



Royal
Botanic Garden
Edinburgh

FIELD NOTES

CHRISTINE BORLAND

IN RELATION TO

LINUM

31 July - 3 October 2021

Open daily from 10:30 Last Admission 16:15

FREE

WELCOME

to this exhibition by Christine Borland who has collaborated with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in creating new works of art.

In 2020, Outset Partners awarded their prestigious Transformative Grant jointly to Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and Serpentine Galleries, London, to realise two projects – *Climate House* and *Back to Earth* respectively – that would challenge the most urgent global issue of the time, climate change. RBGE's vision focuses on imaginative and expansive handling of the climate change challenge.

Our Project transforms Inverleith House into “Climate House” allowing us to test a new kind of art programme: bringing scientists and resident artists together, giving a platform to artists from the geopolitical margins (themselves often at the sharp end of climate chaos), and tending to climate anxiety amongst audiences.

The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh was established in 1670 during an era of famine, plague and witch trials, by two physicians Robert Sibbald and Andrew Balfour. Their vision was to create a garden that would supply the apothecaries and physicians of Edinburgh with medicinal plants to help improve the wellbeing of the people of Edinburgh. Inverleith House sits in a constellation of plants and science, now more than ever we need to be pooling our knowledge and resources gathering the arts and sciences to imagine the possibilities for a better future and making that happen. Now, four centuries later, our vision is to transform Inverleith House into Climate House – an institute for ecology at the edge, reconnecting our gallery both to its roots as a centre for medical innovation and its future as a hub that will promote the synergy between art and science as we face one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century.

“The idea of this exhibition and the intensity of working towards it has sustained me over the past 18 months. The possibilities and limitations of our digital modes of communications dictated a new way of thinking about sharing and passing on knowledge relating to cycles of growing. I hope the works produced reflect the relationships nurtured between the human and plant communities who have been such an important part of it.”

Christine Borland, 2021

The exhibition *Christine Borland: In Relation to Linum* began to take form before the Covid Pandemic when, to mark the momentous occasion of the Royal Botanic Garden's Anniversary and 350 years of plant studies we invited Christine Borland one of Scotland's most celebrated artists to immerse herself within our collections and with colleagues to create new work.



Wild plants have changed to stand in well-behaved rows and wild humans have changed to settle alongside the fields and care for the plants – a kind of mutual taming.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*

Unable to access RBGE during its temporary closure in 2020, Borland focused her thoughts on the lifecycle of flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) and considered the symbiotic nature of its nurture, evolving the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh's 350-year relationship with the plant.

Borland distributed seeds to gardeners across the country, who grew flax alongside the artist, in their gardens, community allotments and co-opted public spaces and communicated on social media platforms using the hashtag **Lineation**.

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.

Spun flax fibres produce linen, one of the most ancient forms of textile. Prized too for its seeds' medicinal properties, flax features in *Hortus Medicus Edinburgensis*, the first catalogue of a plant collection in Scotland, which listed 3,000 plants growing at Edinburgh's Physic Garden in 1670 – later to become RBGE. In 2021, Borland planted flax anew at RBGE, continuing the contemporary and historical cycles embedded in this project.

Within Borland's work, there is an overarching inquiry into methods of preservation and modes of display relating to medical and scientific knowledge. Running through this exhibition is a relationship between the historical and the contemporary, with work exploring the interplay of language between the herbarium, the science lab, the grower and the home.

It is increasingly acknowledged and understood that, historically, the role of female botanists and horticulturalists has been underrepresented At the Botanics we want to redress this omission and bring to the fore the place of women in the story of plants, horticulture, and healing, from the apothecaries of the seventeenth century to the scientists of the present day. This is also of primary concern to the artist and *In Relation to Linum* is an intimate reconnection with the ecological heritage, the rituals, intricacy and generational sharing of growing and making practices, and their associations with care.

