



ROBIN VUCHNICH

In Search of *Thoreau's Flowers*
—The Memory of a Season

Cover: Robin Vuchnich. *The Memory of a Season* (detail), 2025.
Interactive video projection. Courtesy of the artist. © Robin Vuchnich

In her immersive, light-based installations, Robin Vuchnich explores such issues as climate change, sea level rise, and environmental stewardship. Through projection mapping, video art, and creative coding, she brings scientific data about the changing world to beautiful and vivid life.¹

Vuchnich's practice draws from User Experience/User Interface design, a field dedicated to making interactive digital environments that fully respond to users' physical and emotional needs. At the heart of this approach is empathy, as expressed in the idea that design can vicariously connect people through shared emotions and perspectives. Vuchnich extends this empathic impulse from the human into the natural world. Her sublime projections immerse us in kinetic simulations of land- and seascapes, often mapped over architecture or other unlikely structures to generate dreamlike and uncanny juxtapositions. These projections are aimed at inducing the recognition that we are not separate from nature and we cannot detach ourselves from our own responsibility to the planet.

With this exhibition, Vuchnich pays tribute to the naturalist legacy of nineteenth-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau, long celebrated for his profound essays on subjects ranging from natural history to social justice. In the most famous, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), he wrote about living in solitude in the woods, where he hoped to discover insights into himself, society, and the natural world. Throughout his life, Thoreau continued to explore the countryside around his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts—the site of Walden Pond—collecting numerous species of plants on his walks. Today, Thoreau's collection of dried and pressed specimens, along with his extensive notes about them, is housed in the Harvard University Herbaria.²

The idea for this project came from ecologist and entomologist Emily Meineke, who invited a transdisciplinary team, including Vuchnich, artist and professor of photography Leah Sobsey, film studies professor Marsha Gordon, and professor of organismic and evolutionary biology Charles Davis, to collaborate on a



Fig. 1: Robin Vuchnich and Marsha Gordon. *Preserve, Persevere*, 2025. Dried and pressed plants on paper; 60 1/2 × 34 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artists. © Robin Vuchnich and Marsha Gordon

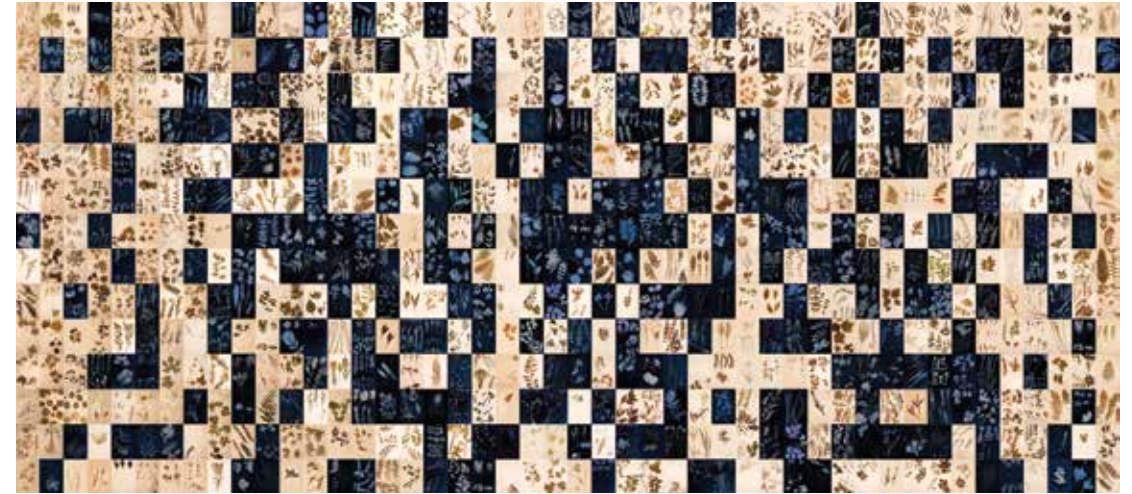


Fig. 2: Robin Vuchnich. *This is and No Mistake*, 2022. Video projection. Courtesy of the artist. © Robin Vuchnich

multidimensional exhibition responding to the Harvard collection. For her part of the project, Vuchnich created the two video projections on view that constitute *In Search of Thoreau's Flowers—The Memory of a Season*.

