

# ArtReview Asia



Martha Atienza and the fight for environmental justice in the Philippines



Thailand's underground art scene

The continuing erasure of India's lowest caste

Opposing the colonising gaze with Trinh T. Minh-ha

## Resistance

Ebbe Stub Wittrup *Botanical Drift*  
Copenhagen Contemporary 25 June – 19 July

In *Botanical Drift*, Copenhagen-based Ebbe Stub Wittrup presents a range of objects whose meaning and value have been renegotiated by the forces of colonisation and globalisation. Questioning the colonial practice of ‘rewriting’ indigenous cultures in the name of science and industry, four installations give form to the shifting overlaps of political and economic power, culture and perception.

Original pressed plants collected and classified by Nathaniel Wallich, who was posted to the Danish colony in India during the early 1800s, are shown in display cases constructed from a species of ash wood named after the aforementioned Danish botanist. Known for identifying thousands of plants, including flora that became commercially profitable in European markets (among them the ‘English’ staple of Assam tea), Wallich also named numerous species after himself. It was precisely this ‘disconnect’ – Indian fauna named after a Danish botanist (and thus, in effect, ‘made’ Danish), now ubiquitous to Denmark’s botanical gardens and even its supermarkets – that prompted Wittrup to examine this colonial history from a vegetal point of view.

Several of the herbarium sheets on display show both the Indian plant name and the Latin name from the European classification system that Wallich deployed. For Wittrup, the reassignment of plant names according to European standards signifies the imperial mindset of ‘overwriting’ local culture. The renaming facilitates oppressive forces with its exceptionalism: ignoring the importance of local names that are the literal roots of traditional plant biodiversity knowledge.

The exhibition is anchored within the expansive space by seven large monochrome banners hand-dyed with pigments from Indian plants, including indigo (from the Ancient Greek for ‘Indian dye’). Each banner is made up of two vibrant tones derived from a single species: a paler rectangle set slightly askew within a larger darker tone that creates a dynamic, spatial effect. The overall grouping of deep and immersive coloured fabrics encourages further sensual and perceptual interaction. Reminiscent of national flags, the banners return representational and territorial notions back to the land: foregrounding biological over geopolitical affinities.

If indigo played a central role as a prized commodity of global trade during colonial times, in today’s networked (and stressed-out) world the practice of yoga has become one of India’s most successful exports. Wittrup’s *24 Characters* represents the ritual hand signals, called mudrās, used in yoga and meditative practice. These gestures are cast in bronze as if gloved in black, possibly recalling both the early colonialist obliviousness to this esoteric language and the current power these practices have over the self-awareness-seeking Western middle class.

The fourth work, a collaboration with Peter Rasummsen, is a Jaguar Mark 2 car, well-known as a coveted British luxury design icon, here refitted with interior elements crafted from wood species classified by Wallich. Since Jaguar’s purchase in 2008 by the Indian conglomerate Tata Motors, which once provided cheap steel for the car, it has become a symbol of the post-colonial shift in power: economically, politically and culturally. Here and throughout, Wittrup’s perceptual tools provide a compelling, corporeal negotiation between language, power, ownership and the hierarchy of visibility.

Rodney LaTourelle



*Twenty-Four Characters* (detail), 2020, 26 bronze-cast gloves, dimensions variable. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy Copenhagen Contemporary