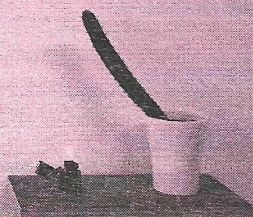
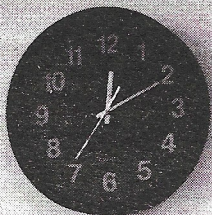


God's House Tower

BLIM

by
Keith Harrison



↖ Cactus + Zippo + Clock,
Keith Harrison, 2019

Rhythm & haze: Botany, Sound, & the Maritime
Jennifer Lucy Allan

In Abraham Pether's painting of God's House Tower, the scene is lit by a bright full moon that hangs low in the sky like a spotlight. It glows, puts the relief on clouds, trails its white light along the water towards us. On the docks, next to a small canon, two men stand with a telescope, studying documents. They may be observing the stars, or working out the tides – four of them per day in Southampton, because of its proximity to the Isle of Wight. The pull of Pether's moonlight is repeated in his background to Philip Reinagle's *Night Blooming Cereus* – a botanical painting of a cactus alternately called the 'night blowing cereus'. Keith Harrison takes both meanings.

In these two paintings, and in Harrison's installation, is the rhythm and haze of historical connection and resonance, where themes and things come together, sometimes in colonial conflagrations. As container ships pass through Southampton, fog horns will sound from 18" bass speakers, an echo of their waterborne counterparts. Botanical material will bloom in clouds like both the fog and the flowering cacti, in shapes like petals and pistils in botanic bass impulses. The flora, the fog, and the fog horns will commune, with the distant ships that once sailed past almost close enough to touch.

Since Pether's paintings, God's House Tower has witnessed the advent of containerisation, where ports were dredged and extended to make way for bigger boats. In the year between 1996–7 seven million cubic metres of material was dredged in Southampton. Ships grew larger and moved further out from the land, and can now only be seen from the roof of the building, across an expanse of concrete port and dock. "The more ships have grown in size and consequence, the less space they take up in our imagination," writes Rose George.

Selenicereus grandiflorus – the Queen Of The Night – flowers once a year and is native to parts of South and Central America and surrounding islands, not, surprisingly, to Southampton. But plants hitch rides in boats. Ballast is plain weight, loaded in hulls to make the boat sit right in the water, that might be composed of soil, stone, brick or other debris. Loaded at source and unloaded when the cargo appeared, it is often material dredged to widen rivers and ports.

In this rubble and muck are stowaways, seeds that can lie dormant for months, seasons, years, even decades. Ballast flora represent a sort of botanical colonialism. The species that travel and take root are often invasive, and overwhelm native plants, hogging habitat. But plants have been travelling like this for centuries, and some are now well established enough to be counted as domestic. An island in Finland counts as native, plants that arrived from South America in ballast over a century ago.

Container ships now often use water for soil, but this means a hull full of water carried across the world and belched out on the other side, complete with the living species that were unwittingly inhaled at port. The North American warty comb jelly has a diaspora in the Azov Sea; the Black Sea jellyfish can be found in the San Francisco Bay; the ruffe fish from Europe has invaded the Great Lakes. The ships that pass through Southampton docks carry flora and fauna now just as they did when Pether painted his moonlit scene.

Just before Christmas in 1878, Charles Darwin wrote to the scientist and foghorn expert John Tyndall, speculating that certain plants had seemed excited, even moving, when played a prolonged high note on a bassoon. He asked Tyndall, who had recently conducted some extensive tests of foghorns on the south coast, if he could borrow some of those foghorns to test his theory.

