

PRESS RELEASE

25 July, for immediate release:

Ashmolean NOW
Bettina von Zwehl - The Flood

18 October 2024–11 May 2025

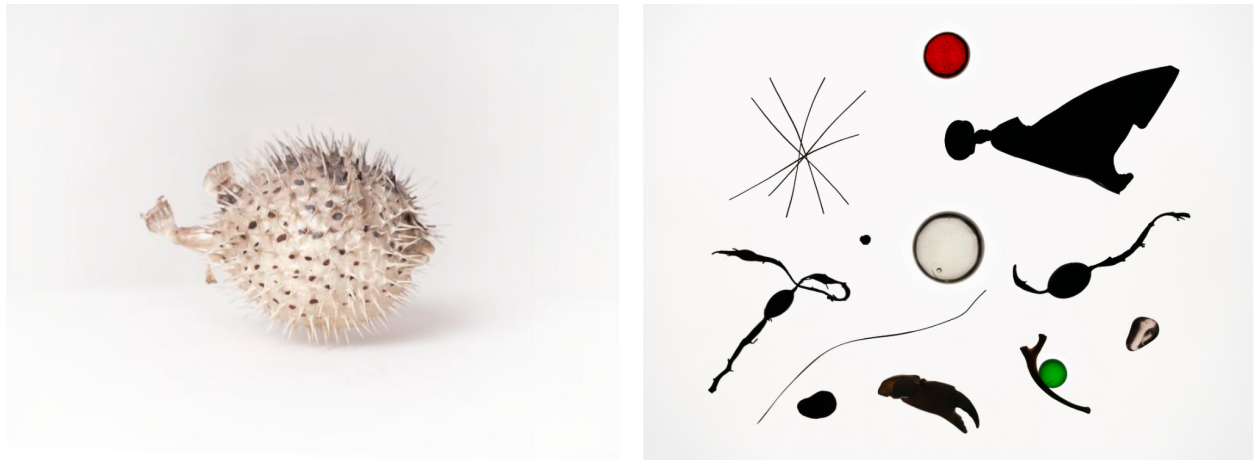


Image credits (l-r): Bettina von Zwehl, *Porcupine Fish* (2023) Courtesy of Oxford University Museum of Natural History; Bettina von Zwehl, *Thing Five* (2024) © Bettina von Zwehl.

Bettina Von Zwehl - The Flood is the latest exhibition in the Ashmolean NOW series inviting UK-based contemporary artists to create new responses to the Museum's collections. During a residency in Oxford in 2022 and 2023, London-based photographer Bettina von Zwehl was drawn to the early history of the Ashmolean's collections, which are based on a Wunderkammer (or Cabinet of Curiosities) featuring natural and manmade objects assembled by the gardeners John Tradescant the Elder and Younger in the early seventeenth century.

Von Zwehl's research inspired *The Flood*, a multi-dimensional installation featuring new works ranging from photographs of found objects, wallpaper made using scaled up images of zoological specimens, a model theatre and a display of gilded mushrooms. These works by the artist are shown alongside an original catalogue of the Tradescants' Wunderkammer, which was known as 'The Ark' and featured wonders ranging from the supposed tail feathers of a phoenix to carved peach stones and elephant teeth. Also on display are some key objects from the Ashmolean's collection, including an iron cradle presented by Elias Ashmole in 1677 and a sixteenth-century 'owl' cup crafted from a coconut shell. Through this comparison, von Zwehl's work reflects on the original purpose of Wunderkammers to investigate the world and humanity's place within it.

About the artist and the exhibition

Interested in photography from a young age, Munich-born Bettina von Zwehl (b.1971) worked as a photographer's assistant in Rome before moving to London to study for an MA in Fine Art Photography at the Royal College of Art. Often focusing on the human condition in portraiture – including distinctive profile and silhouette views – her work draws on different traditions of art history and visual culture, while experimenting with the photographic medium and its installation.

Inspired by the scope and variety of the Ashmolean's original collection, for *The Flood* von Zwehl has created a series of photographic still lifes that combine disparate found objects such as ragged black feathers, blue sleeping pills and starfish. Using experimental photographic techniques to create works resembling photograms, von Zwehl isolates these objects from their contexts, opening them up to a variety of possible meanings.

The foundation story of the Ashmolean is referenced in von Zwehl's miniature theatre installation *Remember Me, Remember Me?* created in collaboration with Opera designer Robert Innes Hopkins, which uses photography, sculpture and text to explore the mysterious death of Hester Pookes, the spouse of John Tradescant the Younger who drowned in her garden pond. Pookes had been involved in a legal dispute with Elias Ashmole, a wealthy antiquary and collaborator of her late husband who was ultimately awarded 'The Ark' and later gifted it to the University of Oxford along with his own collection to form the Ashmolean Museum. This narrative of injustice is embedded in the installation centred around a model of a seventeenth-century theatre containing a wooden stage with two golden chairs that hold space for an imagined conversation between von Zwehl and a friend referenced in a new play script by writer Sophy Rickett.