Throughout her career, Borland has made many works that explore the natural world and its place in the development of our medical and scientific understanding of humanity as a collective, social body. Often working with objects housed in institutional collections and collaborating with specialists in the fields of forensics, science and medicine, her works reveal very personal narratives as well as wider questions surrounding the ethics and care of the human body. Borland has long been fascinated with the botanical world. Her connection to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh began with the development of *Spirit Collection: Hippocrates* (1999), having sight of the plant specimens preserved in alcohol in the Herbarium collection at RBGE, she created a work comprised of 100 glass vessels each containing a leaf propagated from a tree under which Hippocrates taught medicine on the island of Kos. Later for *The History of Plants According to Women, Children and Students*, 2002 she worked with RBGE botanical illustrators to create 100 hand-coloured etchings representing ten plates from one of the earliest and most important woodcut herbals, Leonhart Fuchs' *'De Historia Stirpium' (History of Plants)*, published in 1542. In 2008 Borland appeared in a group in the Garden as part of *What is Life: Christine Borland, Graham Fagen, Simon Starling* exploring their common interest in the uses and symbolism of plants, by cultures past and present.

This show brings together new work that traces Borland's engagement with the cultivation of flax as an artistic material rather than a resource, and the journey made alongside its 100-day growth cycle. Relying on the weather and the actions of birds and animals during the growth cycle and facing her own physical limitations during its laborious processing, Borland has evolved her work in watercolour sculpture, installation and digital media to focus on human and non-human interconnectivities, and help uncover narratives with which to embrace a precarious ecological future.



ABOUT FLAX

DESCRIPTION

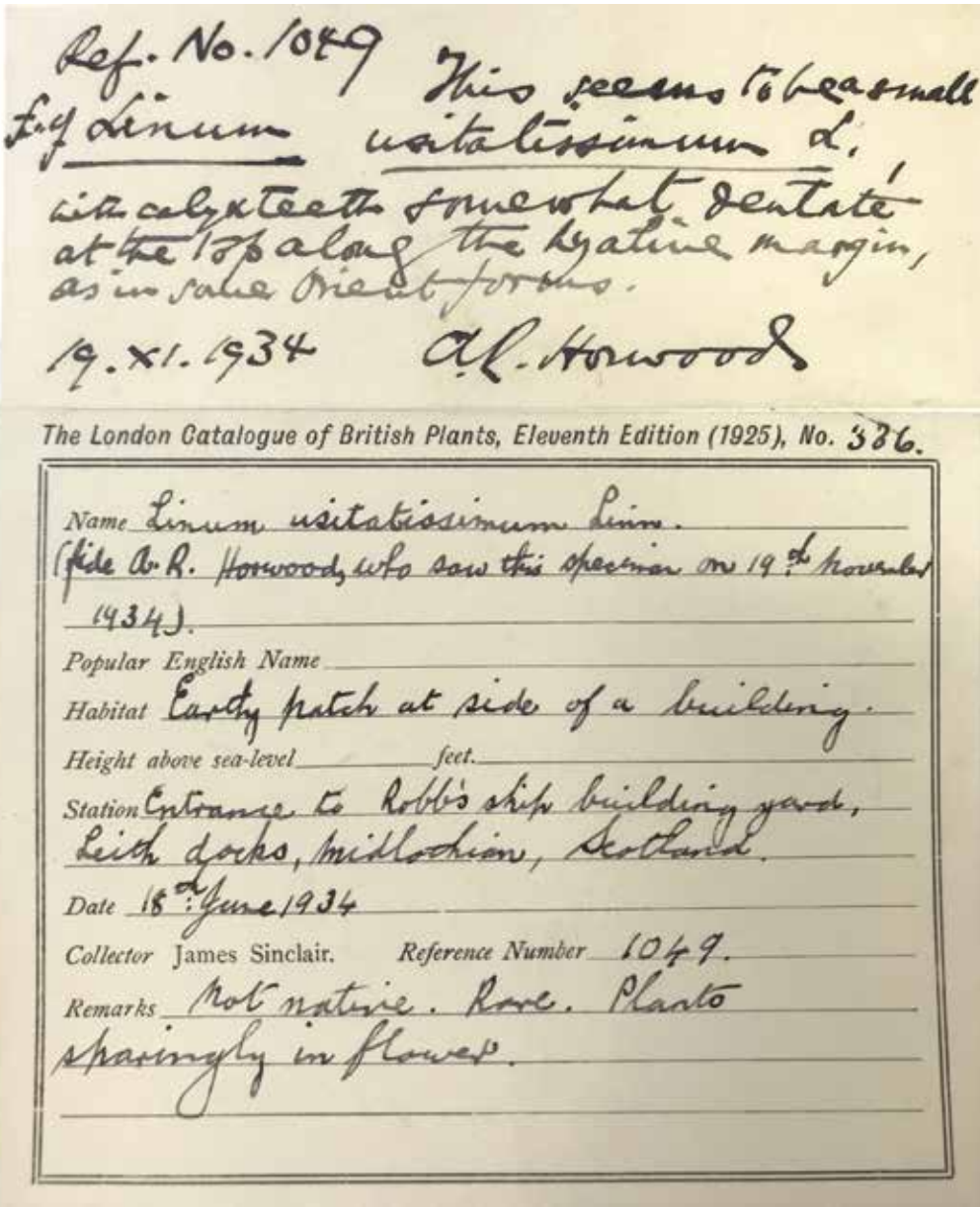
Flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), common names flax or linseed, is a member of the genus *Linum* in the family *Linaceae*

