

*Le Sceau de Salomon exhibition,  
The Engine Room. 2018.  
Photograph by Harry Culy.*



James Hope

## Chloé Quenum, *Le Sceau de Salomon*

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore... He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite - wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. -1 Kings 4: 29, 31-34, NIV

Chloé Quenum considers the sign and the symbol; information relayed across time and distance and the ability of coded objects to take on multiple meanings in different contexts. *Le Sceau de Salomon* was an installation exhibited at Massey University's Engine Room gallery as the outcome of her stay in Wellington through the Te Whare Hēra residency led by the University's School of Art. In the installation, the gallery was partitioned spatially by lengths of steel to which were attached television screens-four in total-on which played short video works. On the gallery's floor, many varieties of plant cuttings, fruit and botanical specimens were laid out, spreading over the entire footprint of the gallery. Hanging suspended in space were arranged loose grids of flowers, each grid of a different variety of flower.

From this distribution of botanical objects could be inferred the impulse to collect and order, to build a taxonomy that one could experience through sight and smell, moving through the space. There was no explicit rationale to the collecting; were there particular aesthetic, fragrant, nutritional or medicinal properties that these specimens had been collected for? Above the swathe of botanicals, the works displayed on the screens showed footage that cut to different scenes with frequency: multiple locations, environments, people, objects and animals. The majority of the scenes were shot in non-naturalistic hues. The result was a conflation of natural scientific actuation and anthropological inquiry. 'Le Sceau de Saloman' is the French for 'the Seal of Solomon', both the name of a magical signet ring said to be in the biblical King Solomon's possession and the common name of *Polygonatum*, the genus of flowering plants known as 'Solomon's Seal.'

Some context. King Solomon is canonised within the Bible as Israelite king who built the first temple of Jerusalem and ruled for forty years; whose father David united all the tribes of Israel and the son who came to power while the former was still alive. Uncertain of his ability to rule his kingdom owing to his youth, he asked that God grant him the wisdom to rule his kingdom effectively. This pleased God, as Solomon had requested such a noble quality as wisdom, instead of material wealth or power. He then bestowed upon him the wisdom allowing him to rule capably, but gave him great wealth and long life also as a reward for his humble request.

Solomon's wisdom became legendary, and people came from all over the world to hear him speak. This wisdom was not only of the Torah, but also of science and the natural world. In the Bible, it is Solomon that is associated with more plants and plant products than any other character. Eighteen are unique to the writings of Solomon from a total of thirty-three associated with him. The Temple, constructed at his behest to be the place of communion between the Israelites and God, had beams decorated with the motifs of plants; the figures of gourdes carved into the cedar wood, and the lily as ornamentation on the holy building's pillars and laver. Plants are also used as allegories and metaphors; the Song of Solomon in the Bible employs botanical imagery throughout to describe the affection between the king and his lover; variously myrrh, roses, lilies, pomegranates, mounds of wheat, the date palm, grapes on the vine and apples. The natural world features prominently in the life of Solomon and his wisdom in part manifests in its study.



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The pseudepigraphical text *The Testament of Solomon*, relates how King Solomon built the Temple with a magical ring given to him by God that allowed him to command demons. The story is as follows: while the Temple was being constructed, a demon, Orniyas, came in the evening among the labourers and took from the chief devisor's son half of his pay and half of his food. After repeating this every night, the child became thin. The boy related to the king what was taking place and after hearing this, Solomon went to God and prayed that he might gain authority over the demon. God sent the Archangel Michael to deliver to Solomon a ring on which was engraved a pentalpha (or pentagram). Solomon then gave this ring to the boy and instructed him to throw the ring at the demon's chest during his nightly visit and to say 'in the name of God, King Solomon calls thee thither. When Solomon went out into the vestibule of the court of his palace, the demon was there. He then sealed the demon to bring him under his command. Solomon set the demon to work cutting stones for the Temple. He then gave the ring to Orniyas and sent him to summon the prince of demons. The rest of the book describes the various demons that are brought before Solomon, and the methods by which they can be overcome . It is an example of a Grimoire, a textbook of magic. The signet ring that gave him the power to control demons also gave him the ability to speak to animals.

Solomon's Seal, varieties of which are distributed throughout the northern hemisphere, is said to derive its common name from either the round scars on the rootstocks which resemble the impressions of a seal, or the Hebrew-like characters which appear when the root is cut transversely. It has long been used as a food source in China, the leaves, stems and rhizomes used raw or cooked and served as a side with meat and rice. The rhizomes can

also be steeped to make tea, or soaked in liquor to flavour them. A sweet snack can be made by frying them and serving with sugar and honey. In traditional Chinese medicine, Solomon's Seal is said to strengthen various organs and enhance Qi. It is also supposedly restorative to mental vitality.

