

# WHITNEY

Whitney Museum  
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# PRESS RELEASE

## WHITNEY MUSEUM PRESENTS GROUNDBREAKING ECO ART PROJECT WITH A LIVE CITRUS GROVE



*The exhibition, opening June 29, examines the work of artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison that proposes a sustainable alternative to an existing food production system.*

**New York, NY, June 13, 2024** — [Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard](#), opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on June 29, 2024, explores alternative, sustainable food systems in an imagined future where natural farming practices are obsolete. Artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, often referred to as “the Harrisons,” conceived and designed the project in 1972, a period when environmentalist movements in the United States were taking shape. Inspired by the growing social awareness of vulnerable ecosystems, the Harrisons developed “Survival Pieces,” proposals for installation projects that served as works of art and calls to action. The instruction drawing for [Portable Orchard](#), which is in the Whitney’s permanent collection, details the build plans for the self-sustaining indoor garden and offers tips on tree care as well as creative recipes for celebrating the grove’s yield. This installation marks the first standalone museum presentation of the fully realized grove of eighteen citrus trees in over fifty years.

The Harrisons drew from their complementary backgrounds in art and education to focus their artistic practice on conceptual, collaborative projects. Their work was inspired by specific sites

and by certain “anomalies,” as they described it, that they perceived in a given environment. *Portable Orchard* was originally commissioned by The Art Gallery at California State University, Fullerton, and the artists specifically considered the rampant suburban development and increased smog levels in the surrounding areas. The Harrisons imagined the indoor orchard as a survivalist antidote for a potential future devoid of the citrus trees that give Orange County its name. By making detailed instruction drawings, like the one in the Whitney’s collection, the Harrisons anticipated future implementation of the “Survival Pieces,” intended to resonate, as the artists described, “first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.”

“The Survival Pieces are still tremendously fresh today, more than fifty years after their making,” says Kim Conaty, Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator at the Whitney. “The Harrisons’ collaborative and community-focused work put ecological research at the center of a unique creative practice that tapped into some of the most urgent issues of their time, from sustainable agriculture to climate justice. A visit to *Portable Orchard* will be an immersive, unconventional gallery experience, and we hope that it will also spark dialogue and exchange around environmental awareness and climate action today.”

“*Portable Orchard* is remarkable as a work of sculpture that is in every way alive. To put on this exhibition of growing trees has been an extraordinary project for the Whitney, both logistically and conceptually. It proves how the Harrisons’ provocations to arts institutions and artmaking still hold true, now even decades later.” says Roxanne Smith, Senior Curatorial Assistant.

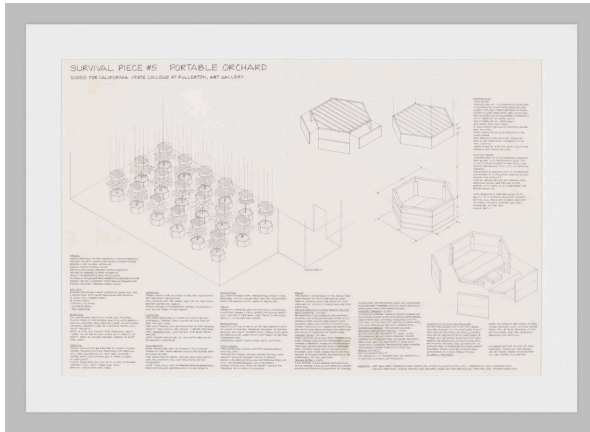
The development of the exhibition offered an opportunity to work in the Harrisons’ spirit of collaboration and knowledge sharing to realize the orchard inside the Museum. With permission from Newton Harrison when the work was acquired, this installation fulfills the original plans with slight modifications to relate directly to the Whitney’s environment and ecosystem. The organizers considered various environmental factors to implement this presentation, including sustainably sourcing the trees and making planter boxes with recycled wood from former New York City water towers.

*Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard* will be on view through January 1, 2025. The exhibition is organized by Kim Conaty, Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, with Roxanne Smith, Senior Curatorial Assistant, at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

### **Exhibition Overview – Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard**

Spanning the entire eighth-floor gallery, the Whitney’s presentation of *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard* is the first standalone museum exhibition of the indoor citrus grove since its debut in 1972. *Portable Orchard* is one of seven “Survival Pieces” created by the Harrisons between 1971 and 1973. In addition to the orchard, the presentation will include the original schematic drawing and archival documents, books, and other materials to contextualize the work’s groundbreaking expression of environmental activism.

The drawing describes all aspects of building and caring for the indoor orchard, including soil mix, planting, feeding, watering, lighting, pollination, harvesting, yield, propagation, and notes on vital signs. Although developed over fifty years ago, the installation resonates with the global environmental and climate issues we face today. The living sculptures will change over the course of the exhibition, growing harvestable fruit.



### **Historical Context**

Helen Mayer Harrison (1927–2018) and Newton Harrison (1932–2022) began their decades-long collaboration in the 1970s when there was increasing social awareness of environmental concerns. The Harrisons brought together concepts and practices from their backgrounds in artmaking and education. Married in 1953, the Harrisons' partnership in life and work led them to develop proposals for practical solutions to sustain life in an imagined future where traditional food systems and farming practices are obsolete.

The Harrisons took inspiration from new thinking around ecology that emerged in the 1960s and '70s. Rachel Carson's environmental science book *Silent Spring* (1962), which helped launch the environmentalist movement in the United States, was a critically important catalyst for the Harrisons as they began to develop their practice. Alongside the first significant steps in environmental protections and awareness, with the Clean Air Act of 1968 and the first Earth Day in 1970, the art world was also experiencing an awakening through the work of Minimal and Conceptual artists who were thinking about utilizing the land as a material and pushing the boundaries of what sculpture could be.

From 1971 to 1973, the Harrisons designed seven "Survival Pieces" to explore questions and possibilities around self-sustaining, manufactured ecosystems. Each project was site-specific and responded to the challenges and degradation of the local environment. The "Survival Pieces" comprise the realized installations and detailed drawings that allow the projects to be restaged. In written reflections on their work from the 1970s, the Harrisons described that period as their "years of prophecy." Their predictions of a future marked by environmental destruction make the work even more urgent fifty years later.

### **Sustainability Efforts at the Whitney**

With guidance from horticultural and sustainability partners, the Whitney's exhibition team followed the Harrisons' model, considering the environmental impact of the fabrication and implementation of the installation. This presentation will utilize reclaimed redwood lumber from a local mill to build the planters and lightboxes. Although citrus trees do not grow naturally in the Northeastern U.S., the team minimized transport by sourcing the trees from a family-owned orchard in South Carolina that produces the varieties of citrus specified in the Harrisons' blueprint. The fruits grown from the trees will be harvested and used in public programs and

staff events throughout the exhibition. The trees, wood, and other materials will be replanted, reused, and recycled when the exhibition closes at the Whitney.

### **Free Public Programs**

A series of free in-person and virtual public programs will be offered in conjunction with *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard*. More information about these programs and how to register will be available on the Museum's [website](#) as details are confirmed.

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## **PRESS CONTACT**

For press materials and image requests, please visit our press site at [whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press) or contact:

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## **EXHIBITION SUPPORT**

Generous support for *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard* is provided by Judy Hart Angelo and The Brown Foundation, Inc., of Houston.

Major support is provided by the Achilles Memorial Fund and the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

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## **ABOUT THE WHITNEY**

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

## Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum’s website](#).

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## VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

### Image credits:

The Harrisons, *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard*, 1972–73 (installation view, Art Gallery at California State University, Fullerton). Citrus trees, soil, wood, and lights, dimensions variable. Courtesy California State University Fullerton Archives & Special Collections

The Harrisons, *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard*, 1972–1973. Graphite pencil on paper, 23 13/16 × 35 3/4 in. (60.5 × 90.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Drawing Committee 2019.297.1. © Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison/The Harrison Studio

The Harrisons, *Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard*, 1972–73 (installation view, Art Gallery at California State University, Fullerton). Citrus trees, soil, wood, and lights, dimensions variable. © Helen and Newton Harrison Family Trust. Courtesy Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Dallas/Seoul

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