

Uriel Orlow
***What kind of times are these, when a conversation
about trees is almost a crime...***

LAVERNICA
arte contemporanea

A cura di Gabi Scardi

1.08 – 15.12.2026

"What kind of times are these, when a conversation about trees is almost a crime...", wrote Bertolt Brecht in 1939 while in exile, in his poem *To Posterity*.

Almost a century later, the world once again faces profound crises. Yet speaking about trees can no longer be dismissed as a retreat from urgent realities. The lack of attention paid to the natural world must increasingly be seen as exemplary of the general neglect of the *more-than-human*.

For many years, Uriel Orlow has explored plants as witnesses, teachers and political actors. Throughout his practice plants become a prism through which to reconsider our relationship with history, thinking through the present and imagining possible futures. In Orlow's work plants and our interaction with them not only reveal blind spots of history but also expose the violence at the heart of Western systems of knowledge, extraction and colonialism.

The works in the exhibition *What kind of times are these, when a conversation about trees is almost a crime* reflect these longstanding concerns.

Herbarium Ghosts, developed over the past decade, is a series of ghostly photo-gravures based on pigmented traces left by plants collected during colonial expeditions. These fragile phantom images, not only evoke the legacy of botanical classification, but also histories of extraction and the continuing extinction of plant species. Like much of Orlow's practice, these works stem from meticulous archival research that reads the archive against the grain, engaging with its material traces and with the partial, often biased narratives it preserves.

Finer Than Thought, Stronger than Rock, a series of drawings on *azulejo* tiles, is dedicated to vetiver, a species of grass that grows in the Himalayas and through its exceptionally long root system has the ability to stabilise mountain slopes at increased risk of erosion due to changing rainfall patterns melting glaciers. The work celebrates human-plant collaboration as a response to climate change.

Echoes of Green comprises frottage drawings made from leaves from the rainforest of the island of São Tomé. Marked by holes, tears and other traces of time, the leaves become indexes: witnesses to both destruction and survival. They evoke absences in historical memory while suggesting the persistence of life despite violence and loss.

The film ***I already walked in the forest with my grandfather and father, and now I'm going alone*** is also set on São Tomé; it follows medicinal plant gatherer Jack Pereira through the rainforest, observing a practice of harvesting founded in respect care and the knowledge of ecological interdependence. Rather than extracting from the forest and destroying it in the process, Pereira demonstrates forms of use and care that sustain both human and forest life, suggesting non-extractive ways of inhabiting the world.

Across these recent works, Orlow has adopted a relational perspective, approaching plants as active interlocutors from whom we can learn. His practice proposes relationships founded on dialogue, interdependence and mutual learning instead of domination and extraction.

Forest Futurism extends this project towards the future. In the video ***We Have Already Lived Through Our Future We Just Don't Remember it***, Orlow establishes a link between childhood – a humanity not yet moulded – and nature, which can never be fully tamed. We witness a group of children whose school life takes place in close contact with the forest: through this interaction, they learn to listen to and act in harmony with the environment, fostering principles of reciprocity rather than utilitarianism.

The children engagement with natural fossils in their environment proposes that learning with forests requires not only looking but also listening and touching. These ancient fossils evoke the concept of 'deep time': a remote, palaeontological era that transcends human control, but the study of which can provide clues for understanding how ecosystems evolve and adapt, responding in the face of the climate change we are already witnessing.

The exhibition opens with the performance ***Reverie of Collective Walkers (Reading to Plants)***, in which the artist and participants will read poetic and literary texts to the plants in San Giuseppe 'U Timpuni' Park in Modica. By reversing the conventional hierarchy between speaker and listener, the performance invites the plants to become interlocutors with whom to build individual, intimate relationships.

Together, the works in ***What kind of times are these, when a conversation about trees is almost a crime*** make an urgent plea to move beyond human exceptionalism and open new perspectives to rethink our place in a shared world through principles of coexistence, reciprocity, care, conviviality and radical proximity.

Gabi Scardi