drawings, multi-media art, and environmental installations reveal how interconnected, rather than separate, humans and nature are. Scientific research and field notes are integral to her process and often take the form of maps, diagrams, and other didactics in her work (Fig 10). While Stillman works with cultivated plants, Irons researches and gathers spontaneous wild plants, looking at how human activity has hastened the global spread of persistent plant species. Irons believes that terms like invasive, native, and weed are cultural constructs. Her process involves grinding the parts of plants that yield desirable pigments (petals, berries, and leaves) to extract and mix their essence with gum arabic binder; she then uses the solution that is made as a kind of watercolor paint to create her art. Her *Invasive*

Pigments series show maps and diagrammatic drawings that present the migration of each plant species across the globe (Fig. 11). This series and Irons's extensive *Invasive Pigments Flow Chart* (Fig. 12) recall conceptual artists who explore the intersection of image, text, and site, like Smithson and Fulton.¹⁶ Her works typically reference the locations of the materials' origins.

Fig. 10: Irons, *Invasive Color Wheel* (Greater New York City), detail

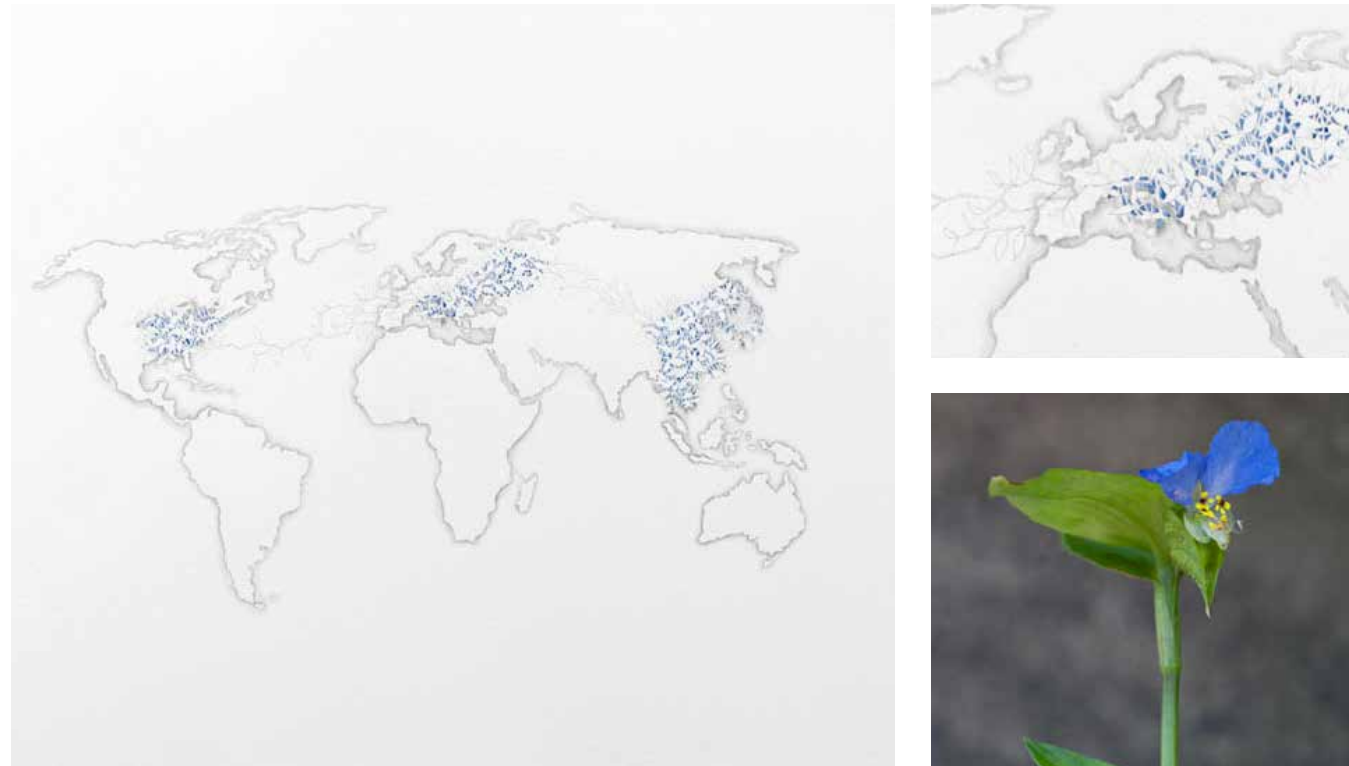


Fig. 11: Irons, *Invasive Pigments: Asiatic Dayflower*



Fig. 12: Irons, *Invasive Pigments Flow Chart*

Irons's use of pigments on maps to portray the human imposition of structure on uncontrollable flora, particularly the types that are considered invasive, is exemplified by her *Spontaneous Plant Cluster* drawing. (Fig. 13) The city grid on the left side of the image represents the rational order and control that man has imposed on the landscape, while the bright dots of pigment on the right illustrate the places where unintentional plants have sprouted in a section of Central Park that is undergoing construction. Riding in on delivery trucks and vehicles, the furtive seeds of invasive plants travel from all over the country and settle into new habitats, even on grounds that are as well designed and maintained as Central Park. This shows the impossibility of preventing spontaneous plants from encroaching on man's claimed territory, especially in an era of increased global trade, which disperses not only manufactured products but also organic matter.

For *Chroma Botanica*, Irons creates an installation, titled *Asiatic Dayflower (Wildflower/Superweed)* (Fig 14), which displays her process from field guide, to plant cuttings, to extracted pigments, to painting implements, to finished artwork. It also includes a process video playing nearby. Compare this to Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which includes a found chair, a picture of a chair, and a print-out of the dictionary definition of "chair." Irons takes this conceptual exercise a step further by displaying the raw material used to make the picture. If Kosuth would have done so, he might have presented the chopped wood or lumber used to make the chair. Irons builds on Kosuth's semiotic installation of language, representation, and explanation, developing terms for human interactions with non-humans.