In another work, *Fungi Island* created in collaboration with artist David Robinson, von Zwehl pays homage to the Tradescants' reputation as prolific horticulturalists in a sculpture composed of slender long-stalked mushrooms resembling lilliputian trees configured on a low-rise platform in archipelago-like clusters. Created from dried Shimeji mushrooms that have been hand-painted and gilded, the work also references the hybrid objects found in seventeenth-century Wunderkammers that often combined organic forms such as nautical shells, animal horns, sea coral, and large eggs, with utensils, ornaments, drinking vessels, and other human made artefacts.

Von Zwehl's choice of title for the exhibition, *The Flood*, reflects the material displacement that occurs due to the forces of nature that reorganise the physical world in unexpected ways, much like in a Wunderkammer. The title also encourages the viewer to consider the climate crisis and the necessary ideas of renewal, transformation, and change required to address it.

Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean Museum, said: 'Following the success of Pio Abad's Turner Prize-nominated Ashmolean NOW exhibition earlier this year, we are delighted to have Bettina Von Zwehl turn her photographic lens on our rich collections. Inspired by the wild variety of 'The Ark', Von Zwehl has played creatively with subject matter, with photographic conventions and with the possibilities of her medium to suggest and challenge different traditions in art history, in visual culture, and in museum display. At the same time her work reflects upon and responds to the purpose the original Cabinets of Curiosity as places to understand the world and humanity's place within it; drawing attention to new perspectives on our position in the world and our responsibilities towards a shared and fragile planet.'

Lena Fritsch, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Ashmolean, said: 'When devising the Ashmolean NOW exhibition series, which encourages critical conversations and responses to historic collections in Oxford, Bettina von Zwehl's research-led practice sprang to mind and seemed a perfect fit. The resulting contemporary curiosity cabinet exhibition, and accompanying book, showcase the artist's aim to rekindle wonder and curiosity as critical tools for exploring new ideas and unique practices. Portraying historic objects, specimens, animals, and only few people, her photographs are, nevertheless, deeply concerned with the human and human responsibilities today. They remind us of our interdependent relationships with animals, plants, and other non-human domains of existence in our ecosystem and invite us to reconsider the hierarchies that have proven to be detrimental to our environment.'

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Exhibition: Ashmolean NOW: *Bettina Von Zwehl - The Flood*

Dates: 18 October 2024–11 May 2025

Venue: Gallery 8, Lower Ground Floor, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK

Admission: Free

Ashmolean NOW

Ashmolean NOW launched in 2023 to engage and support new artistic voices based in the UK and encourage critical conversations with, and creative responses to, the Ashmolean's collections. Ashmolean NOW is curated by Dr Lena Fritsch, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and presented in Gallery 8. To date, Ashmolean NOW has invited four very different artists and perspectives to exhibit:

- Flora Yukhnovich x Daniel Crews-Chubb (8 July 2023–14 January 2024);
- Pio Abad (10 February–8 September 2024);
- Bettina von Zwehl (18 October 2024–11 May 2025).

About the artist:

Bettina von Zwehl (b.1971, Germany) is best known for her work in photography, installation and archival exploration. Drawing on various art historical traditions and visual culture, she experiments with, and expands, the language of photography. Living and working in London, von Zwehl holds a BA in Photography from the London College of Printing and an MA in Fine Art Photography from the Royal College of Art.

Her practice has evolved, in large part, through a series of artist residencies, including The Victoria and Albert Museum (2011), the Freud Museum (2015), the New-York Historical Society Museum (2018), The Queens House, Greenwich (2018) and at BTV Stadtforum Innsbruck in liaison with Castle Ambras, Austria (2019/20). Most recently she has completed a year-long residency at the Ashmolean, The University of Oxford's Museum of Art and Archaeology, culminating in a major solo exhibition and publication at the museum in 2024.

Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at The Photographers Gallery, London (2005), The National Portrait Gallery (2012), The Holburne Museum, Bath (2013), The Freud Museum, London and Vienna (2015/16), The New-York Historical Society Museum (2018) and BTV Stadtforum Innsbruck, Austria (2020). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions including The National Gallery, London, (2012), Bluecoat Gallery Liverpool (2013), The Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2015), San Diego Museum of Photographic Art, USA (2016); The National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington DC (2017).

Her work is represented in museum collections worldwide including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; LACMA, Los Angeles; Victoria and Albert Museum; Arts Council Collection, London; National Portrait Gallery, London; Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida; and Pier 24 Photography, San Francisco.

Supporters:

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The exhibition is supported by:

Christian Levett

The Patrons of the Ashmolean Museum

and those who wish to remain anonymous