

Education guide

captured earth

05.24–08.18.24

MoCP Museum of
Contemporary
Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO



Byung-Hun Min, *Untitled*, from
the *Weed* portfolio, 1999

Introduction

This exhibition pulls from the MoCP permanent collection of over 17,000 objects to highlight pieces made by artists who venture into nature to explore, and at times collaborate with, the land—on a material, meditative, or sometimes mystical level. This guide is designed for you to slowly wander through the exhibition and use the prompts provided here for deeper engagement.

Some key themes to look for in this exhibition include:

close observations in nature

cultural, emotional, and spiritual
connections to the land

experimental photographic
processes and camera-
less photography made with
unconventional materials

West Gallery

Upon entering the museum,
locate this piece by

Tarrah Krajnak (American,
b. 1979 Peru).

To make this series, Tarrah Krajnak arranges plants, rocks, and her own body onto sheets of photosensitive paper. The title of the series, *Ayni, Offerings, for my Sister* makes reference to an Andean ceremony of gratitude and healing for the earth. Krajnak, an indigenous transracial adoptee, first learned about the *Ayni* ceremony from watching her sister Maria perform it with shamans in the Peruvian Andes. *Ayni* is a Quechua word for balance, and Krajnak uses photography to visualize the passage of time, the imprint of her body performing the ritual, and the materiality of the objects she uses to make the cyanotypes.



Tarrah Krajnak, *For Maria*,
from the *Ayni, Offerings for my
Sister* series, 2020

About the process

You will see many cyanotypes throughout this exhibition. Cyanotypes are easy, camera-less photographs that anyone can make at home. You can buy pre-coated sheets of paper that have been painted with a mixture of ammonium iron and potassium ferricyanide, making the surface light sensitive. Objects or photographic negatives can be placed directly onto the paper and then placed in the light. The objects leave a white imprint in the area where they blocked the paper from the light, and the remaining areas turn blue. Cyanotypes were one of the first easily reproducible printing processes and were used by engineers to create blueprints.

To learn how to make your own cyanotypes, [please watch this instructional video.](#)