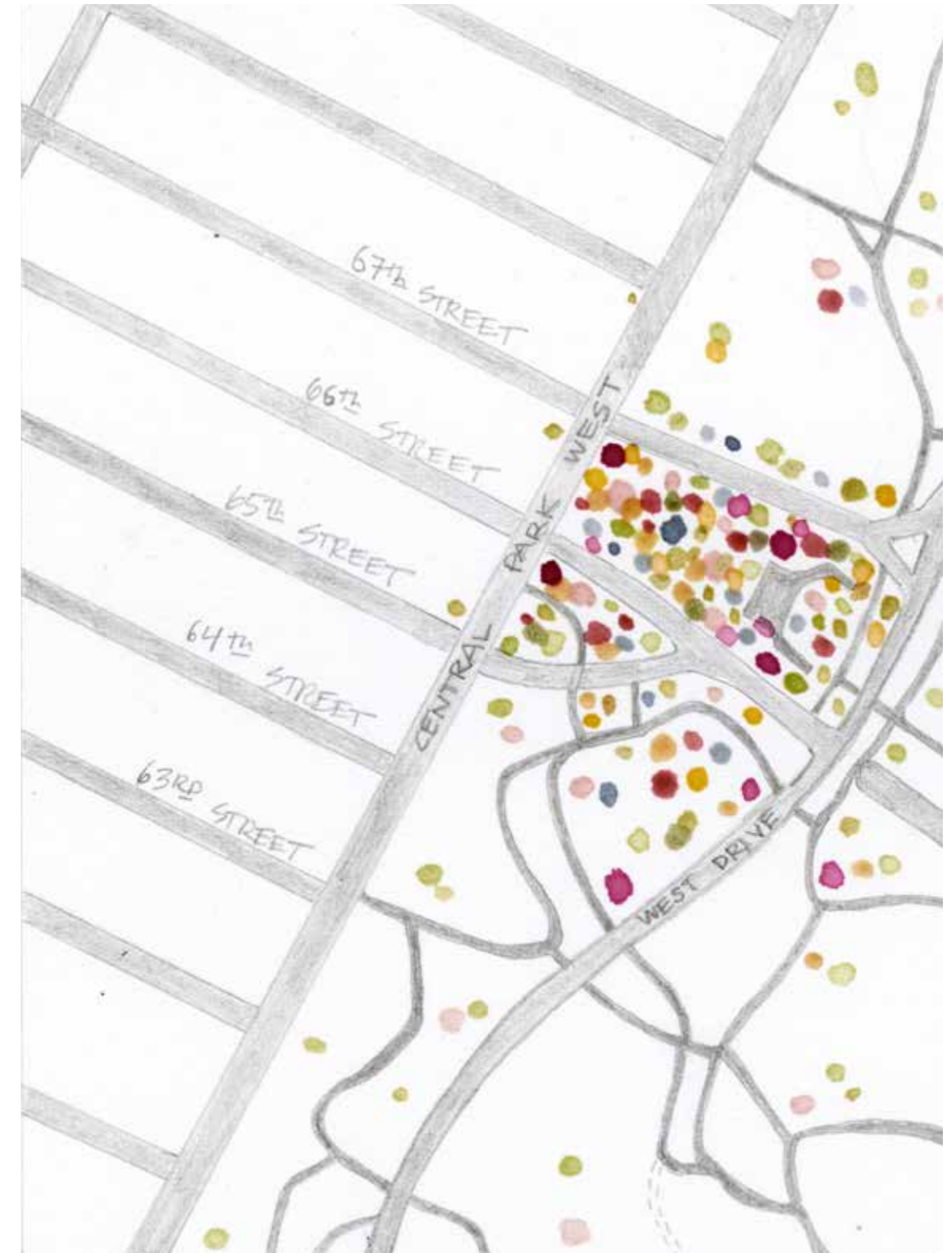


Fig. 13: Irons, *Spontaneous Plant Cluster*

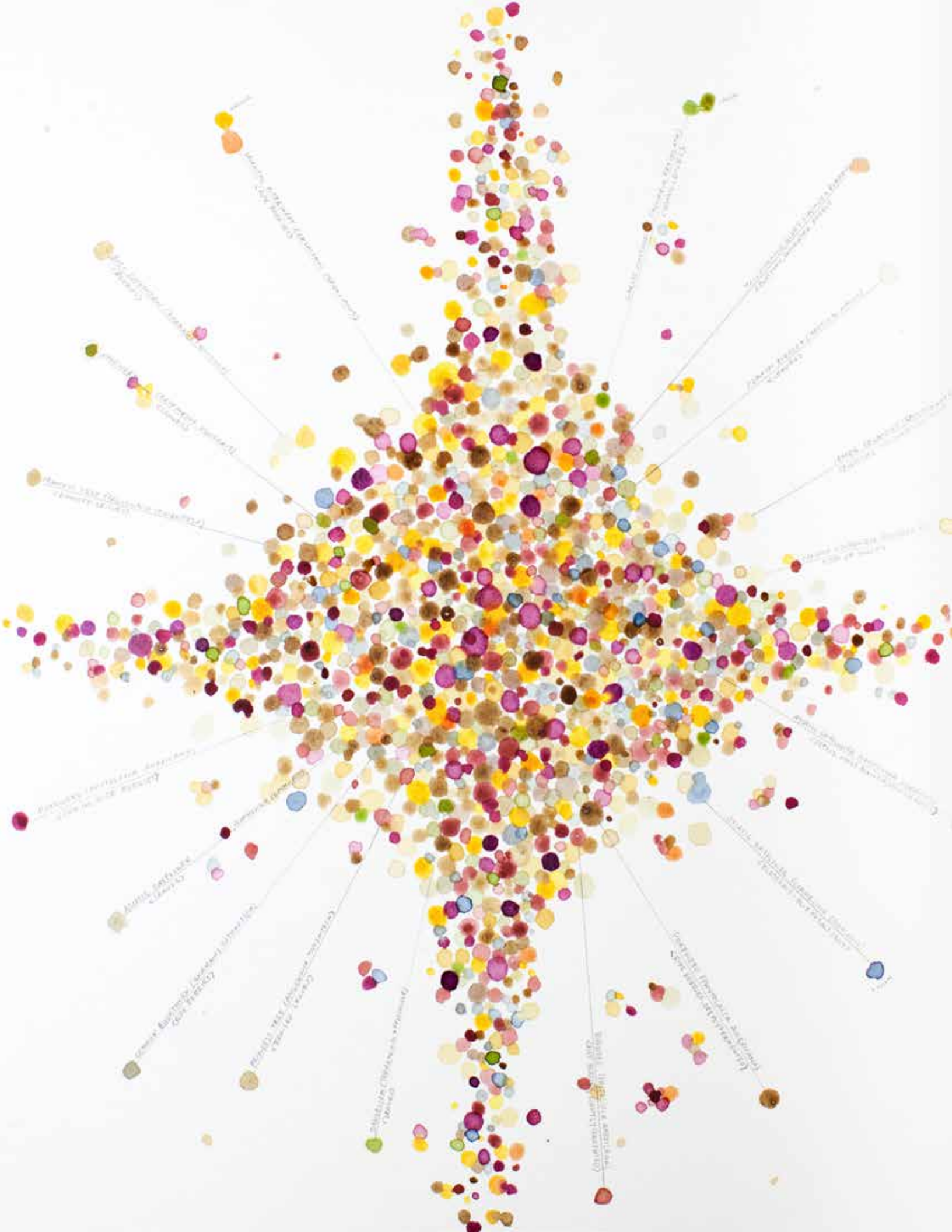


Fig. 14: Irons, *Asiatic Dayflower (Wildflower/Superweed)*

More recent work, such as *Dot Cluster: Wild Flowers Common in New York City* (Fig 15) signal a loosening of the systems and didactic aspects of her previous work. Irons has found a new technique for highlighting the naturally derived colors. By dropping the pigment solution into a bead of water on the surface of the paper, an intense hue of dried pigment remains when the water evaporates. This application method creates brilliant dot patterns that prioritize the aesthetic quality of the work over its conceptual structure. Stillman, on the other hand, has begun to incorporate text, including didactic elements in more recent work (Fig 16) The two artists have clearly inspired one another during their yearlong participation in preparing *Chroma Botanica*.

Much like nature, the artists' Organic Minimalist practice is ever evolving. Irons and Stillman continue to balance and integrate their organic processes with the aesthetic and conceptual strategies of Minimalism. Their multihued, plant-stained drawings, watercolors, and installations reflect on our shifting relationship to nature. Irons and Stillman are addressing environmental issues that are of increasing relevance and importance to survival on Earth. As long as their supply of botanical material is replenished, they will continue to find ways of reconciling art and nature in the Anthropocene era.

Following spread, left to right: Fig. 15: Irons, *Dot Cluster: Wild Flowers Common in New York City*, detail; Fig. 16: Stillman, *Conservatory Garden: Collect*



GABRIEL DE GUZMAN is Curator of Visual Arts at Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center in the Bronx. He has also organized exhibitions and published essays for the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Rush Arts Gallery, Carriage Barn Arts Center, Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance, the Affordable Art Fair, Kenise Barnes Fine Art, and The Jewish Museum. He earned an M.A. in art history from Hunter College and a B.A. in art history from the University of Virginia.