Cultivated flax, include some that have similar blue flowers, and others with white, yellow, or red flowers. Some of these are perennial plants, unlike *L. usitatissimum*, which is an annual plant that grows to 1.2 m (3 ft. 11 in.) tall, with slender stems.

Flowers have five petals pale blue to purple. The fruit is round, holding glossy brown seeds shaped like an apple pip.

THE ORIGINS OF FLAX

Originated in the Mediterranean, there is evidence of processes involved in sowing flax in the wall paintings of ancient Egypt and mummies were entombed in linen. As the Roman Empire declined, so did flax production, but was revived in the eighth century. Eventually, Flanders became the major centre of the linen industry in the European Middle Ages. In North America, flax was introduced by the colonists and it flourished there, but by the early twentieth century, cheap cotton and rising farm wages had caused production of flax to become concentrated in northern Russia, which came to provide 90% of the world’s output.



Detail from RBGE *Linum* Herbarium specimen

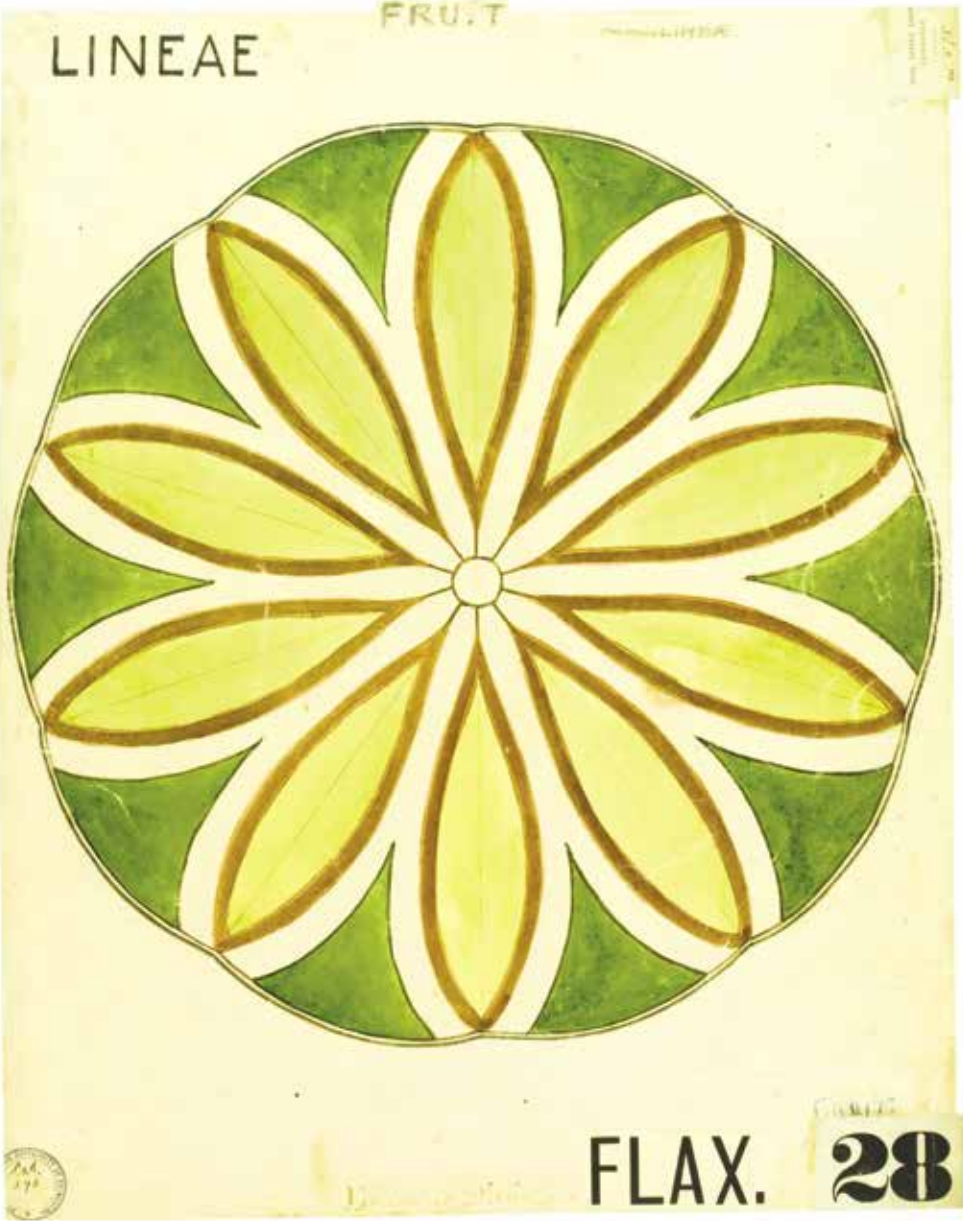
THE USEFUL PLANT

The Latin species name for flax *usitatissimum* means “most useful”.

Flax has been grown for its seed or fibre for at least 4,000 years, we know that industrial-scale flax fibre processing existed in the ancient past. The fibre is obtained from the stem of the plant. Flax fibre is flexible and lustrous and the origin of the description “flaxen” hair. Stronger than cotton it is often used for fine fabrics