In Quenum's video works, there is symbolism in various guises: hair, tattoos, water. There are people, but they are mostly anonymous, mute or incomprehensible. Only one of the works contained sound. They were about transit-physically shifting from one place to another, and the transmission of knowledge. In one, there was footage of clouds passing shot from an aircraft. Chromatically distorted, the sky became a bilious lime green hue, perhaps a visualisation of the cognitive shifts undertaken when travelling, the onset of jetlag, perception as vapour and the world viewed through a circadian haze. It cut to a viewpoint looking directly up towards the sky. A cloud slowly drifted from in front of the effulgent sun against a firmament of frothing artificial green. Next, the same green was darkening against an orange sunset out of frame. The slightly swaying hand-held camera focused on a glint of light hanging in the sky-was it an aircraft so far off in the distance so as to not register movement? It then returned to in-flight footage of the sea of clouds rolling past.

In another video, a static shot of a dark blue-green body of water with silvery light ginting on the fluttering surface. Another shot: deep cobalt blue. A shadow moved quickly upwards and caused a splash off the top of the screen, sending white ripples downward to lap against an edge near the bottom. The footage repeated; the anonymous bodies of water a perpetually disquietening turbidity. Another screen: A honey bee collecting pollen from a bright orange and yellow flower, the background foliage of cobalt and indigo. It looked like the colouration of ultraviolet, as if the video was shot from a bee's perspective. It cut again to two figures standing on a concrete platform near the coastline, one dressed entirely in stripes with a wide brimmed hat. The camera panned around to reveal a stand of palm trees; it must have been somewhere in the tropics. Another cut to a young woman, and she looked to be singing. The camera trained on her face for a time as her head moved slightly in consonance with her voice. What she sung was unknown, and the camera panned down and out of focus. Another: rain dappling the surface of water. Another: the hands of an elderly person working on an embroidery, then a pile of slabs of asphalt; a woman singing in a stationary car at traffic lights, rain droplets on the windscreen and windows; a blue sky shot from a moving vehicle, sparsely vegetated brown hills rolling slowly past; the ocean seen from an aircraft, cloud shadows passing over the ridges of water. Most scenes were saturated

in the same cobalt blue, giving the impression that everything was shot at dusk.



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Another video work, and the only one with accompanying audio. It opened with music, what sounded like the strains of sitars, but with that characteristic abrupt woosh that denoted it was being played backwards. The shot showed the same young woman singing silently saturated in blue, but this time she was shown on a screen herself, the aliasing creating a moire pattern over her face. There was a shot of razor wire atop a wall partially obscured by a palm frond rustling in the wind. Behind it a building that looked brutalist and institutional, like a prison. The camera panned down to a young man speaking, the camera trained closely upon his face, the colour tinted a reddish purple, as if the images were viewed in infrared. It could not be discerned what he was saying. In another shot, the same young woman, her face rufescent and filling the colour saturated screen. This time she could be heard, although again the audio was reversed, giving her intonations the character of an eerie incantation. The scene cut to another woman reciting another song beside the ocean. Another shot looking up towards the sky, with a cloud obscuring the sun; this time the sky a hue of claret red. Then African children singing and dancing, another shot of honey bees collecting pollen, then the back of a head, with loose strands of blonde hair fluttering in the gust. At the end of this sequence was an anonymous man explaining the significance of a tattoo on his arm. This footage was presumably gathered during a workshop held by Quenum during her residency, where people could explain their tattoos and their meaning.

The use of multiple screens could have its touchstones in other contemporary European artists working in video; the use of the ocean as symbolism and the collaging of imagery in the work of John Akomfrah or the interest in personal stories and the exhibiting strategies of Bouchra Khalili. Locally, similarities with photographer and filmmaker Gavin Hipkins could be discerned, for example in his 2014 film *Erewhon*. As a visual essay, there are moments of physical transit; shots of clouds seen off the wing of an aircraft, as well as cuts which jump between countries. Or scenes in which the imagery is seen as a photographic negative, a phantasmagoric inversion of the natural.

Chloé Quenum's installation suggested a somnolence. The plant materials lying dormant on the floor seemed to be in a stasis, awaiting use in tinctures, as offerings or for adornment. Perhaps they lay in readiness to be purposed in a scientific experiment. The works on the screens above this array, with their altered colours, had a chimerical quality; the off-colour collage of scenes that did not propound an obvious linear narrative, but touched on themes of transit, the natural world, the transmission of knowledge, barriers, borders and cultural knowledge; the phenomenological impulse to gain knowledge through being-in-the-world. Returning to the title of the work, *Le Sceau de Salomon*, alluded to wisdom gained through the collection and organisation of the substance of the world, its matter and impressions; to scrutinize in the manner of King Solomon. To what end this studying was intended was left open. It felt to be a meditation on metaphysics and the impossibility of humans as we are to grasp the world as a gestalt, but to attempt nonetheless to transfuse its vagaries with poetry.

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