¹Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991), p. 137.

²Organic Minimalism is a term that has become popular in interior design, but can also be applied to the visual arts, particularly with environmentally mindful contemporary artists like Stillman and Irons. Design sites and blogs like Decoist.com, Dotandbo.com, and Houzz.com use the term to refer to spare, pared down elements, which are softened by the use of natural materials that reveal its origins, textures, and patterns.

³James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁴Richard Wollheim, Barbara Rose, and Lawrence Alloway reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 387-99, 116-47, 274-97, and 37-60. Irving Sandler, "The New Cool Art," *Art In America* 53:1 (February 1965): 96-101. Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966).

⁵Meyer, 3.

⁶"Linda Stillman—New York," blog interview in *365 Artists/365 Days: A Frank Juarez Gallery and Grey Matter Gallery Collaborative Project*, March 3, 2015, <https://365artists365days.com/2015/03/03/linda-stillman-new-york>, accessed April 28, 2016.

⁷Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), reprinted in Battcock, p. 45

⁸Elisabeth Sussman, "Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1968" in Sussman and Fred Wasserman, eds., *Eva Hessa: Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2006), p. 1. Hesse is often described as a Postminimalist. See Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York, Norristown, Milan: Out of London Press, 1977): 42-62. However, this essay avoids the problematic distinctions introduced by the prefix "post," preferring instead to see the late 1960s and 70s work of artists like Hesse, as an extension and loosening of Minimalist practice. If the definition of Minimalism is difficult to pinpoint, then defining Postminimalism poses an even greater challenge. The prefix "post" implies a leaving behind, a break, or even a rejection of one style for another. I do not agree with the way that Pincus-Witten characterizes Postminimalism as a rejection of "the high formalist cult of impersonality" of Minimalism. Pincus-Witten, 14.