Questions for reflection West Gallery

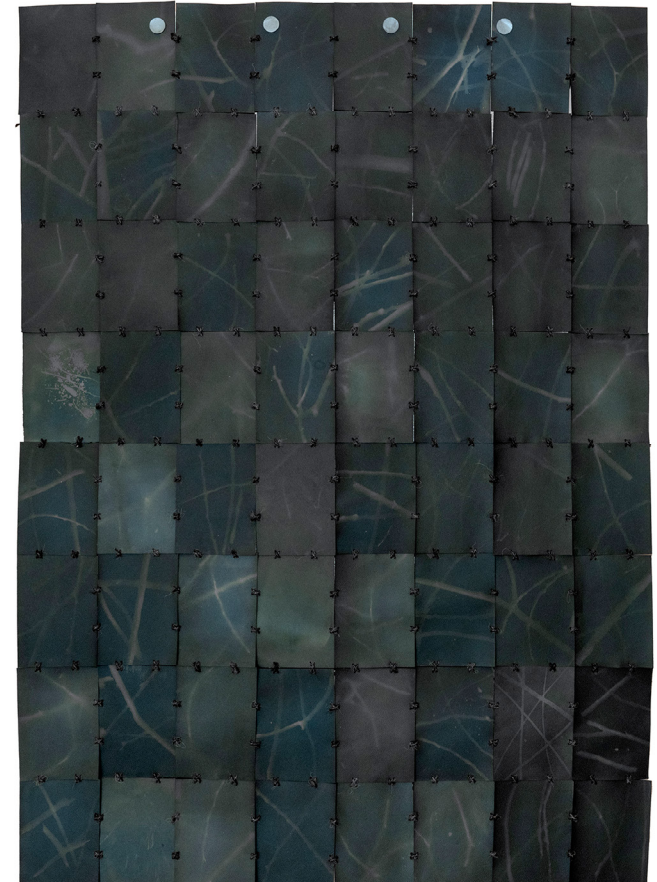
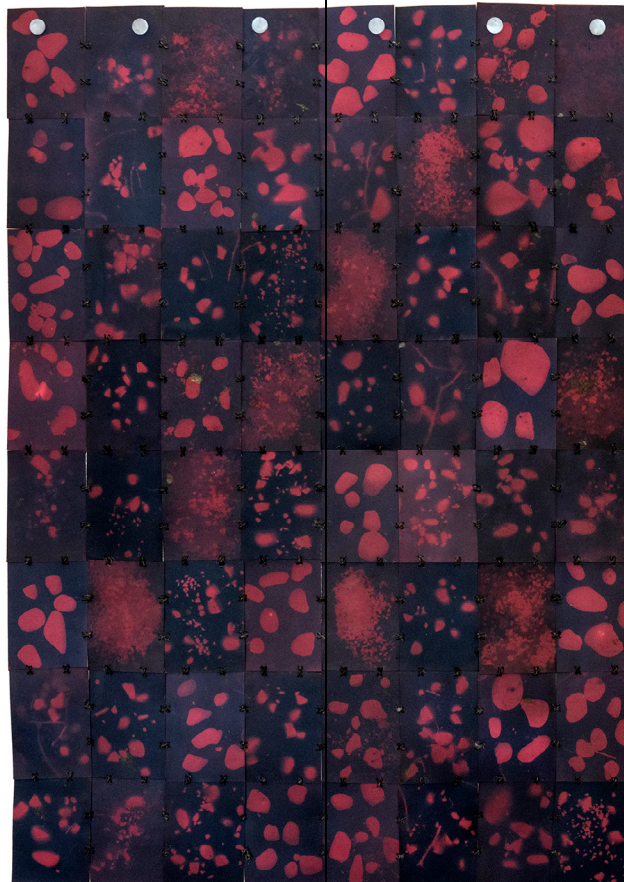
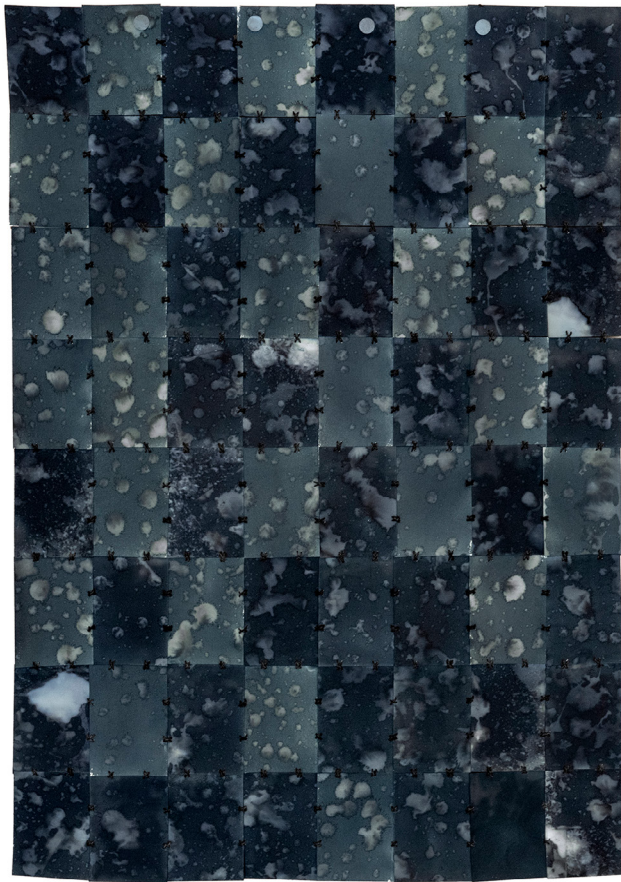
Are there rituals in your daily life that you do for grounding, gratitude, or wellness?

Are there any plants or natural objects that have significance to you?

East Gallery

Moving to the adjacent gallery, find these three pieces by **Dakota Mace** (Diné, b. 1991).

Left to right: **Dakota Mace**,
Níłtsá, Bi'áád (Gentle Rain),
Tse (Stones), and *Tsin Bigaan*
(Branches), all 2023



In *Tsin Bigaan (Branches)*, Mace refers to the branches that functioned as roofing over holes people had to dig in the ground to create a shelter at the camp. In *Níłtsá, Bi'áád (Gentle Rain)*, the artist refers to the heavy and unusual rains that soaked the desert land upon the arrival of Diné at Bosque Redondo — seen by them as a message of protection from the gods. And *Tse (Stones)* refers to the stones that people took with them on the Long Walk to remain connected to the lands they were forcibly removed from.

