

## Art History and Communication Studies Speaker Series

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## "Diversity: Difference, Identity and the Botanical Encounter"



**Abstract:** This paper offers a philosophical exploration of the registers of sense and meaning intrinsic in botanical illustrations produced by women artists in nineteenth and early-twentieth century Canada. Beginning from the observation that visual elements of difference and repetition are key factors in the pictorial organization and appeal of such images, my aim is to participate in a scholarly conversation that has positioned botanical drawings as instruments of identity, while simultaneously suggesting a new perspective from which to develop that conversation further.

Concepts of identity have been key to understanding botanical art. From their scientific and taxonomical functions to their role as historical agents of colonization, botanical drawings have been closely linked to processes of identification, naming, and claiming. In *Learning to Draw* (2000) Ann Bermingham has taught us to see how the practice of botanical drawing also contributed to a specifically feminine identity during the nineteenth century. I seek to build on Bermingham's insight, but by grounding my analysis in the images' visual organization rather than their historical and discursive context, I am led to other, more philosophically oriented, conclusions. These relate to the ways in which botanical drawings mobilize elements of sameness and difference that consequently open a vantagepoint onto the complex experience of the feminine self in relation to the world. While, through their Latin inscriptions and controlled outlines, botanical images participate in a rigorously upheld logic of sameness, their qualities of brushstroke and seriality also instate pictorial effects of differentiation and repetition at their very core, prompting questions about the ontological primacy of identity that are pertinent to feminist thought. Through their embrace of empiricism, moreover, botanical images raise the liberating possibility that experience may exceed our preexisting conceptual frameworks for it.

**Thursday November 4 at 5:30 pm in Room W-215, Arts Building, McGill University, 853 Sherbrooke St. West.**

**This lecture is open to the public and all are welcome.**

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