like bedding and lace. More coarse quality is used for string and rope. Flax fibre as a raw material is also used in the productions of high-quality paper for the use of printed banknotes, rolling paper for cigarettes, and tea bags.

The flax was in full bloom. It had such pretty blue blossoms, as soft as the wings of a moth, and even more delicate. And the sun shone down on the flax, and the rain clouds watered it, and that was as good for it as it is for little children to be bathed and kissed by their mothers-it makes them look so much prettier, and so it did the flax.

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Flax*



Above: *Linum usitatissimum* L. (LINACEAE Common Flax, John Hutton Balfour, teaching diagram pre-1859, Cross Section of ovary in fruit.

HISTORY IN SCOTLAND

The growing of flax and the making of linen has a centuries-long history across Scotland from the Linen mills of Fife to the hand-spun cloth of the highlands – a well off laird’s son of the sixteenth century had twenty-four pairs of sheets.

During the 18th century, linen was one of Scotland’s most important industries. In 1771 thirteen million yards of linen were stamped as fit for sale as required by Act of Parliament.

From the 1830s onwards the production of linen was increasingly mechanised with hundreds of flax mills across Scotland and Ireland. These were dangerous and unhealthy environments often producing Osnaburg, a coarse fabric for export to America and the colonies for use in clothing for enslaved plantation workers.

