

# Art in America

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REVIEWS DEC. 05, 2016

## Uriel Orlow

LONDON,  
at The Showroom

by Gabriel Coxhead



Uriel Orlow: *The Crown Against Mafavuke*, 2016, two-channel video, 30 minutes, 50 seconds; at The Showroom.

Uriel Orlow is Swiss, and lives and works in London—so mounting an exhibition about the history and culture of South Africa, specifically exploring links between plant ecology and social identity in that country, wasn't perhaps the most obvious route for him to take. For sure, his past practice has focused on how meaning is culturally constructed across a variety of historical periods and locations. Still, it would have been interesting had "*Mafavuke's Trial and Other Plant Stories*" provided some insight as to how he arrived at this particularly remote nexus of colonialism and botany.

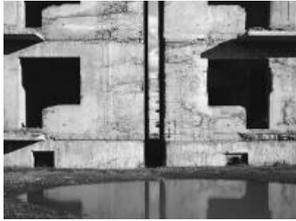
That aside, the actual work in the show was fascinating. The main piece was the video installation *The Crown Against Mafavuke* (2016), whose two channels play sequentially across two screens. The first projection dramatizes the eponymous criminal trial from 1940 in which British authorities prosecuted a local *inyanga*—a native healer or herbalist—for being an unlicensed druggist. Initially, the case seems a fairly straightforward instance of colonial repression: an attempt to stamp out indigenous traditions based on plants, roots, and tree barks, which provided an alternative to the medicines of white pharmacists. Yet, as the video makes clear, the issues were far more nuanced. In fact, the basis of the charge against Mafavuke was that of dispensing, alongside herbal remedies, treatments he had mixed using store-bought chemical solutions—using, in other words, Western medicinal processes. Thus, he was accused of “untraditional behavior,” his appropriation of the colonizer's scientific knowledge being viewed as a kind of usurpation, a racial transgression—and not just by white chemists, but also by his fellow herbalists, one of whom testified to the impurity of Mafavuke's hybrid practice.

Orlow's video is a similarly impure thing. The staging, the artifice of the courtroom reenactment, is made manifest, with actors assuming multiple roles—we see the prosecution attorney, for instance, changing outfits to play the defense—and frequently even switching genders and ethnicities. The point is to sound a note of anti-essentialism, to emphasize the gap between biology and identity, as a parallel to how pharmaceutical substances, irrespective of their origins or native ecology, become freely adopted by different medical traditions.

The second projection is more open-ended. Handheld-camera footage documents the collection, preparation, and distribution of herbal cures within contemporary South Africa, from street vendors gathering wild plants to apothecaries pounding barks into powder. Yet far from being quaint, the industry, with its specialist nurseries and modern educational facilities, often appears as professionalized as any Western enterprise. Only in the final scene, when an *inyanga* demonstrates the burning of certain roots to “expel negative vibes,” is a more spiritual, faith-based aspect introduced, in a way that initially appears to challenge rationalist, Western preconceptions of healing, but that also provokes thoughts about how every medical tradition perhaps equally depends upon ritual, esoteric elements.

The “other plant stories” of the show's title were exhibited within a so-called conceptual herbarium. In this modular, wall-like structure, Orlow displayed several pieces by other artists—mostly pictures by South African photographers, such as David Goldblatt's shot of a hedge originally planted by seventeenth-century Dutch settlers to fence out indigenous peoples—alongside his own works, which were, unsurprisingly, the standouts. *The Fairest Heritage* (2016) is a video projection overlaying stills from a '60s film celebrating the centenary of Cape Town's botanical gardens with images of a black female actor, who appears to mix amid the oversize images of flowers and white dignitaries, as a kind of retrospective disruption of the racist pageant. *Grey, Green, Gold* (2015–16) includes, among other components, slide-projected texts in which Robben Island inmates describe how they grew chilies and secreted Mandela's political writings in their tiny prison garden. In the sound piece *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name* (2016), indigenous language speakers deliver a litany of precolonial plant nomenclature. These are concise, specific works, but taken together they convey a sense of conceptual fecundity—of diverse ideas branching out, and forgotten histories taking root.

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