



**Galleria Eugenia Delfini**

# **Daisy Chain**

Erin Johnson

February 8, 2023 - March 29, 2023

# Introduction

Galleria Eugenia Delfini is pleased to present *Daisy Chain*, New York-based artist Erin Johnson's first solo exhibition in Europe, and the gallery's second exhibition after its opening in October 2022.

Johnson (b. 1985) interrogates notions of collectivity, dissent, and queer identity through video, sculpture, and photography. The exhibition's title, *Daisy Chain*, denotes several things at once: a crown of daisies, an interlinked series of electronic devices, a group sex formation. In all cases, the term refers to the processes of relationship, collaboration and interconnection between people or things. What it means to be together, share, and build a community is in fact one of the main themes of Johnson's practice.

The exhibition presents an immersive installation of videos, photographs, and sculptures. In the three-channel video *Oranges* (2023), Johnson directs the intimate gestures of a group of friends and lovers as they engage in an exchange of oranges. In this portrait of collectivity, the camera pans across them one by one in succession as they taste, play with, or smell the fruit, capturing their whispers and acts of intimate and casual sharing.

In *There are things in this world that are yet to be named* (2020), we see a young team of botanists in their laboratory, studying the Australian plant *Solanum Plastisexum*. Capable of producing male, female, and hermaphroditic flowers, the plant's sexual instability has baffled the scientific

community for decades. While the botanists work, a voiceover reads the private correspondence between influential environmentalist Rachel Carson and her secretly beloved addressee, Dorothy Freeman, interweaving the two women's love story with the environmental history of the sexually fluid plant.

Hung nearby are photographs, printed on silk, of *Solanum* samples pressed and dried between Australian newspapers and tabloids. Adjacent, two bronze sculptures immortalize herbarium straps at rest. While they are usually cinched and tightened around plant presses that contain and conserve samples of *Solanum*, here they gently curve, soften, and dangle. Their formations refer to ideas of sequence and circularity that are explored throughout the exhibition.

# Installation views



Daisy Chain - Erin Johnson

Installation view from Erin Johnson, "Daisy Chain". February 8, 2023 - March 29, 2023.  
Photo by Carlo Romano. Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Eugenia Delfini.



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# Exhibited Artworks



**Who but you cares what I am doing every hour of the day, 2023**

Digital print on silk  
46 cm x 53 cm (x2)  
Edition of 3 + 2AP



**Anika, Genesis, Kam, Kanthy, Sindhu, 2023**

Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle paper

71 cm x 71.5 cm

Edition of 3 + 2AP



**Line of best fit, 2023**

Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle paper

70 cm x 68 cm

Edition of 3 + 2AP



**Joy ride, 2023**  
Blackened bronze  
170 cm x 20 cm (x2)



**Joy ride, 2023**  
Blackened bronze  
170 cm x 20 cm (x2)



**Joy ride, 2023**  
Blackened bronze  
170 cm x 20 cm (x2)



**Oranges, 2023**

Three-channel HD video

3:35 minutes

Edition of 3 + 2AP





**There are things in this world that are yet to be named, 2020**

HD video

7:20 minutes

Edition of 3 + 2AP

# Both Have Historically Carried, 2022

## By Wendy Lotterman

What's in a name? This iconic question is Juliet's, asked in an attempt to escape the weight of patronymics and the prohibition of love. Her question, though piercing, undermines its own ambition. Using the example of a rose, she observes that signs don't actually change things they name: "that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet." Unfortunately for Shakespeare's heroine – and yet by her own logic – that which we call a Juliet, by any other patronym, would still be linked by blood, responsibility, and property to the Capulets. If the rose is just as sweet, the Juliet is just as burdened. But the strength of her desire to disinherit the family is cast upon the plant to deliver her point.

Ironically, Juliet isn't the only one to use plants to reveal the arbitrariness of names, suggesting that the example itself may not be so arbitrary after all. The father of semiotics himself, Ferdinand de Saussure, used the example of a tree to elucidate the structure of signs. Taking for granted that everyone understood the arbitrariness of the sign – i.e., that all language is not onomatopoeic – Saussure explained that the signifier does not correspond to the thing itself, but rather our concept of it. In a classic infographic, the image of a leafy tree sits atop a line that divides the clip art from the word "arbor," flanked on either side by an arrow, one up, one down.