⁹Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), pp. 158-59.

¹⁰See McShine, *Information*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970). Bochner, Kawara, and Ruscha were featured in McShine's groundbreaking exhibition, a seminal moment for Conceptual Art. Almost 100 other artists who incorporate grids, maps, data, and diagrams in their work were included, such as Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Hamish Fulton, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Yoko Ono.

¹¹Quoted in Ellie Irons, *Invasive Pigments (The Making of)*, 2015, video, <https://vimeo.com/120435491>, accessed April 28, 2016.

¹²Quoted in "Linda Stillman—New York," blog interview.

¹³Matthias Winzen, "Collecting—So Normal, So Paradoxical" in Ingrid Schaffner and Winzen, eds., *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998), p. 24

¹⁴Rorimer, 171, 173.

¹⁵Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 58-61.

¹⁶Ibid.

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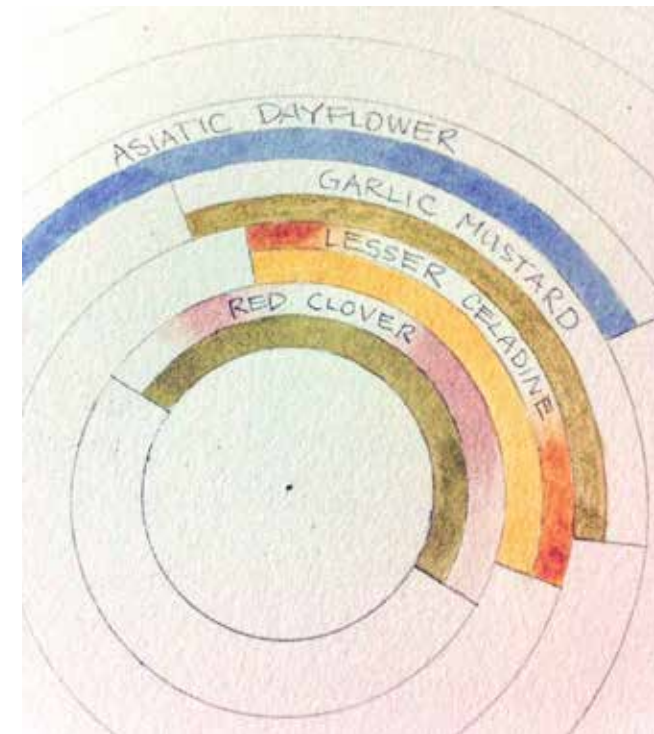
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Courtesy of the artist

Fig 16:
Linda Stillman
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Courtesy of the artist