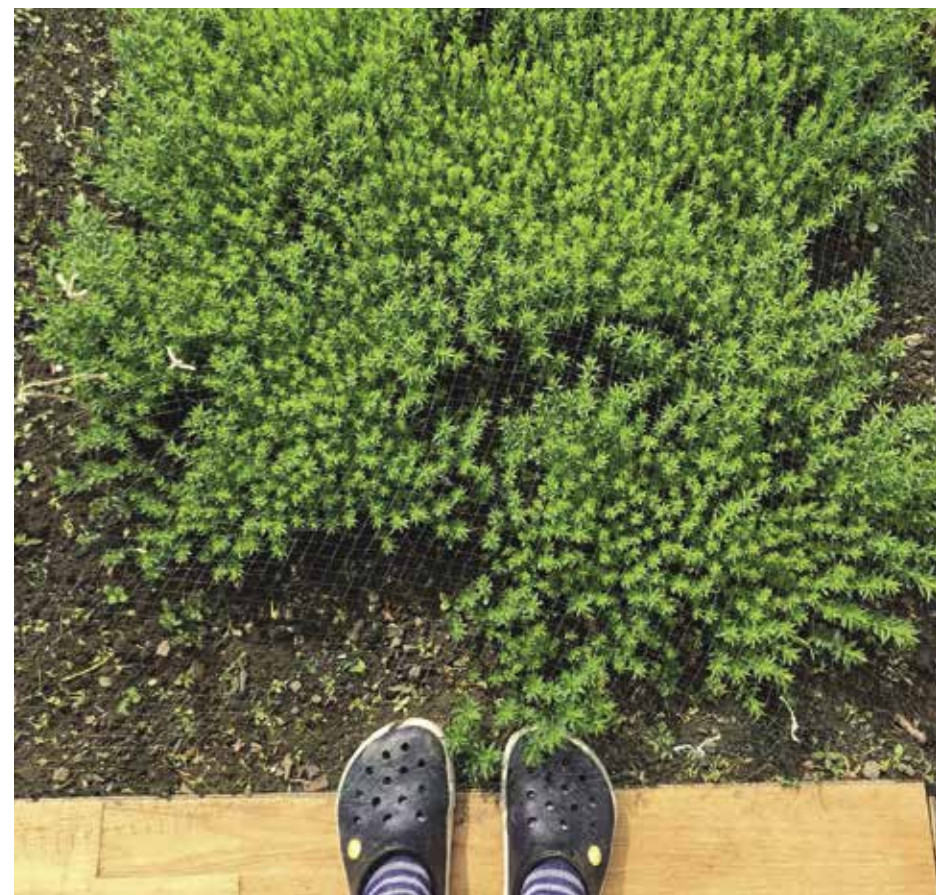
By the end of that century, only large mills remained which had gradually converted to spinning jute, hemp and sometimes cotton, which were more profitable. Now the only commercial flax grown in Scotland is for linseed oil, the last mill which focused on weaving linen stopped working in April 2021.

HARAKEKE (NEW ZEALAND FLAX OR PHORMIUM TENAX)

Europeans visiting New Zealand in the 1700s saw how Māori people made ropes, baskets and cloaks made from Harakeke. The Europeans named the plant flax because they thought it resembled the *Linum* plant. Joseph Banks on his return from New Zealand had his portrait painted by artist Benjamin West wearing a cloak made of New Zealand flax. Following failed attempts in the 19th century to work with the plant fibres on an industrial scale in the UK it is now a popular ornamental plant and garden escapee. Harakeke is a type of lily, from the *Heimerocallis* family.