Many thinkers have used the organization of language to explain less salient systems. According to Lacan, another semiotician, the unconscious is structured like a language. So then where does language, an inorganic phenomenon in need of systematic definition, get its structure? One answer is plants. Language is visualized according to an intricate hierarchy of families and sub-types that mimics the phylogeny of species. Any simile relies on the stability of the second term to qualify the first. So if language is structured like plants, then what happens when a plant is discovered that challenges the taxonomical precision of language? The reciprocal analogy must either ignore what it cannot comprehend, or rebuild the machine.

On October 9, 2022 Bruno Latour died, and a few days before that, DJ and artist Juliana Huxtable tweeted a tribute to rival the flurry of appropriately timed memorials. Quote-tweeting a comedian named “Ariel Elias” who on October 3 wrote “Tomatoes are the most patriotic plant. Because botanically, tomatoes are a fruit. But according to an 1893 Supreme Court ruling, they’re a vegetable. And there’s nothing more American than a legal decision that disagrees with science,” Juliana reposted and replied in classic all-caps:

“SCIENCE’ ISNT AN ETHICALLY SALIENT SPHERE UNTO ITSELF THAY THE OSTENSIBLY MORE FE-  
EBLE SPHERE OF LAW SHOULD BE SUBJECT TO ... U REALLY THOUGH THIS WAS A TEAR BUT ITS  
IDEOLOGICALLY GRANTING ‘SCIENCE’ EPISTEMOLOGICAL HEGEMONY OVER TGE LAW ...BOTH  
HAVE HISTORICALLY CARRIED..”

My favorite thing about Juliana’s tweet is the lowercase d at the end, indicating a possible refusal of the eminently efficient caps lock in favor of holding down shift for (almost) the length of the entire tweet. There is a commitment to tone, and the exhaustion involved in speaking at a register that is actively disincentivized. This is one way to approach Erin Johnson’s corpus.

I work on the law, or how, like Juliet, to disinherit some of its more damning legacies. Erin Johnson works on science, or how, like Juliana, to make visible the imbrication of science and ideology in order to de-naturalize its specious authority.

Erin Johnson’s video *There Are Things In This World That Are Yet to Be Named* is about a botanically overlooked tomato plant. Children delight in being the first to reveal the truth of tomatoes being a fruit. There is a joy in its transgression from the way categories typically make sense. The tenure of the tomato’s misperception as vegetable has nothing to do with the law, or science, but like Juliet’s rose, with the question of its sweetness. A tomato is not nature’s candy. This categorically evasive quality of the fruit does not make it patriotic, but it does add mystery to its botanical profile. In 2019 the New York Times published an article about a recently classified Australian bush tomato that, on account of its fickle sexuality, remained unnamed for decades. In 1974 one Australian botanist simply recorded, “This has me puzzled.” Johnson’s video moves around a greenhouse at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania where a team of botanists gently groom and care for specimens of *Solanum Platisexum* as a network of fans and ducts meticulously maintain the conditions. This is the lab that first gave the plant its name,

one which encodes the supersession of dimorphism into its title – in Greek “plasti-” means able to be molded.

Johnson’s work is engaged in opacity. I mean this in a few ways. Ideology works best when it is transparent – literally, when it cannot be seen. Although the process behind the scenes is beautifully chaotic and maximallist, Johnson’s videos are themselves very spare. Very little directs your gaze in one direction or another. A scene is presented, and you are free to walk around. The context is often withheld, not to confuse or seduce, but to allow for impressions to accrue without the heavy imposition of fact. If the subject of Johnson’s videos is the way stories about places or things change the way those things are experienced, then what is the task of her camera – another device with angles that crops, frames, and selectively shows?

The question is perhaps best left rhetorically unanswered, but I do think there is an answer. Johnson’s camera is precisely interested in the narrative remainder, or the unindexed slush that builds up around the joints of the taxonomic machine. In a piece called *The Way Things Can Happen*, extras from the 1983 anti-war TV Movie *The Day After* retell their experience of acting out nuclear disaster. The film, which was cast entirely by locals from Lawrence Kansas, is neither fiction nor historical fact. Johnson’s video finds a language for representing the bizarre suspension. Or perhaps the language is already there, but Johnson’s video finds a way to listen.

