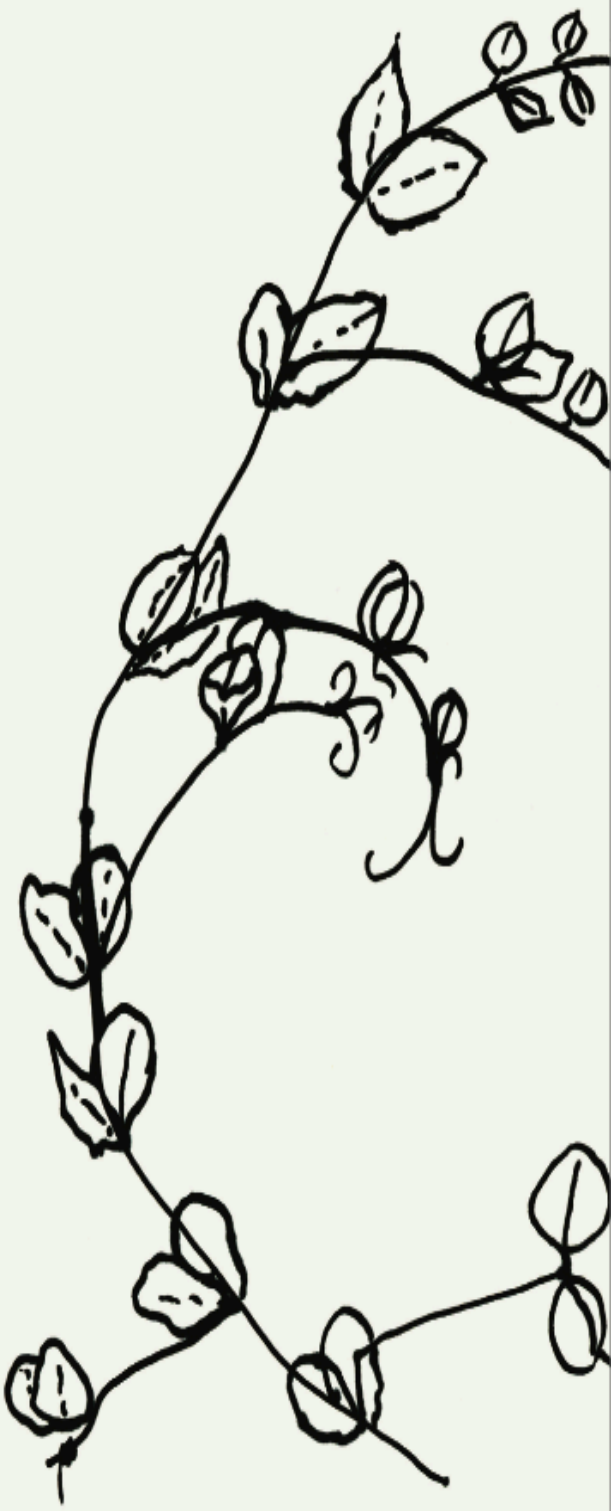
Maria Thereza Alves
Art in America
March 2022
by Emily Watlington

Seeds of Change

By Maria Thereza Alves



The Berlin-based Brazilian artist reports on research into the inadvertent dispersal of various plants via immigration, colonization, and the transatlantic slave trade.

Above, a panel from *Seeds of Change: Liverpool*, 1999–2016, photographs and texts on paper on wood, 45½ by 88½ inches.
Opposite, drawing of a *Pisum arvense* plant, 2006, marker on paper, from the Bristol iteration of *Seeds of Change*.

This page: Courtesy Michel Rein Gallery, Paris; Opposite: Courtesy Maria Theresa Alves

My research-based project "Seeds of Change" had its beginnings in 1987, when I attended an art and science conference organized by environmental scholar Yrjö Haila and curator Marketta Seppälä in Finland. There, a botanist named Heli Jutila showed me an earth sampling tool, and I quickly became fascinated with the possibility of gathering and analyzing a small chunk of earth. Jutila was working on a dissertation on ballast flora—merchant ships would use soil, stones, sand, wood, bricks, or anything else that made economic sense to help stabilize ships by counterweighting their cargo. When these ships arrived in port, the ballast was also unloaded. Inadvertently, this material often carried seeds, and sometimes the seeds would grow and flourish in new locales.