SOW

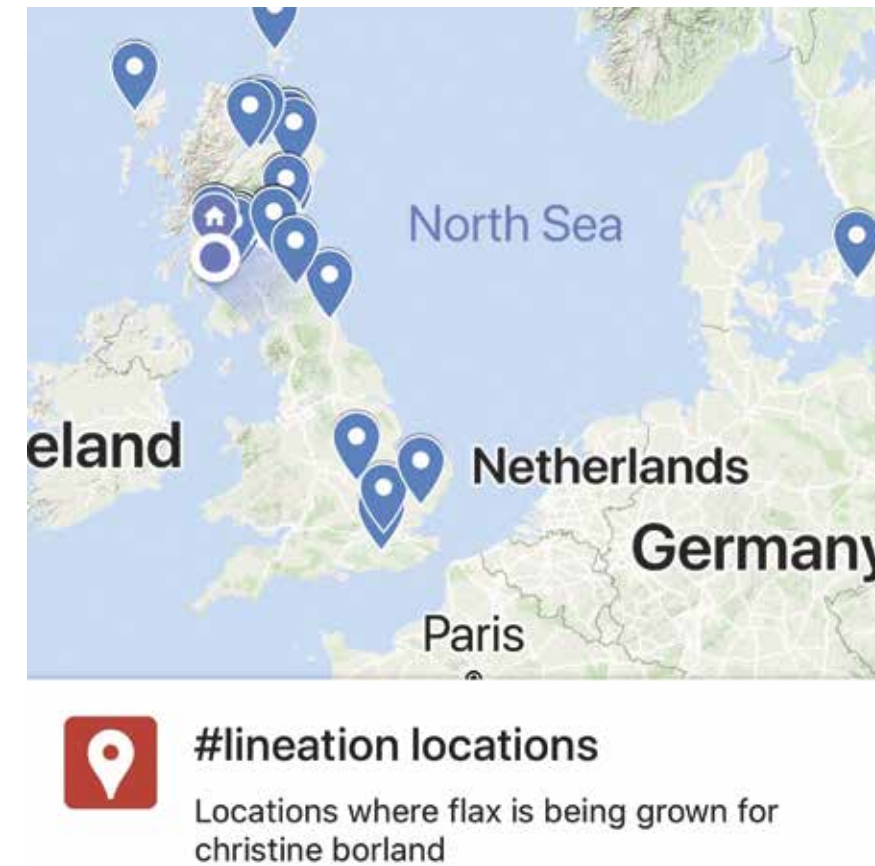
In a response from Borland to the closure of the Royal Botanic Gardens in 2020 due to the pandemic – where she had originally hoped to sow flax seeds, a team of 37 gardeners were co-opted through an Instagram callout to grow flax alongside the artist, in their own gardens, community allotments and co-opted public spaces. Beds of all shapes (but approximately 1m sq in size) were sown in spring 2020 and slowly sprouted flax around the country. The first fragile blue flowers arrived in June, each lasting a day before fading to a seed-head which ripens to yellow.



PULL

2020 found us all inhabiting space and time in different ways, and many found themselves gravitating to their gardens and or nature. The group of growers regularly communicated over WhatsApp and Instagram using the hashtag *Lineation* to share their stories and experiences; discussing everything from their weeds and pest problems to shared textile histories and colonial garden legacies – over the strangest of growing seasons.

All the flax grown from 2020 was dried by each participant (in sheds, greenhouses, porches and living rooms) and sent on to, or collected by Borland to become raw material for *In Relation to Linum*.



THE FLAX SOWER’S GUIDE

DIG: it starts with one line of string laid out in my front garden, in early spring. Further lines radiate from the centre to make six segments. Cutting down with the spade, I shuffle around clockwise, joining the outer point of each string to make one continuous circular brown slit in the grass. And then I dig.

RAKE: the small amount of soil underneath the turf is poor because the garden is still really part of the rocky beach across the road. I wheelbarrow in dark brown topsoil, and rake it together with some compost until I think I have a seed-bed of ‘fine tilth’.

SOW: Mother’s Day, 31st March 2019 – one daughter weighs enough of the silky brown seeds to make a dense planting of 2000 plants per square meter. The family line up and I make us rehearse until we can sow our allocated section of seeds in a smooth, circular choreography.

RIDDLE: everyone stands on the turf perimeter watching me walk from the outside to the centre of the circle, riddling the finest of soil over the seeds, which I can clearly see sitting on the surface. I don’t mention it, but worry they are not evenly distributed.

WATER: flax seedlings are ‘frost tolerant’ and they begin to emerge on April 16th after sleet and snow. I pull one up; the strong branching root makes up two-thirds of the plant. Next day the hottest recorded spell of April weather begins. I hadn’t anticipated this, but I water every second day, using 24 watering cans each time.

WEED: there are many vigorous weeds, most of which are new in my garden so probably arrived in the topsoil. I look them up as I go and nearly all have associations with traditional medicine – Plantain; leaves in poultice used for sores, blisters, swellings, and insect stings. The physiotherapist I see for my sore shoulder says she recommends all her middle-aged female patients take two table-spoons of ground flax seeds a day to replace oestrogen’s anti-inflammatory properties.

PULL: in late June the first fragile blue flowers open, each lasts a day before fading to form a seed-head. On a sunny morning 116 days after sowing, when most of the seed heads have yellowed, I pull the flax. Working from the outside of the circle, I gather a bunch with my right hand and pull up with my left, repeating until I can’t comfortably hold anymore. At the end of the day the circle is edged by 60 bundles of flax. Over the next month they turn the colour of straw as they dry out.