To learn more about the Long Walk, [please see the resource linked here.](#)

About the process

Dakota Mace also uses the cyanotype process, and in these three pieces she weaves together multiple prints of rain, sticks, and stones. These works address the history of the Long Walk — a time in US history during the 1860s in which the government forcibly removed Diné (Navajo) people from their land in present-day Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. Thousands of people were forced to walk between 250 and 450 miles to an internment camp at Bosque Redondo, which is in present-day Fort Sumner, New Mexico.

The artist chose to not use fixer on the images — an important step that photographers usually take to keep images from fading with exposure to light. Instead, the imagery will gradually disappear over time, serving as a metaphor for how histories are forgotten if not taught or passed down to future generations.

Questions for looking reflection
East Gallery

Dakota Mace has a background
in textile studies.

Besides the use of wool in the paper, how else might you see the influence of working with fabric in her work?

Dakota Mace makes work about
separation from a specific landscape.

Do you have a connection to a place that you cannot easily return to? What emotions do you have about this separation?

Notice the texture and appearance of the photographs, and the way they are woven together.

The artist states:

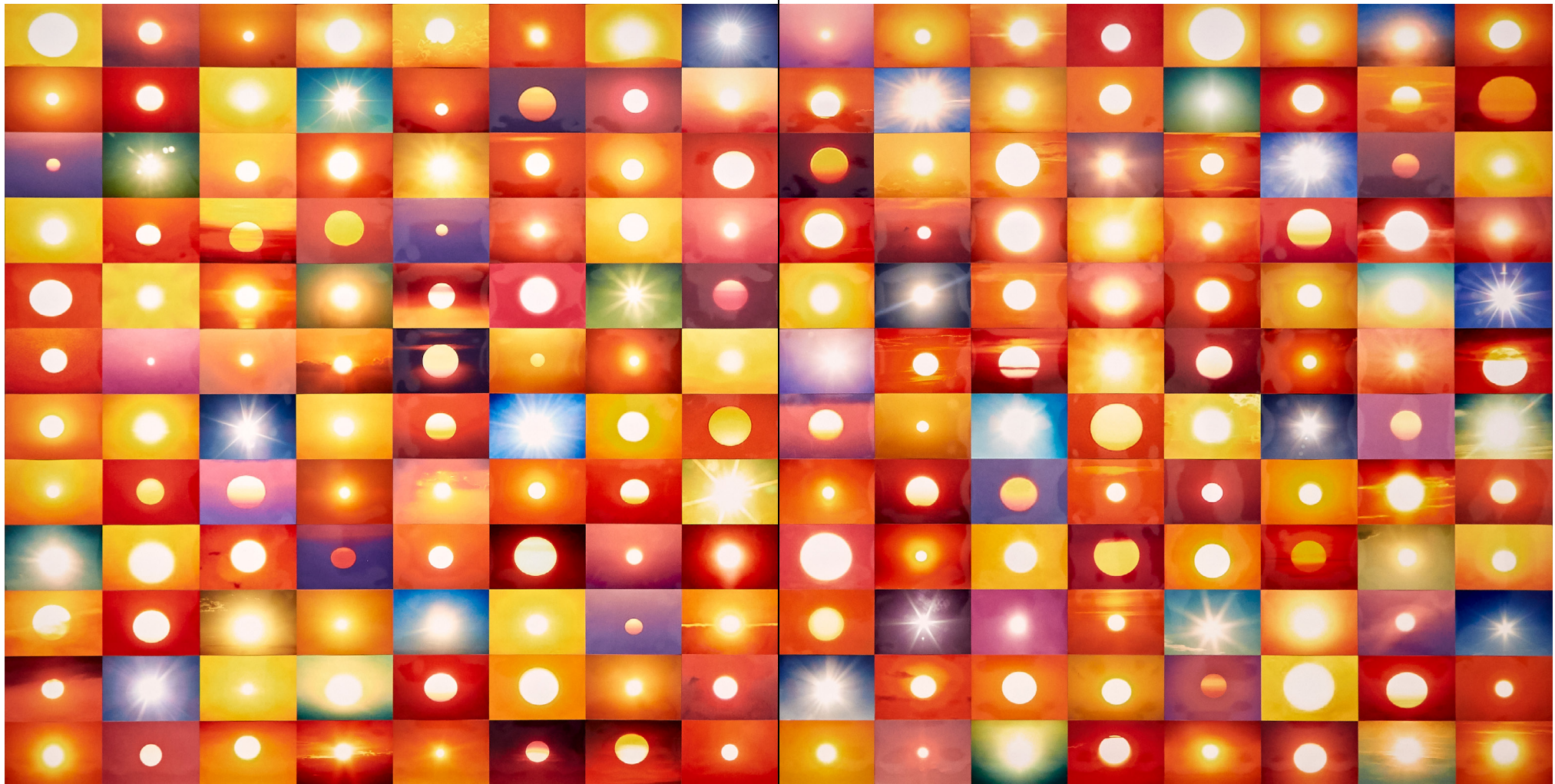
Each print is woven with churro wool from the Churro sheep that live on the site and toned using the cottonwood bark that surrounds them. For the Diné, Churro sheep were the primary source of wool, and thousands were slaughtered during the US Militaries scorched-earth campaign. This led to the loss of their livelihood. Even though food was limited, the Diné held their sheep in the highest regard as Diné women worked to create wool blankets and clothing. For the women, carrying on the tradition of weaving was passed down through the wool itself and the natural dyes and tannins that shift the colors. The cyanotypes carry these stories of the importance of these materials and the stories that exist within them.