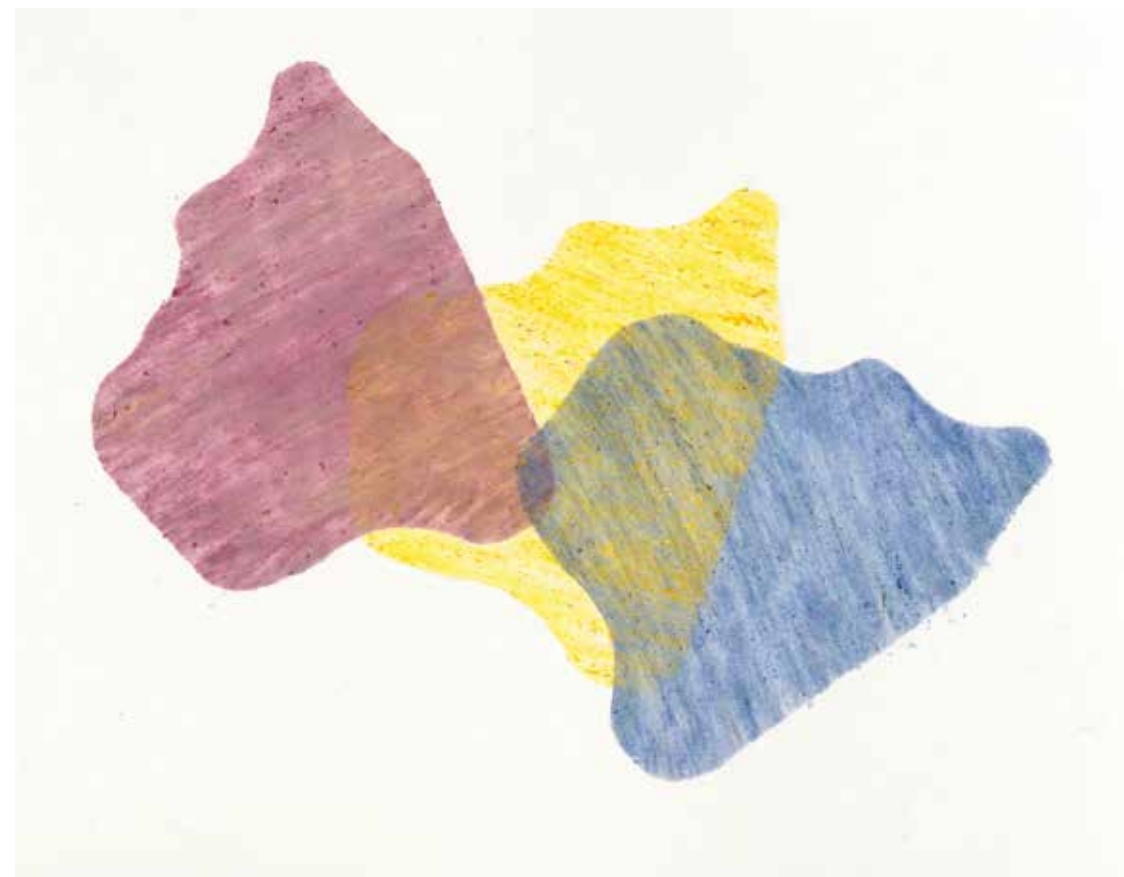
Opposite page clockwise from top left:
Linda Stillman, *Plotted*, 2016, collaged flower stains on paper, 21" x 16", courtesy of the artist

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This page from top:
Ellie Irons, *Phenological Clock (CSAA & surrounding blocks, March–November 