I've been working on "Seeds of Change" ever since, researching ballast flora and creating installations in different cities. The first installation in this series was in Marseille in 1999, and since then I've also developed projects in Reposaari [Finland], Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, Bristol, and Antwerp. The most recent edition took place in New York as part of my 2016–18 residency at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School. Each iteration takes a different path based on the available research materials. In Reposaari, for instance, I learned that several local residents were carrying out their own studies on various aspects of ballast flora. So for that iteration, I made a greenhouse inside the Taidemuseo [art museum], where I grew individual specimens labeled with the names of the residents who allowed me to take samples from their land.

The List Center iteration opened up a lot of possibilities for me. My parents immigrated to New York decades ago, and the city has been my home for much of my life. The large street-side window of the New School's gallery encouraged me to create an indoor garden. I made a selection from the 400-plus types of ballast plants that are still growing in the city. I came to see the plants as witnesses, not only to trade and travel, but also to invasions, massacres, enslavement, immigration, war, and real estate development. For a series of text-based works I showed on the gallery walls, I gathered several local stories, beginning with one about what is known as the Peach Tree War—a 1655 conflict thought to have begun when an Indigenous woman was killed by a settler for picking a piece of fruit. Next was the story of the American sailing ship *Liberia*, which arrived "in ballast"—meaning empty except for ballast—in the port of New York in 1898. That ship conveyed to Liberia free Blacks who were fleeing Southern states to escape violence and death after Reconstruction. After that came a story about a Norwegian immigrant, who, in exchange for loading ballast on a ship, was able to sail to New York. The subsequent story concerns the use of ballast as landfill in New York—smoothing out the land to make it more profitable for real estate development. And the final text is about a walk with my partner in Inwood Hill Park in New York—while picking pokeweed for dinner, we met an Indigenous family camping out for the summer on Munsee land.

Peach Tree War, 2017, watercolor and ink on paper, 24 by 18 inches.

There was little institutional support or interest when I started working with plants in 1999. In Marseille, I began by asking local universities whether they were conducting ballast flora studies, as I did not want to duplicate scientific work. Rather, I wanted to support existing efforts. Once they said no, I began teaching myself how to decipher handwritten French nautical terminology so that I could research documents in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archives. I found correspondence between ship captains and municipal officials that led me to probable ballast sites in Marseille—these are indicated on the map on page 71. I also asked ecological expert Heli Jutila to be my mentor on the scientific research, and she provided guidance on taking viable earth samples and caring for seeds.

I first created a ballast garden in 2012 for a project in Bristol. There, I developed not only an installation, but an extensive five-year program. During that time I worked with different groups—Malcolm X Elders, LAFTA (Looked After, Fostered and Transracially Adopted), Full Circle Youth, Community Resolve, and others—to grow ballast flora, research local histories, and organize storytellings and performances.

The Entire Coast of Long Island (2017) is a painting of the coast of Long Island, where most of the sales of enslaved African people in New York occurred, since slavers were trying to evade Manhattan taxes. Wanting to show the impact of this history upon the land, I remolded the coast of the island, making it into one long horizon.

A ballast flora garden installed in the Groot Begijnhof quarter of Leuven, Belgium.

From top: Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich; Photo Joeri Thiry

Botanist Heli Jutila examining Alves's ballast flora in Reposaari, Finland, 2001.

***The Entire Coast of Long Island*, 2017,** acrylic and ink on linen, 60 by 162¼ inches.

From top: Photo Maria Theresa Alves. Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich

Above, *Unrejected Wild Flora*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 52 by 100½ inches.

Left, *Seeds of Change: Marseille*, 2009, video.