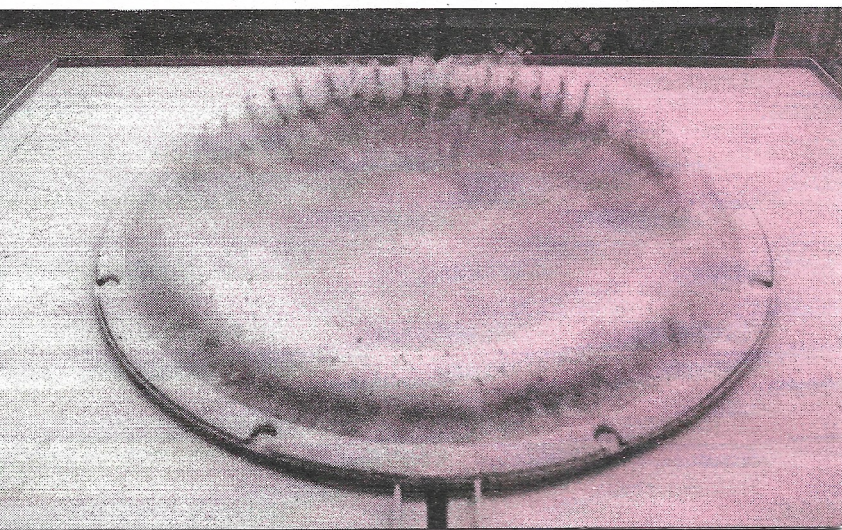
A century later, Mort Garson recorded *Music For Plants* on a Moog at home in Laurel Canyon; Stevie Wonder released *Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants*. At the same time, the MV *Koorringa*, MV *Kanimbla* and MV *Manoora* were launched in Australia, marking the arrival of the age of the container ship.

Where Garson and Wonder were making new-age music to stimulate growth, Darwin wanted to see his plants *move*. Nothing happened when he honked away at them in his greenhouse, but he didn't have an 18" bass speaker to hand. When the foghorns sound for Harrison, the plant material will bounce and make new shapes – the night blowing cactus will bloom, in plumes of contoured powder, activated by sound. As the moon pulls the tides, the horns will keep rhythm in the temporal suspension of the fog. But the fog and the foghorn are the same thing – weather and bass are both manifestations of low-pressure waves, just at vastly different scales. In English, the language of sound also carries the language of the maritime. We have ear canals, we hear sound waves. James Jeans wrote that "sound reaches our ears in the form of waves, which have travelled through the surrounding air, much as waves travel over the surface of a sea or river". The blooming and blowing of the speakers is therefore both literal and figurative, a pleasing loop of signals and signifiers.

The soundsystem's billowing clouds of botanical haze, triggered by the horns, represents in micro what is happening at Southampton in macro, articulating connections between plants and sound, weather and ships, as the moon, hanging low, dictates our rhythms. Like the cactus' momentary flowering, *Bloom*'s sounding will take place in a space and time that will not be easily replicated. In this brief ecstatic moment then, there is a night blooming, and a night blowing.



Bloom,
✓ Keith Harrison, 2019



AS What initially drew you to this commission?

KH It was a compelling invitation to produce a new work for God's House Tower (GHT), a building that's such a mix of contemporary and medieval with a brutalist staircase in between. It was also a chance to continue a relationship I've had with 'a space' arts since 2009, when I performed *Blue Monday/White Label* for the first time as part of 'Testing Grounds', a one-night event at Bargate Gallery when I played and scratched on two Technics 1210's an unfired porcelain copy of the New Order 12" alongside the vinyl original and a disco light show. That opportunity initiated an approach to working with sound and raw material that has informed my practice since. It was a terrifying experience but I really appreciated that 'a space' were so open to someone trying something so speculative in front of a live audience. So, when 'a space' asked if I wanted to be involved I felt it was taking us both into new territory on the back of some shared history and a remarkable site.

AS What were your first impressions of the space itself?

KH Thinking back to the first visit I'm not sure the renovation work had fully started, so I saw it at a point where the medieval history sections unapologetically butted up against the concrete stairwells and enjoyed these two things colliding. During the tour around the space the view from the top of the tower coincided with one of the enormous container ships leaving Southampton Docks, providing a slowly moving, geometric, colour-coded backdrop. The contradictions of those containers, their anonymous enormity, their familiarity as they get trucked in and out of Southampton and then their strangeness as a floating tower block has stayed with me.

The paintings by the Pethers were included in the original artist brief sent out, and it was the night paintings, the moonlit scenes that really struck me. One of the Pether paintings has a group looking through a telescope like a Southampton branch meeting of the Lunar Society; the pull of the moon and looking out beyond their immediate circumstances make the Apollo landings already seem inevitable.

AS What inspired you to use shipping horns for the audio component of Bloom?