RIPPLE: my eldest daughter works with me to remove the seeds; she wears a shocking pink silk skirt. We put the seed-pod ends of the bunches into pillow-cases and use our weight to crush them with rolling pins, marvelling at the thousands of seeds among the debris that we empty out.

WINNOW: A perfect sunny, windy late autumn day to remove the dried debris of the crushed outer seed-pods. Taking a handful in my right hand, I slowly let it trickle into my left, the broken yellow husks fall to the cloth on the ground – I’m collecting them for the compost – leaving the shiny, perfect brown seeds in my left hand.

THE SOWER’S DAUGHTERS GUIDE

WINNOW: Hands feel for invisible intricacies. Unknown textures and remote familiarities. Fractal. Fibrous. Skin puckers with the evocation of misplaced memory. Mumpsimus. An air not artificial but alive. Alive used to have an opposite, what was it?

RIPPLE: Separation. Everything was once not whole. Instinctive, a strange pounding from within. Something is emerging. Dormant sensations stir, dwams distil. Pummel. Pound. Small, invaluable. Can’t let it get away.

PULL: Eyes turn towards the ground, hands open upwards. Palms crack. The cleaving of chronology. What was once pure transforms. Now worn, adept. Fingers grasp at unseen shapes, feet trace a circular pattern. Vital signs oscillate.

WEED: Remove the bad, preserve the good. ‘Weed: a plant that causes ecological damage’. A flash. The last vestiges of flora. The opposite of alive returns, stronger now. A bitter taste on the tongue. Stomach churns. To protect is to destroy.

WATER: A new sound, a light in the vast expanse of space. Transparent, tasteless, odourless, colourless. No, not colourless. Particles swirl to make green. Droplets of memory, a hand pulls back a curtain. Blurred spectres flicker across the ether. A dry globe in reverse. Empty chasms fill with sustenance. Concrete cracks, a force pushes back against gravity. The ignition of the inevitable.

RIDDLE: Eyes open to a deluge of dirt. The earth’s mouth gulps greedily. Submerged, sunken, entombed, enshrouded. For days there will be silence. Unseen hands of long-awaited verdure move beneath the surface. Subterranean whispers. Waiting patiently to be born again.

SOW: Figures flicker, bent and silent. Faces blurred, they move in patterns. Rise, step, crouch. Rise, step, crouch. Transmissible momentum. Fata Morgana, a facsimile of generations long past.

RAKE: A world comes into focus. Grey sky, a biting wind, the rich smell of petrichor. Intimacy creeps, the figures sharpen. A wooden handle manifests. Smooth, sturdy, imbued with purpose. Lines in the earth form a pathway into a past. The past. My past. Memento mori, the opposite of alive.

DIG: The warmth of genesis. Inception radiates. An organic rhythm thumps beneath the surface. Pale flesh flushes with crimson. Saturation bursts. A womb of open terra. Seductive, bewitching. Calloused hands clutch and cradle, rough cloth absorbs beads of salt. Straining together, breathing as one. Distance evaporates. Faces turn, heads beckon. Lips sculpt words in the frosty air. Primogenitor, ancestor, mother.

RIPPLE - HECKLE

With an abundance of dried, communal flax to hand the process begins to turn the plant into linen fibre – an involved, lengthy process. First the seeds must be removed (**rippling**); the artist developed her own method, bunching the flax into pillow-cases and crushing them with rolling pins. In a further process of **winnowing**, the dried husks are removed on a windy day to leave only the heavier, shiny brown seeds. The dry flax straw is then **retted**, spread across the lawn to allow bacteria and dew to break down the woody core.

After drying again comes the **breaking**, the crushing of the woody material, to then be **scutched** (whacked with a wooden blade) and finally **heckled** by drawing the fibres through a set of combs. The shorter fibres are removed and the artist is left with the so-called 'line' – long hairlike fibres ready to spin and be woven into linen.



SOW: ONCE AGAIN, IN 2021

A cycle has been completed. In the artists' studio, the fibres hung alongside the winnowed seeds before their journey to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, a year later than planned but imbued with added meaning. The mixture of seeds carefully nurtured and harvested by Borland's virtual community of growers can now be seen growing in the Botanic Demonstration Garden as well as once again in the gardens and plots of the growers, returned to them to grow and harvest as they wish, perhaps long term in a self-sustaining cycle.



