

DRAFT

Artist Bio: Ansel Oommen

American, b. 1992



Return to Quiet Revolutionaries, <https://www.quietrev.com/portraits/ansel-oommen/>

Ansel Oommen, September 7, 2021, in Taxon Leaders, VTL21, <https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/bioblitz/2021/09/07/ansel-oommen/>

“My little misstep into alternative photography was an accident of my eclectic background. I am not a botanist at all, but I have done research at a botanical garden. I am not a chemist either, though I do hold a minor in chemistry. I have no formal training in art, yet I would like to think I create it. In this sense, neither professional nor amateur, both specialist and generalist, my condition mimicked the hodgepodge lives of early scientists and inventors. And so, I was able to channel that same inquisitive spirit that originally led [cyanotype pioneer Anna Atkins] to harness one discipline to unleash another.”

“As I continue tweaking the age old blueprint, I hope that my findings will be anything but [cyano] typical.” -Ansel Oommen

<https://medium.com/exposure-magazine/anna-atkinss-ghost-and-the-conception-of-the-combination-cyanotype-c080a57ba10d>

The following excerpts are from an interview with the artist, published online in 2016 and used with permission.

Ansel Oommen is a New York based artist working in a variety of mediums. His works borrow techniques and theoretical principles from chemistry, botany, entomology, optics, and health sciences.

“Plants have this complex passively dynamic identity. They are often seen as a backdrop or a decorative accent when compared to humanity, but they are a vital force that can dominate, subjugate, and manipulate their environments through fascinating means. While their resiliency is impressive, they are also quite transient. Some flowers only bloom for a day and when autumn arrives, chlorophyll ceases to be produced, exposing hidden colours in a seasonal dance with death. When I learned about the cyanotype process during my undergraduate studies, I appreciated how delicate leaves could be immortalized through the chemical stability of Prussian blue.”

“The cyanotype is an alternative photographic process that relies on the chemical properties of two iron compounds – ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide. Under UV light, the Fe(III) ions of ferric ammonium citrate are reduced to Fe(II) ions. Photochemically produced Fe(II) ions can then complex with potassium ferricyanide to form a richly coloured water insoluble compound called ferric ferricyanide or Prussian blue.”

“Basically, formulas of these two iron compounds are mixed together in a 1:1 ratio to form a citrine coloured solution. The solution can then be painted onto a surface such as paper or cotton and should be left to dry in a dark place so that the material doesn’t auto-expose. Once the material is dry, I arrange the leaves on top of the sensitized surface (again in a dark place) and place a glass pane on top of them to add pressure so that I can get accurate prints. Then I move the whole set outside into a bright, sunny spot where they can be exposed to UV radiation from the sun. After the print has been exposed to UV, I let it sit in a vinegar bath followed by a hydrogen peroxide bath to bring out the rich [Prussian blue](#).”

“Traditionally with most botanical cyanotypes, and with my initial experience, you get the negative of the leaf but usually do not get details of the veins. Currently, I am conducting self-directed research at St. Joseph’s College on combining the cyanotype with other lab techniques used in botany to illuminate the leaf architecture, in effect creating blue plant X-rays.”

Ansel Oommen’s art blog (used with permission):

[https://arthescience.com/blog/2016/12/02/works-botanical-cyanotypes/#:~:text=The%20cyanotype%20is%20an%20alternative.to%20Fe\(II\)%20ions.](https://arthescience.com/blog/2016/12/02/works-botanical-cyanotypes/#:~:text=The%20cyanotype%20is%20an%20alternative.to%20Fe(II)%20ions.)

From WORKS – BOTANICAL CYANOTYPES BY ANSEL OOMMEN

In ALL, WORKS by Julia Krolik, December 2, 2016

More From Ansel

You can *absolutely* use my texts and/or images for your class! I've attached a few images for you. I am so honored (and flattered) because I have been meaning to write an article about the upgraded cyanotype process I developed for the National Association for Biology Teachers. I believe scientific/technological advancements should be open access so that society as a whole can benefit.

For the scientifically (and creatively) minded students in your class, I would like to share this article/personal reflection on how knowledge of art and science can complement each other in the process of discovery and self-exploration:

<https://medium.com/exposure-magazine/anna-atkinss-ghost-and-the-conception-of-the-combination-cyanotype-c080a57ba10d>

The article has GIFs of my process which your students might like. To boil it down, I discovered that by soaking leaves in dilute sodium hydroxide solution (and replenishing as needed), plant pigments get cleared out of the leaves and the resulting cyanotype is better able to capture leaf architecture e.g. veins. I was obviously inspired by Anna Atkins, who many regard as the first female photographer, and I think her history is also so relevant to share, to both boys and girls.

On a separate yet somewhat related note, I just recently wrote an article for the Center for Humans & Nature on how I used a unique art material (biohazard labels from the lab) to make collages during the pandemic, drawing again on scientific phenomena such as aposematism:

<https://www.humansandnature.org/the-pandemic-process-using-aposematism-and-metamorphosis-as-concepts-for-creative-meaning-making>

Maybe it might inspire students to think outside the box. Thanks so much for writing!

-Ansel

Cyanotypes by Ansel Oommen

Website: <https://www.behance.net/ansel>

Cyanotype Gallery: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/16905703/Cyanotypes>







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