KH That wasn't necessarily an immediate connection but one that came out of a current interest in sound physically moving material. I've been making DIY speakers – fitting subwoofer drivers in plastic crates – and by using heavy bass frequencies it has been possible to agitate matter to the point that it starts to let go of itself and becomes airborne. That a foghorn should produce fog felt right. Subsequently, I was introduced to the painting *Night Blooming Cereus*, whereby Philip Reinagle has depicted a flowering cactus over the top of a moonlit scene by Abraham Pether in which a clock is showing 12.00 midnight. To a certain extent, I have deconstructed the painting into cactus powder, the speakers and their activation at specific times of the day to create a combined bloom of material and sound. With the original Pether paintings on show in the gallery below and *Bloom* above, the overlaying of one work over another, as in *Night Blooming Cereus*, is repeated.

AS How did your research and development inform the final outcome?

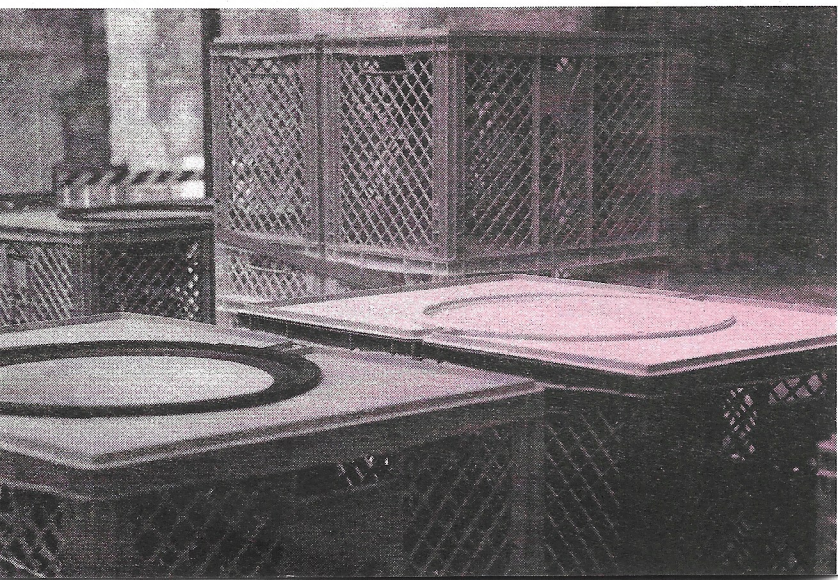
KH I'm working with plans of the gallery space to see what kind of arrangements I might make with the speakers. I'm hoping to use recycled plastic storage boxes from a company in Southampton as their dimensions and range of colours have a similarity to the container ships' cargo. A vinyl record will be cut using recordings taken of the ship horns made from the tower platform at GHT. Using the daily published shipping movements in the Solent, the record will be played out through the soundsystem by a gallery assistant each time a ship departs and arrives at the docking bays. Working with the blacksmith Paul Ager we will construct a steel and Perspex shipping-container sized housing for the soundsystem that can be entered through a vinyl curtain from one end. In such a carefully controlled environment as God's House Tower it felt important to keep the cloud of cactus material within a defined area using a structure that suggests shipping, propagation and materials just about kept in-check.

AS When we've spoken before, we've talked about the possibility of igniting a bloom - is that still something you're interested in doing?

KH I'd love to do it, I still think there's potential for an ignition point to be reached. The idea came out of a recent project called *Ecstatic Material* where there was such a cloud of dust produced by the end of the event it felt a spark would create an instantaneous explosion that would have taken us all out. I'm keen to explore that possibility in this work, from bloom to boom, but I'm not sure how viable it might be in such a sensitive environment. Ideally it would be an event that happens on a full moon to reflect the Pether paintings and *Night Blooming Cereus* in particular. I'm excited by the unpredictability of trying to make it happen, there's inevitably a trade-off with the building it's sited within but I'm so pleased to have the opportunity to start the programme of contemporary exhibitions at GHT and continue with 'a space' the series of material experiments that began at Bargate in 2009.



Bloom,
✓ Keith Harrison, 2019



Published to coincide with the exhibition

BLOOM

16th November 2019 – 16th January 2020

God's House Tower
Town Quay Road
Southampton, SO14 2NY



Night Blooming Cereus,
Robert Dunkarton after Philip
Reinagle & Abraham Pether, 1800

Credits

Steel construction
Perspex

Sound production
Recycled Plastic Containers
Photography
Graphic Design

Paul Ager
David Brown and Peter Webb
at GAP sheet materials,
Southampton
Matt Black
Solent Plastics
a space arts
Charlie Newhouse

God's House Tower is a project conceived,
developed and managed by 'a space' arts



a space arts



GOD'S HOUSE
TOWER



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