Penelope Umbrico,
8,146,774 Suns from Flickr
(Partial) 10/15/10, 2010

East Gallery

Next, locate the large-scale piece of suns by
Penelope Umbrico (American, b. 1957).

Umbrico created this piece by using the search term “sunset” on the image-sharing website, Flickr, and selecting hundreds of images from the 8,146,774 results it produced on that day in 2010. She cropped the original files to include only the suns and printed them as 4×6 inch prints on a Kodak Easy Share printer.



Questions for reflection
East Gallery

Have you ever photographed a sunset? If so, how much of the experience do you feel is translated into the image?

Umbrico's assemblages speak to the sheer volume and ubiquity of images in contemporary culture.

Why might people so universally feel compelled to photograph the setting sun?

Do you think the act of photographing something that has been photographed by millions of people has meaning?

Byung-Hun Min, *Untitled*, from
the *Weed* portfolio, 1999

East Gallery

Turning to the right, now engage with the series of photographs of weeds by **Byung-Hun Min** (South Korean, b. 1955).

Quite opposite from Umbrico's images that point to a collective appreciation for sunsets, Min photographs weeds — aspects in nature often thought of as invasive nuisances. Yet, Min composes his photographs in line with traditional Korean floral art to convey their patterns and delicacy.



Activity
East Gallery

Consider this statement by poet and essayist Mary Oliver, from her essay *Home*:

It is one of the perils of our so-called civilized age that we do not acknowledge enough, or cherish enough, this connection between soul and landscape — between our own best possibilities, and the view from our own windows.

Then, when you return home, choose a window to sit by for fifteen minutes and write down in a list, sketch, or photograph every detail you can see within that view, from the ground to the sky.

Did you notice anything that you had not seen before? What is drawing your attention the most?

Extended Resource: Mary Oliver, *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005.

North Gallery

Find the small gallery located in the north-west corner of the first floor and experience the lightbox installation by **Antonia Contro** (American, b. 1957) with sound design by **Lou Mallozzi** (American, b. 1957).



In this mixed media installation, Antonia Contro presents illuminated photographs she made in ode to a deep connection she felt with cypress trees she encountered during an artist residency in Bellagio, Italy. She called the trees her “sentinels,” or guards that kept watch, and produced dozens of drawings, photographs, and paintings to capture their energy. Looping throughout the installation is an experimental sound piece, which includes the voice of the groundskeeper in Italy describing each plant to Contro, as well as a voice from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the 8th century epic poem written as an origin story. In the poem, the Gods roam the earth before humans, and transform into plants, animals, or rocks as they encounter different obstacles, and highlighting the persistence of change and an interconnection between life forces. One such passage is: *Omnia mutantur, nihil interit* (everything changes, nothing perishes).