2014)*, detail, 2014, graphite, plant derived pigments on paper, 15" x 15", courtesy of the artist

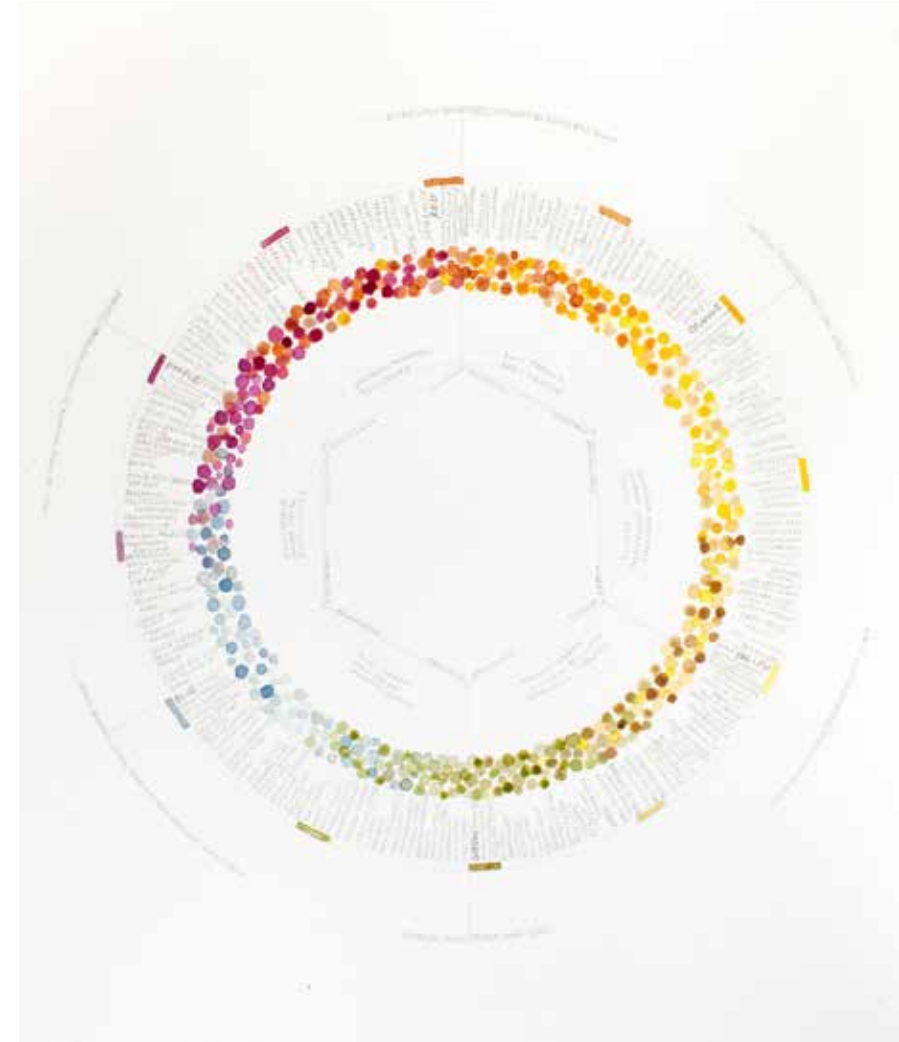
Ellie Irons, *Invasive Pigments: Oriental Bittersweet (Celastrus orbiculatus) American Range*, 2013, graphite and oriental bittersweet berry pigment on paper, 8" x 9.5", courtesy of the artist





