



# KATE ROBERTSON

## CHRONICLING COMMUNITIES

In each leaf is a chapter; in every vein runs a narrative; the jungle is a volume of a community's story, one that is evergreen. However this must be tenderly cultivated in order for the story to regenerate and to keep future generations healthy.

Kate Robertson's time spent in the Siwai region, on Bougainville Island, is a balanced combination of 5-year field research, community participation and initiation into the esoteric language of flora, as guided by the revolutionary return to traditional herbal medicine after the Bougainville crisis. This is an arcane knowledge almost lost to the rivers of time and colonisation, and encroached by the tide of modern technology, yet resurfaces now through the vessels of Robertson's photographs. Through the sensitivity of lumen prints, the artist offers the practical tools to align photographic processes to traditional knowledge systems to be used as a contemporary visual codex. This is a healing collaboration between individual and community, informed by the knowledge extracted and radically celebrated by Chief Alex Dawia, Tu Lupumoiku Clan, and Chief Jeffrey Noro, Rura Clan, to reunite Siwai people losing roots with their herbal tradition.

Indeed the plants are not so much botanically documented as much as they are alchemically imprinted onto photosensitive paper; careful observations of weather and climate were imperative to this project, where sunlight and humidity activate potent properties within the plant, transferring curative virtues into pictorial language.

The oozing and bubbling of liquids inherent in the veins of leaves translates essence into new form, staining a memory to ensure tradition is kept, is revived. This is a manifestation of medicinal magic, appearing and reacting, as it would flow through veins of infected blood or washed over germ-contacted flesh. Through reading the photograph one may therefore understand the plant and the ritual cultivation behind its use before both fade away – *kiiipo* is employed for asthmatic symptoms, whilst *rungiwo* is applied for itchy sores, and *poraka* is used when a baby is vomiting. This is the feeling.

With their luminous hues of pink, yellow and orange, these images are presented as a chronicling of an identified community, steeped in a rich and colourful tradition of horticultural medicine, one that is very much alive, so long as knowledge of these plants are translated and shared. Tradition, however, has become abstracted through the wash of modern technology in Siwai; ritual has become fragmented, yet new networks of communicating tradition flow through these digital waves. By scanning the lumen photographs glitches appear, and the image of the plant is broken up. Yet Robertson here ensures ancient herbal knowledge is passed on and channels the new rituals of modern technology within in this community.

Like the *uraiwo pango*, used during the crisis to heal deep wounds, so too may Robertson's photographs knit past, present and future.

### Jake Treacy

Jake Treacy is an independent curator based in Melbourne. His work channels esoteric virtues and occultist methods in the mediumship of contemporary art and exhibition making. Currently co-directing Mailbox Art Space, Flinders Lane, his recent curated exhibitions include Heavy Majestic, Oracular Vernacular and Resonance & Wonder.

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