

Light from the Hawthornvale Space of Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop pours out onto the street. An exotic tricolour of pink, orange and yellow cuts through the still greyness of late afternoon in Newhaven. Each window contains a different named specimen, three towering flower bodies that shimmy and jitter in their own tropical microclimate. But these sleek petals did not arrive via photosynthesis, instead they were painstakingly cooked, section by section, in a domestic kitchen. Powdered gelatine, thickened into an almost opaque sheet. Droplets of colour bleed out in circular motions, dotting the petals like jam dropped in panna cotta. I imagine biting into the surface and tasting each plastic colour. Delicate aluminium leaves cling on to each side, steel roots unfurl in a desperate search for soil and familiar ground. Through these imitable sculptures, Camila Ospina Gaitán dissects ideas of colonialism within the history of orchid collection. This activity, taking place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, involved collectors from the global north excavating species from the West Indies, South America, the Indian Peninsula and Southeast Asia under the guise of scientific exploration and environmental conservation. However, following the logic of colonial expansion, this thinly veiled mission was guided instead by violent, racialised ideas of extraction and domination. Historical context, fiction and scientific information, interweave in Gaitán's installation to expose the repercussions of this colonial mission on her native Colombia. This work also expands on Gaitán's previous interrogations concerning the objectification of women. Here she draws a connection between the exploitation of nature and female bodies. I think then of my own body, and how its reproductive parts still bear the names of the male doctors who 'discovered' them. But this work does more than simply compare a woman to a flower, these hybrid creatures appear to have agency and demand that the story of how they came to exist be told, in all its incriminating detail. They put themselves on display, offering their bodies as testament to the violence through which they were obtained, the text on each window giving voice to this journey. These writhing orchids, although contained for now, are not passive specimens. They loom over the viewer, threatening release.