The exhibition debuted in 2022 at the Harvard Museum of Natural History and was subsequently presented in 2025–26 at the Gregg Museum of Art and Design at North Carolina State University, where Vuchnich taught design as an assistant professor of the practice. For the latter venue, Vuchnich worked with Gordon to create a pressed-plant collage featuring North Carolina botanical specimens (fig. 1).

At the Frist Art Museum, the exhibition opens onto a projected digital grid of the plants preserved in the Harvard collection (fig. 2). This data visualization is color coded to convey these species' decline—often because of climate change, pollution, and overdevelopment—near Concord, Massachusetts. Dark-blue rectangles represent species that are locally extinct or endangered, accounting for over half the specimens in Harvard's collection. If Thoreau were alive today, we can only imagine his despair at the



Fig. 3: Robin Vuchnich. *In Search of Thoreau's Flowers—The Memory of a Season* (installation view), 2025. Courtesy of the artist. © Robin Vuchnich

breadth of this loss. Seeing the pressed plants as digital ghosts, harbingers from the past, Vuchnich portends a future in which we will only be able to experience much of the flora of the region in a museum or virtual display.

The interactive element of Vuchnich's installation is a projection of the myriad floral species in decline around Walden Pond. An immense field of colorful wildflowers sways gently on three walls of the gallery, nearly surrounding us with stunning beauty and abundance. While the topic of diminishing biodiversity is being studied by scientists, this projection does not describe the loss in terms of charts and statistical data, which might give an abstract picture of extinction rates but not spur an emotional response. Translated into a visually alluring expression of sheer artistic beauty, however, the changes from Thoreau's time to the present are easier to internalize; this is a heartbreaking memorial

rather than a clinical assessment. Vuchnich notes, "The concept of loss is easy to dismiss when you're seeing it on a spreadsheet, as opposed to experiencing it in the way that art can help you experience it and make it memorable and resonant."³

Adding to the lyrical quality of the experience, the installation includes a soundscape recorded at Walden Pond: birds singing, insects chirping, and water lapping. By giving the Edenic scene a rich digital afterlife, Vuchnich encourages us to embrace and remember its fleeting beauty.

The sense of being fully immersed in this enchanted meadow is compounded through our interaction. A sensor picks up our movements, which instantly affect, disrupt, or cause spaces to open up in the dense fields of flowers, revealing trees from Walden Pond in the background. When viewers stop moving, the fields of flowers return to full density. The metaphor is clear—whether we can see it or not, human presence changes the environment; in a posthuman world, nature would remain in full bloom (fig. 3).

Vuchnich and her collaborative partners hope that this experience will encourage people to walk through the landscape wherever they live, enjoying nature's beauty while remembering what has been lost, and to take responsibility for preserving what remains. Using beauty as an inducement to care, Vuchnich invites us to feel fully absorbed in nature, in body and in mind.

Mark Scala, Chief Curator

Notes

1. The artist does not use artificial intelligence in the creation of her work.
2. To explore Thoreau's specimens in Harvard University Herbaria's online database, see https://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/botanist_search.php?mode=details&id=22794.
3. Emily Meineke, Robin Vuchnich, and Leah Sobsey, "In Search of Thoreau's Flowers: An Art + Science Conversation with Biologist Emily Meineke & Artists Robin Vuchnich & Leah Sobsey," interview by Jennifer Berglund, *HMSC Connects! Podcast*, Harvard Museums of Science and Culture, April 6, 2022, <https://hmsc.harvard.edu/2022/04/06/in-search-of-thoreaus-flowers-an-art-science-conversation-with-biologist-emily-meineke-artists-robin-vuchnich-leah-sobesy/>.

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