Antonia Contro with sound design
by **Lou Mallozzi**, *Sentinels*, 2002

Questions for reflection
North Gallery

Consider the title of this piece, *Sentinels*,
a term that Oxford defines as:

Noun: a soldier or guard whose
job is to stand and keep watch.

Verb: station a soldier or guard
by (a place) to keep watch.

Have you ever felt an unex-
plainable connection to a plant,
animal, or landscape?

Are there places where you go
in nature to feel protected?
Describe what it's like. If you do
not yet have a place like this,
describe what it would look like.

Mezzanine

Head upstairs to the second level to find works by **Alan Cohen** (American, b. 1943).

For many decades Cohen has photographed places historically transformed by glaciers, meteors, or volcanoes, as well as the ground in locations of bloodied human conflict. Cohen narrowly sets the edges of his frame, showing only a close-up detail. His works speak to both the smallness of humans on an expansive planet and layers of history on the surfaces of the terrain.



Alan Cohen, *In Situ (Death Valley — California)* 105-03, from the *Earth with Meaning* series, 2002

Questions for reflection

Consider the quote by the artist below:

I travel to document the physical remnants of history, the earth of our past as a record of memory, not as an act of witness.

What do you think Cohen means by not acting as a witness?

[illegible]

Do you think memories can be held within non-human life forces, such as soil and trees?

[illegible]

Print Study Room

Continue to the third level of the museum and find works by artists who collect and preserve botanical specimens. Among photographs of plant forms, locate this abstract image by **John Opera** (American, b. 1975).

This piece was made using the anatype process, which involves creating prints with photosensitive materials derived from berries or other fruits and vegetables.

John Opera, C-2, 2010



On this piece, the artist states:

The anthotype prints I have been making since 2010 harken back to the earliest moments of photography's history, and even its prehistory. This plant-based method for printing was invented by Sir John Herschel, known for inventing cyanotype and fix for silver-based images. Herschel turned to the garden as a site of experimentation for studying the properties of light and photosynthesis. It seems he hoped to find answers about rendering color in a photograph and its corresponding chemical reactions. All the images are rendered in reds and violets derived from the material sources of emulsions: blueberries, pokeberries, beets, and chokeberries. The prints fade in a few years; however, for me their impermanence is a conceptual layer that enriches their presence and time in the world.

Deeper Reading: The Art of Impermanence

Much like Dakota Mace's unfixed prints on the first floor, John Opera's anthotype will intentionally fade over time. The gesture of creating forms that will gradually disappear can be traced back to Tibetan Buddhists, who have created sand mandalas for centuries. These elaborate creations made with colored sands take several weeks to create. Once they are complete, people systematically dismantle them and put the sands into jars to be offered back to a body of water with a prayer for the sands to release healing energies to the earth. The mandalas speak to the importance of detachment on a spiritual path, and the temporary material nature of life.



Chenrezig Sand Mandala created and exhibited at the House of Commons on the occasion of the visit of the Dalai Lama, May 21, 2008; not in the MoCP collection or exhibition

Print Study Room

Finally, spend time observing the botanical specimens by **Bertha E. Jaques** (American, 1863–1941) and **Karl Blossfeldt** (German, 1865–1932).

Bertha E. Jaques was a self-taught artist who documented unique botanical findings on her foreign and domestic travels and contributed to the conservation efforts of the Wildflower Preservation Society.

Bertha E. Jaques, *Orange Blossoms Sent in a Letter from California*, 1909



Karl Blossfeldt, *Sempervivum Tectorum*, from the *Urformen der Kunst* (*Art Forms in Nature*) book, 1928

Karl Blossfeldt created straightforward photographs of plant life made with homemade cameras during the 1890s through the 1920s.