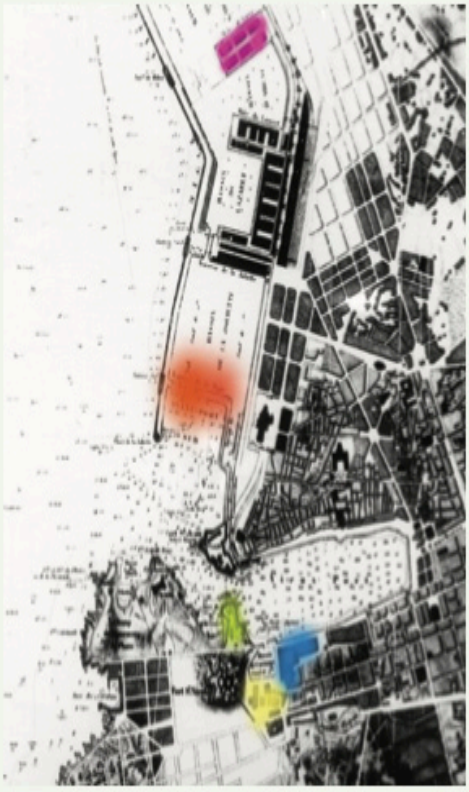
I began a series of works in 2013 called "Unrejected Wild Flora," using plants typically considered "weeds" as paintbrushes. I found samples of some of the ballast flora "weeds" and dipped them in bright acrylic colors before brushing them over various surfaces—walls, paper, metal, canvas, whatever was available.

In the middle of the investigation for the Exeter and Topsham iteration [England, 2004], the work changed course. In the archives, I discovered that human bones were imported to Britain in 1858, then turned into fertilizer for gardens. My first question was, whose bones were they? Perhaps they came from the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58, which involved several massacres. An Aboriginal friend of mine in Australia, Cheryl Buchanan, suggested that perhaps they were the bones of her people—the British might have wanted to eliminate evidence of the mass killings carried out against Aboriginals. At this time, "Seeds of Change" expanded

From top: Courtesy Alfonso Artiaco Gallery, Naples; Courtesy Maria Theresa Alves

Above, *Sida rhombifolia*, 2019, watercolor and pastel on paper, 11¾ inches square; from the Antwerp iteration of *Seeds of Change*.

Right, archival map of Marseille showing areas around the port city where ballast was unloaded, and where Alves extracted samples.



From top: Courtesy Maria Thereza Alves; Courtesy Archives de Marseille

beyond the slave trade, immigration, and colonization to also study imported cargo such as sugar, tobacco, chocolate, wine, cork, hemp, and gold.

When I took the project to Antwerp, I focused on the Belgian colonization of the Congo. Through some drawings of plants, I extended colonization narratives from the past into the present. This particular drawing of the *Sida rhombifolia* was accompanied by a text detailing a story about Belgian officials, missionaries, soldiers, business people, and the king. All these actors were involved with the rubber trade, and *Sida rhombifolia* is a plant from the Congo that could have arrived in Antwerp via ballast. The story ends in 1995, with a Belgian official sitting underneath a poster of a seminude African woman in a government office. That is the site where immigrants in the Saint-Gilles neighborhood of Brussels, myself included, were asked to prove that we are respectable enough to qualify for residency.

Clockwise from top: Photo Max McClure/Courtesy Bristol City Council, Arnolfini, and the University of Bristol Botanic Gardens; Courtesy Michel Rein Gallery, Paris (2)

From top: Photo Maria Thereza Alves; Courtesy Michel Rein Gallery, Paris

Above, Oldham's Manure and Chemical Company, a fertilizer processing plant in Topsham, ca. 2004.

Opposite top, *Seeds of Change: A Floating Ballast Seed Garden (Bristol)*, 2016.

Left, three "Ballast Indicator" drawings, all 2017, 11¾ inches square. Left to right, *Verbene officinalis*, *Diplotaxis-tenuifolia*, and *Mercurialis annua*.

Chunks of earth have been arriving in and leaving New York throughout the city's history—first because of settlers and soldiers, then because of slave traders. There was extensive ballast use during the transatlantic slave trade, especially on trips from the Americas to Britain. Since the profit from selling enslaved people in the colonies was four to six times that from selling colonial exports in England, shipowners preferred to return their vessels quickly to England "in ballast" rather than wait for colonial goods to be loaded. This way, traders could more quickly begin the whole process again. Ballast is also required for transporting people, including immigrants, since their movements affect the balance of the ship. On one day in 1900—June 30—more than 7 million tons of ballast arrived at the port of New York from different regions of the world. This would continue during World War II, when ships returned ballasted with pieces of ruined European cities after dropping off supplies. Eventually, so much ballast arrived in New York that developers started using it as landfill, as I documented in my installation. The New York iteration of the project came to address the colonization of the earth itself. Ballast studies revealed that many histories were removed while others were transplanted, forever changing the soil of New York. My hope is that this work will remain with viewers as they walk out into the world, that the plants and earth will assist them in witnessing these once repressed histories.

—As told to Emily Watlington