

# TimeOut New York

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Anna Atkins, *Ulva latissima*, from *Photographs of British Algae*, c. 1850.

## “Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature”

The Drawing Center, through May 22 (see Soho).

Wherever the 19th century feels itself to be unobserved, it grows bold,” wrote the historian Sigfried Giedion, and he could well have been referring to the botanical opulence of the Drawing Center’s current show, curated by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher. More than 300 photographs, drawings and prints flaunt such a pleasure in pattern and minute detail that the scientific character of these investigations of feathers, ferns, shells and

seaweed is often overshadowed.

At the exhibition’s core is the work of Anna Atkins, one of a number of women “amateurs” who illustrated botanical texts in the mid-1800s. Her work oscillates between drawing and watercolor, on the one hand, and camera-less photographic processes such as cyanotypes on the other. In the process it reveals the close relationship between “light drawing,” as photography was originally termed, and more traditional forms of representation. Atkins’s photograms of meticulous arrangements of kelp, like her earlier hyperreal drawings of shells and other marine life, capture the rhythmic undulations of her aquatic subject.

Once considered mysterious—even mythical—during this era, undersea plants became part of a systematized image world, thanks in part to the new technologies that were developed to represent them. (It didn’t hurt that the territorial expansion of colonialism provided a boundless diversity of samples.) The Victorian fascination with natural history showcased in “Ocean Flowers” was part of a larger impulse to collect, catalog and display objects of all sorts, linking scientific inquiry with the desire to manage and control nature.—*Eva Diaz*