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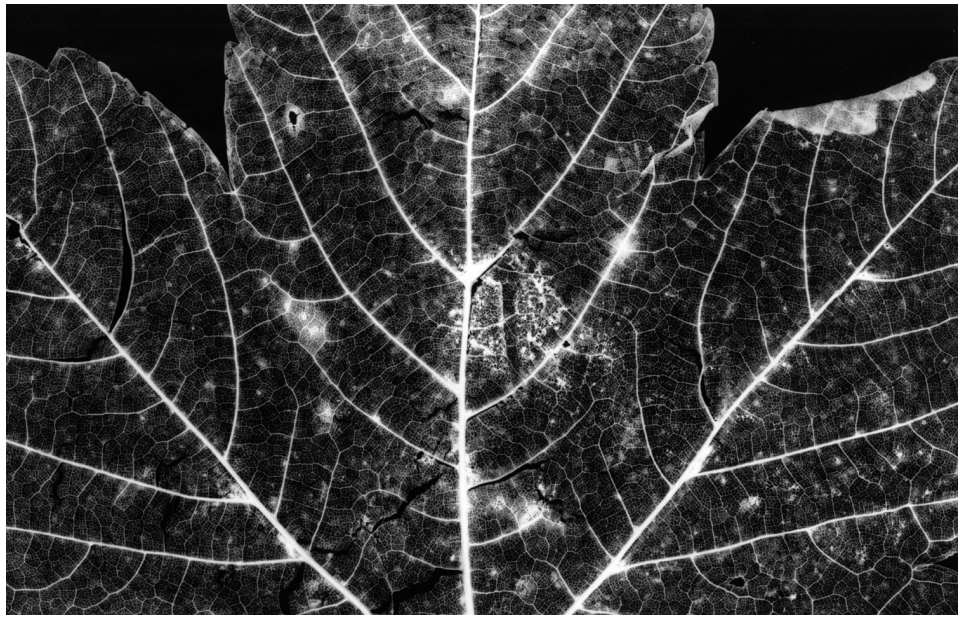
Visual Arts

Another green world

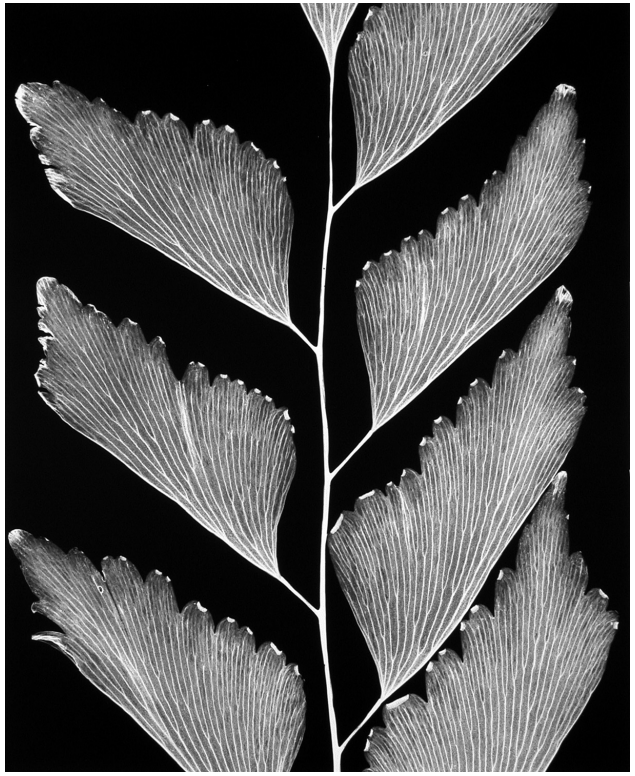
Amanda Means's luminous photographs of leaves make nature look almost extraterrestrial

By Mark Feeney
GLOBE STAFF



To make images such as "Maidenhair Fern" (left) and "Maple," Amanda Means puts leaves in an enlarger. Light passes through the leaves and the lens to expose photographic paper.

Looking at Leaves:
Photographs by Amanda Means
At: the Harvard Museum of Natural History,
26 Oxford St., Cambridge,
though Feb. 8, 2009
Call 617-495-3045;
www.hmnh.harvard.edu



CAMBRIDGE - Amanda Means grew up on an upstate New York farm. The natural world had a greater significance for her than it does for most people. And moving to New York City, to go to art school, she felt its absence. "My photographs," she writes in the text that accompanies her show, "Looking at Leaves," "are a metaphor for this sense of loss."

Review

The 18 pictures that make up "Looking at Leaves," which runs at the Harvard Museum of Natural History though Feb. 8, are more than just metaphors. Certainly, they're more than just leaves. The most common association "leaf" has is with lightness and insubstantiality: tremble like a leaf, leaf-blown. What Means offers is something quite different. These are brooding, imperial forms (some of the photographs are as big as 3 feet by 4 feet). Yes, Means looks at leaves and precisely records them. She also exalts and monumentalizes them.

"I do not photograph the leaves with a camera," Means explains. "I place an actual leaf in the enlarger. Light passes through both the leaf and the lens to expose photographic paper below. The luminosity resulting from this unusual approach transforms the imagery into bursts of radiant light, surrounded by intense darkness."

What we see is a reverse image, like an X-ray. The greenery is blanched-out. Any reticulation becomes a pale, purified tracery. The background is so solidly black it could be outer space. It would be easy to mistake the leaves for planets, except there are no shapes known to astronomy anything like these.

The very considerable beauty of these photographs is at once natural (think of them as bioluminescence on a heretofore unimagined scale) and artificial - they resemble maps detailed with an almost impossible delicacy.

Means gives each photograph the name of the plant the leaf came from - "Prayer Plant," "Rattlesnakeroot," "Sensitive Fern," "Peacock Plant," "Friendship Plant," "Silver Nerve Plant" - and they can be as beautiful as the images. Yet beauty of appearance need not owe anything to beauty of name. The single most magnificent picture shows a very large, tightly cropped maple leaf. Its ribs look like so many tributaries of a mighty river system.

Conversely, what may be the most striking name of all, "Silver Lace Dusty Miller," is the show's least impressive image. Almost completely lacking in reticulation, it looks fake - like a doily or stencil. The other images may frequently look alien, even extraterrestrial, but never fake. They belong to real worlds, even if those worlds may not seem to be our own.

Each leaf is a form unto itself, of course (that's the essence of its power as an image). Still, some inevitably summon up other shapes: "White Oak," a damaged butterfly; "Maidenhair Tree," a battered open book; "Maidenhair Fern," a flutter of pennants; "Prayer Plant," an illuminated electrical grid.

The absence of any color makes these shapes seem abstract: not just cartographic, but schematic, even architectural. Yet they are resolutely organic, grandly natural. Wordsworth wrote of "thoughts that lie too deep for tears." These are shapes that lie too deep for geometry. Gazing upon the bare-boned beauty Means has rendered, Euclid would have thrown up his hands in despair - and wonder.

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