In his 1928 book, *Urformen der Kunst* (*Art Forms in Nature*), he states:

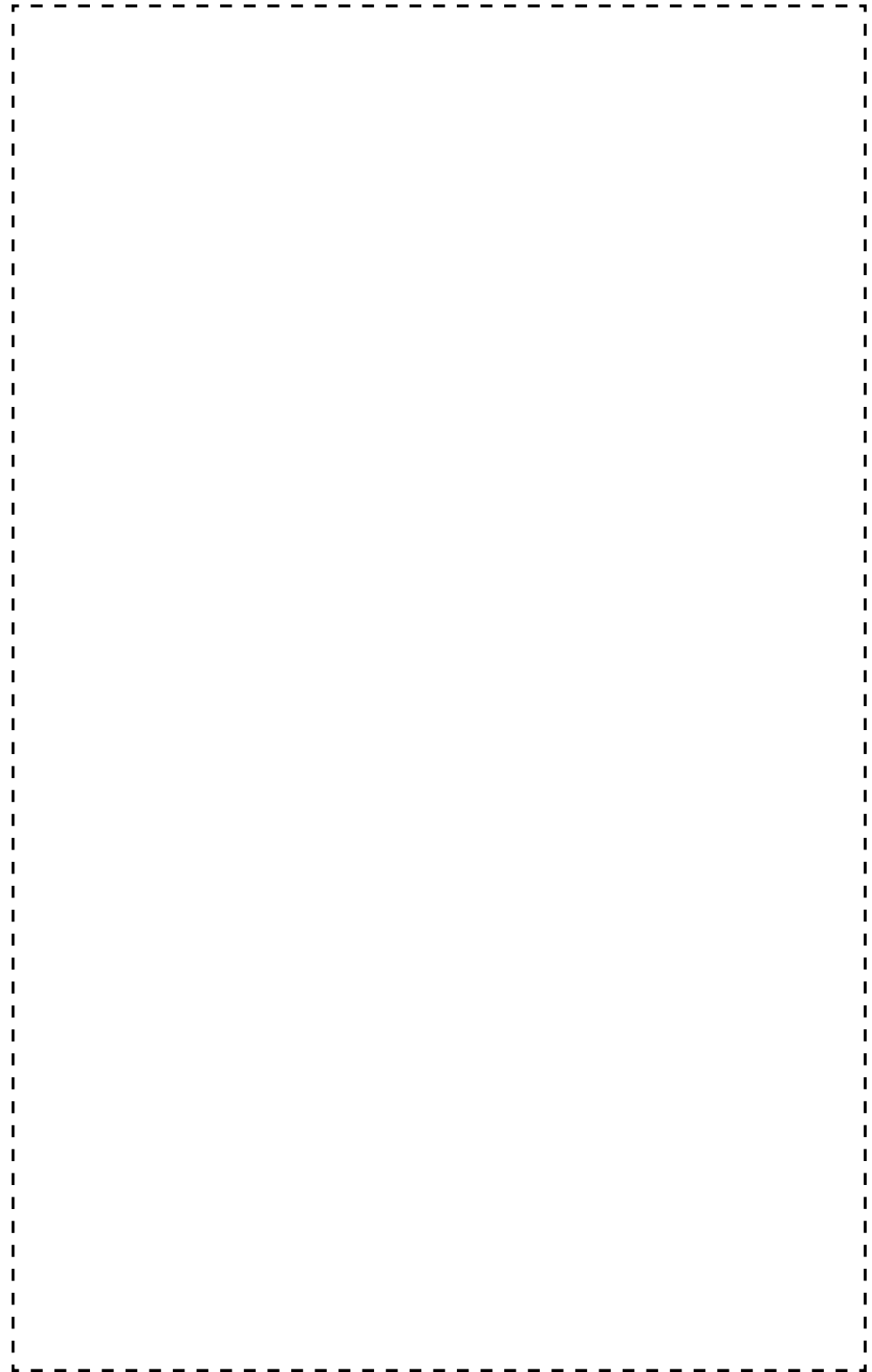
My botanical documents should contribute to restoring the link with nature. They should reawaken a sense of nature, point to its teeming richness of form, and prompt the viewer to observe for himself the surrounding plant world.



Activity
Print Study Room

After closely observing their images, find your own plant specimen on the way home from this exhibit and preserve it in these pages.

For tips on how to select a plant, or how to evenly press it, please see the guide provided here.



This guide serves as a supplement to the exhibition *Captured Earth* and includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, activities, and suggested readings. You may learn more about educational programs at the MoCP [here](#). To schedule a tour of the exhibition or print viewing with your class, please go [here](#). This guide was created with contributions from Ash Huse, photography MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago.

Cover: **Meghann Riepenhoff**, *Ecotone #285 (Bryant Park, NY 12.15.17, Mixed Precipitation of Freezing Rain and Snow)* (detail), 2017

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