

Art **Reviews**

The Indigenous and Female Roots of Harvesting Flax

Christine Borland looks at one of the oldest known forms of fabric in the world.



by Anna Souter
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Christine Borland: *In Relation to Linum* at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, installation view (all photos by Keith Hunter)

EDINBURGH — Dig, rake, sow, riddle, water, weed, pull, ripple, winnow. For her [solo exhibition at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh](#), *In Relation to Linum*, [Christine Borland](#) created a series of rituals around these actions for the growing and harvesting of the flax plant, *linum usitatissimum*. The name means “most useful”; flax seeds have many medicinal properties, while the fibers can

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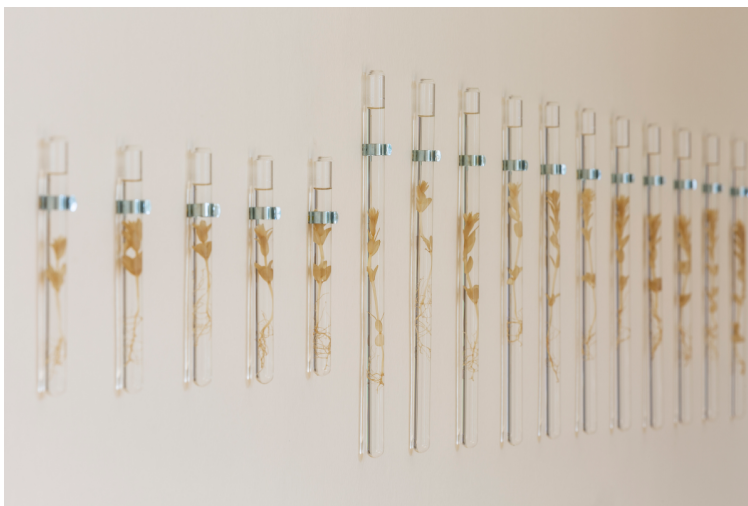
be spun into linen, one of the oldest known forms of fabric in the world. Unable to sow flax at the Royal Botanic Garden during its pandemic closure in 2020, Borland sent packets of seeds to a group of women gardeners around the UK and asked them to carry out the same seasonal rites as they nurtured their plants.

The resulting exhibition responds to the processes of growing and harvesting flax, as well as to Indigenous plant lore and female-held modes of knowledge that would have been prevalent before the modern scientific-industrial era. In a newspaper publication accompanying the show, Borland explains: “The growers shared the seasonal rituals, which would have sustained both society and environment before the modern scientific and industrial era displaced the plant-lore of women as healers and makers of cloth.” Borland’s processes emphasize growing and preservation techniques that can be done in a domestic context, responding dynamically to the weather, the actions of birds and animals, and the growers’ personal limitations.



Christine Borland: *In Relation to Linum* at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, installation view

To prepare for the installation “Home Herbarium Specimens” (2020), Borland’s growers uprooted samples of the plant in full bloom and pressed them at home. Borland has delicately pinned the brittle specimens to the wall, where they resemble a fragile esoteric alphabet of curling roots and linear stems, a functionless alphabet that is nevertheless powerfully communicative.



Christine Borland: *In Relation to Linum* at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, installation view



Borland continues this investigation into botanical preservation techniques in “Home Spirit Specimens” (2020). To produce the work, she uprooted a flax stem every day of the 100-day growing cycle and preserved it in Copenhagen solution, drawing on examples from the botanical gardens’ archives. The plants (preserved initially in vodka due to the shortage of industrial alcohol last summer) look ghostly and pale in slim scientific glass tubes, forming a haunting narrative of repetition and growth.

In the black and white photograph displayed at the center of the exhibition, Borland wears a rough linen cloak from which her body emerges snail-like to grasp a wooden-handled spade. The theatrical image is a response to a portrait of botanist Sir Joseph Banks (who is famous for accompanying James Cook on his first voyage), in which he is depicted wearing a Maori ceremonial cloak acquired in New Zealand and woven from Harakeke, the New Zealand flax plant. Here, Borland nods to the colonial context of the botanical garden and the extractive approach to plant life and Indigenous knowledge that still lies at the heart of much botanical science.



Christine Borland: *In Relation to Linum* at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, installation view

As the exhibition progresses, works such as “Dressing Room” (2021) give a hint of flax’s threadlike properties, where bunches of line flax hang from clay vessels like horse’s tails. Intriguingly, however, Borland’s exploration of flax’s material properties stops short of spinning it into thread or weaving it into cloth. It’s perhaps a way of recognizing the exploitative, anthropocentric attitude behind seeing the plant as *usitatissimum* — “most useful.” Instead, Borland presents a more open-ended and responsive relationship between humans and flax.

Christine Borland: In Relation to Linum continues at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (Arboretum Place, Edinburgh, Scotland) through October 3. The exhibition is curated by Emma Nicolson.