This is another way that Johnson works with opacity. Following Edouard Glissant, opacity is meaning that refuses to assimilate to readily intelligible sense. It is the same principle that guides us to read works of literature in their original language, but can happen within the same language. What does it mean to make a reader or listener come closer, to learn a new grammar so intimately that a meaning is revealed that does not make sense because of its proximity to something else, but because something new is understood?

If science rejects threats to taxonomy until an entirely new system of names can be invented to classify the outcast, then, without exaggeration, there is a language that has yet to be spoken. Johnson’s videos can be described as documentation of this language, or the stuff remaindered by narrative – scientific, historical, national, etc.

Rather than anxiously defend against the consonance between truth and representation, Johnson al-

lows for the discrepancy to speak. Often this takes the form of an ambient friction that breeds between text and image, or multiple video channels, or a combination of unsynthesized source material with the faintest hint of a through line.

*There Are Things In This World That Are Yet To Be Named* pairs images of the sexually irreducible tomato plant with voiceover of the private correspondence between influential environmentalist Rachel Carson and her secretly beloved addressee, Dorothy Freeman. Among them is one from Carson written at the precipice of death that never met its recipient. The primary affect of the letters is regret. The rush to preserve in language what could not find expression in life rubs up against the irony of a behavioral discretion that intended to escape the consequences of being named or identified as gay.

The film is paired with sculptures, photos, and silk prints in Johnson's first European solo show, capaciously named "Daisy Chain." At once designating a complete circuit of group sex and a delicate crown made of flowers, the double charge of the term is reproduced in visually arresting casts of herbarium straps in black bronze. The straps recall the erotics of bondage as well as the literal flowers that their tightening conspires to dry. Johnson's casts capture the incidental shape of the looped fabric that hung for weeks on her wall in Brooklyn before rendering them into the immutable medium of metal. Johnson has also included photos of the dried tomato plant sandwiched between Australian tabloids and printed on sheets of silk. The drab and brittle plant, lifeless from compression within a corset of herbarium straps, is laid against saturated coupons and dated headlines that stamp its entry into scientific attention.

In addition to group sex and floral coronation, "daisy chain" more loosely names any sequence with junctures of activity and passivity—a string of extension cords, for instance. The sexing of plants is largely reduced to active and passive parts—pollinator and pollinated. Bucking the trend of sexual dimorphism, *Solanum Plastisexum* exhibits what botanists call "breeding system fluidity," or an unstable sexual expression that changes with each observation. Johnson's work is often concerned with groups: how certain actions are only possible through the alchemy of collaboration. The pollination of flowers is a scene of interspecies group sex between plants and insects, making it a natural draw for Johnson. But *Solanum* does more than highlight the ensemble cast of botanical reproduction. It provides the occasion for a pause in the circuitry of sexual knowledge, an interruption to the reproduction of ideas about the science of reproduction.

Rather than usher this scientific revelation toward a new ideology of sex, *There Are Things In This World That Are Yet To Be Named* inhabits the scene of possibility without narrowing its capacity to a point. We are not instructed to value or devalue names. We are not given a rubric for morally evaluating taxonomy. The plainly factual title of the video captures this calm refusal of sentimentality or judgment. Instead it tells us something about the structure of the problem that Johnson lays bare. The temporality of “yet” suggests a horizon of inclusion, but for the statement to remain true, something must always be left out, awaiting its invitation to language. As long as that’s the case, something other than a name will have a chance to pick up this refuse and take it for a ride. This is how I read Johnson’s video, as a paralinguistic joy ride through a landscape of taxonomical refuse with periodic stops to spectate upon new signs of life.

**Wendy Lotterman**

**Wendy Lotterman** is a postdoctoral fellow at New York University and associate editor of *Parapraxis* magazine. Her first full length collection of poetry will be published by *Futurepoem* in fall 2023. Her poetry has appeared in *BOMB*, *Prelude*, and on the Poetry Foundation’s *Poetry Now* podcast. Her chapbook, *Intense Holiday*, was published with *After Hours LTD* in 2016.



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