Christine Borland was born in 1965 in Darvel, Ayrshire, Scotland and lives and works in Kilcreggan on the west coast of Scotland. She studied Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art from 1983-1987 and Master of Fine Art at the University of Ulster in 1988.

The starting point of her first solo exhibition *From Life*, in 1994 at Glasgow's Tramway, was the purchase of a human skeleton through a mail-order, medical education supplies catalogue. She then consulted with a variety of experts to explore the identity of the specimen and the implications of the processes which made the commercial transaction of human remains possible. Since then she has often developed work in negotiation with experts in institutions of science and medicine and museums, collections and archives to make invisible, often discredited practices and hidden narratives accessible.



Throughout her career, Borland has taught and been involved in research and currently works part-time as a Professor of Fine Art at Northumbria University. She is a founder member of the Northumbria University research group The Cultural Negotiation of Science. In 2016 she was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters (DLitt) from Glasgow School of Art/ the University of Glasgow and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (F.R.S.E.) in 2020.

The artist's initial research into flax was supported by a research residency at Deveron Projects, Huntly which was partly funded by the RSA, she will return for a follow-up residency in late 21/22.

Christine Borland is represented by Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow

Cover Image: Christine Borland, *The Flax Sower's Cloak*

Inverleith House was designed in 1774 by David Henderson for the Rocheid family and was the official residence of successive Regius Keepers (directors) of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh until it became the founding home of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, from 1960 to 1984. Since 1986 it has run a continuous programme of temporary exhibitions spanning visual art and botanical science under the auspices of the Garden, which recognises the need for art as well as science in our appreciation and understanding of the natural world, making it pre-eminent amongst botanic gardens today, in this respect.



In 1960, the house was turned into the inaugural Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, before transitioning into the official art gallery of RBGE in 1986. For 30 years, Inverleith House presented stellar shows – from the likes of Douglas Gordon, William Eggleston and Robert Rauschenberg, Karla Black and Louise Bourgeois.

Climate House marks a new era in the legacy of this leading contemporary art institution.



To view a short film made by Patricia Fleming Projects please scan this QR code.

The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) is a leading international research organisation delivering knowledge, education and plant conservation action around the world. In Scotland, its four Gardens at Edinburgh, Benmore, Dawyck and Logan attract nearly a million visitors each year. It operates as a Non-Departmental Public Body established under the National Heritage (Scotland) Act 1985, principally funded by the Scottish Government. It is also a registered charity, managed by a Board of Trustees appointed by Ministers. Its mission is "To explore, conserve and explain the world of plants for a better future." Learn more: www.rbge.org.uk

These field notes were published as part of Climate House on the occasion of *Christine Borland: In Relation to Linum*, part of Edinburgh Art Festival 2021.

Text by Emma Nicolson and Christine Borland with Louise Briggs at Patricia Fleming Gallery

The Sower's Daughter by Grace Borland Sinclair

Curated by Emma Nicolson, Head of Creative Programmes in collaboration with Christine Borland.

We are grateful to our RBGE colleagues who have supported this exhibition during what has been an exceptional year; in particular we would like to thank David Knott, Ben Dell, Graham Hardy, Greg Kenicer, Ian Edwards and Henry Noltie.

Further thanks to the Creative Programmes team: Amy Porteous, Creative Programmes Producer; Kenna Tasker, Exhibitions Officer; Natalie Lyons Ballantine, Creative Programmes Assistant; and our invaluable team of Creative Programmes Volunteers. Christine Borland would like to thank her Lineation participant growers for their sustaining enthusiasm, Eilidh Guthrie for her valuable assistance and family Borland Sinclair for their love and support.

Special thanks and sincere appreciation to Christine Borland for bringing her knowledge, ideas and how she has been inspired to share with us all.

Please stay in touch with us through our social media channels on: Instagram, Facebook and Twitter @RBGECreative

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & CREDITS

Christine Borland: In Relation to Linum is an Edinburgh Art Festival 2021 partner exhibition, supported by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland and sits within RBGE's Climate House project, supported by Outset Contemporary Art Fund's Transformative Grant.

Thank you to Craig and Rose for their support in the painting of this exhibition.

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