

# A trail of healing



One of London's oldest riverside gardens has been hosting a unique ceramic installation. *Gabrielle Hoad visits *Curse or Cure?**

Containing more than 5,000 plants from around the world, Chelsea Physic Garden is an oasis in central London. Established in 1673 as a garden for medicinal plants, it's a fitting setting for Nici Ruggiero's installation *Curse or Cure?*, which explores historical ideas about plants and their healing properties. Entering the garden, my eye is caught by a scattering of white vessels, which appear to float on a sea of green foliage. These are Ruggiero's modern-day versions of apothecary jars, mounted on oxidised steel stakes. I approach one. It's inscribed with a line drawing of a plant and the words: 'Solidago (Golden Rod). Cures conditions of jaundice. Provokes urine in abundance, whereby gravel and stone may be voided...' Another tells of poppies and sleep; one more about iris petals as a poultice for bruising. As I study these, I'm led towards a second display of 21 jars lined up on wooden shelves. Set high against a wall, this ordered collection contrasts with the intuitively placed jars below.

Ruggiero's installation looks specifically at the doctrine of signatures. This theory suggests that the outward characteristics of a plant are a clue to its application within the body. So, for example, *Pulmonaria's* effectiveness for treating the lungs is indicated by leaf mottling that resembles a diseased lung. Botanist and herbalist Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654), from whose *Complete Herbal* Ruggiero has drawn many of her texts, was a keen advocate. In his time, medicine and sorcery were intertwined – and patients were as likely to be harmed by a medicine as healed by it – hence the title *Curse or Cure?*

Apothecary jars were used for storing medicines and ingredients. To reference the Delftware favoured by early pharmacists, Ruggiero has deployed a tin glaze, applied thick to accentuate pock marks from air bubbles, and overlaid it with blue decoration. Traditional and modern techniques overlap. The artist has slip-cast her pieces from porcelain rather than hand-thrown them in earthenware. Text in an antique font is computer-generated and applied from a digital transfer before further firing; the illustrations, though hand-drawn, are also applied via scanning and digital transfer. Last, each staked pot is accompanied by a glazed ceramic tile containing a digital quick response (QR) code

which, when scanned with a smartphone, gives access to online information. It's possible to stand in a 17th-century garden, browsing pages from Culpeper's *Complete Herbal* on a 21st-century electronic screen. This combining of old and new acts as a reminder of how knowledge evolves – and holds our own system of beliefs up for inspection. Although rooted in the rigour of science as we know it, current medical practices may also be swept aside by future discoveries.

For me, the formal and spatial qualities of this installation hold the most interest. The pale stone of the Hans Sloane monument, at the heart of the garden, is spun out across the space by a trail of fifteen white jars. Each hollow, sealed vessel echoes the contained nature of the garden. In such a space, you'd expect pots to be on the ground; here they are elevated to eye level on narrow steel rods, and sway gently like the plants surrounding them. They look as light as seed heads, but disperse historical rather than genetic information. The shelved installation, suggestive of the order of an apothecary's cabinet, sits apart, high on its wall. The two physical positions held by the jars – human height and beyond reach – recall Culpeper's challenges to the closed-shop elitism of 17th-century medical establishment, which allowed ordinary people little access to medical knowledge. Culpeper saw medicine as a public asset and translated documents from Latin to make information available to anyone who could read. Ruggiero not only follows his example by juxtaposing Latin plant names with recipes in plain (and often earthy) English, she gives instant public access to online information via her QR codes. I suspect Culpeper would have approved of the democratisation of knowledge offered by the internet.

Making contemporary art works for well-known sites that are already intensively curated can be a challenge. Done well, it is immensely rewarding, sharing contemporary art with new audiences and revealing different perspectives on a place. *Curse or Cure?* acknowledges the long and fascinating history of Chelsea Physic Garden, but brings it up to date. It not only adds a new layer to the garden's narrative, it adds a new layer of material and form. **GH**

On until 31 Oct; [chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk / nakedpots.com/four.php](http://chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk/nakedpots.com/four.php); Gabrielle Hoad is an artist and writer