LINDA STILLMAN is an artist who works in various media, investigating concepts of time, memory and nature. She works in her studios in New York City and upstate New York. Stillman is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (BA), the School of Visual Arts and Vermont College of Fine Arts (MFA). She has been awarded fellowships and residencies at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts Mark program, the Wave Hill Winter Workspace and The Studios at Mass MoCA. Her work has been featured in many solo and group exhibitions in galleries and museums around the country, including the Hunter College Art Galleries, the Brooklyn Museum and the Dorsky Museum. Stillman's art work has been reviewed in numerous publications and blogs and is included in many private and museum collections.

Linda Stillman, *Central Park Colored*, 2015, Flower stains on paper, 18.25" x 23", courtesy of the artist



ELLIE IRONS is an artist and educator based in Brooklyn, NY. She works in a variety of media, from walks to WIFI to gardening, to reveal how human and nonhuman lives intertwine with other earth systems. Recently she has been an artist in residence at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, the Institute for Electronic Arts and the SVA Nature and Tech Lab. Recent exhibition venues include Wave Hill, the Queens Botanical Garden, Pioneer Works and the Center for Strategic Art and Agriculture in New York City. Her writing has appeared in *Temporary Art Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and *Landscape Architecture Futures*. She is supported by a 2015 NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Work and a 2015 Turbulence Commission. Irons teaches part time at Brown University. She studied Environmental Science and Art at Scripps College in Los Angeles and received her MFA from Hunter College, CUNY.

Ellie Irons, *Color Wheel: Problem Plants by Hue*, 2016, graphite and plant pigments on paper, 19" x 24", courtesy of the artist

The Arsenal Gallery

Located in the historic Arsenal Building in Central Park, the Arsenal Gallery is dedicated to examining themes of nature, urban space, New York City parks and park history through a diverse schedule of art and history exhibitions. The gallery is committed to providing unaffiliated artists, independent curators, and non-profit organizations with an accessible exhibition venue.

The Arsenal Gallery, Central Park

830 Fifth Avenue at 64th Street, Third floor

Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.
Closed holidays

Related Programs

Tuesday, May 17, 2016, 6:00 p.m.

Exhibition tour with artists and flower stain demonstration with Linda Stillman

Tuesday, May 24, 2016, 6:00 p.m.

Exhibition tour with artists and plant watercolor demonstration with Ellie Irons

Tuesday, June 14, 2016, 6:00 p.m.

Panel with artists and Daniel Atha, Conservation Program Manager, New York Botanical Garden and Heather Liljengren, Supervising Seed Collector/Field Taxonomist, NYC Parks

Program admission is free but space is limited. To RSVP, please email artandantiquities@parks.nyc.gov.



Photo: Ellie Irons, pigment process



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