

Kathryn Elphinstone



Kathryn Elphinstone, *Leaf of Life (Bryophyllum pinnatum)*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas.
Collection of the artist.

**“Like the women of these Islands, the *Leaf of Life* too is strong
and resilient.”**

DART

MINDS
INSPIRED



BUTTERFIELD

The Artist

Elphinstone studied art at the University of Toronto, Canada. She received a BA majoring



in fine arts and a B.Ed. from the same institution. She taught art at the high school and community college levels in the Toronto area before relocating to the Cayman Islands 25 years ago. Elphinstone has taught art at several schools in Grand Cayman and founded the art programme at Faulkner Academy, now Cayman International School. Her art always considers colour first, followed by form. Her practice moves between painting and craftwork and she draws much of her inspiration from the seas and shores surrounding the Cayman Islands. Currently, Elphinstone teaches for the Walkers Art Club Programme at the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands and works on her art pieces at her studio in South Sound.

NGCI exhibitions include: *Upon the Seas* (2017), *Revive: Contemporary Caymanian Craft* (2017), *Cross Currents – 1st Cayman Islands Biennial* (2019), and *Island of Women: Life at Home During Our Maritime Years* (2020).

The Artwork

Originating in Elphinstone's fascination with Caymanian folk medicine and herbal remedies, *Leaf of Life*, 2020 is grounded in the idea of knowledge shared in a close-knit community. The artist herself experienced this when given clippings of the Leaf of Life plant (*Bryophyllum pinnatum*) when she first arrived on these shores.

The Leaf of Life, also known as Curiosity, was used to treat a multitude of ailments, ranging from respiratory distress to ulcers and insect bites. These cuttings are placeholders for both the artist's intervention into this practice – the sharing of traditional knowledge – which saw her distributing clippings to gallery visitors on the exhibition's opening night. This cultural practice largely ceased with the advent of modern medicine.

Discussion

- Consider the artwork *Leaf of Life*. Why do you think the artist chose to tell the story of women through a medicinal plant? What does the history of the many ailments that this plant was used to treat convey about the time period in the Cayman Islands? What does it say about the women of the time?
- Does the Leaf of Life plant still hold the same significance in today's society? Do you think it can still be used? Why or why not?
- What other medicinal plants can you name that are found in Cayman?

Comparison

Compare Kathryn's pieces to the works of Anne Pratt, a botanical illustrator.

- What are some stylistic similarities that you notice?
- What are some differences?

Anne Pratt 1803 -1893



Anne Pratt, *The Flowering Plants, Grasses, Sedges, & Ferns of Great Britain and Their Allies, the Club Mosses, Horsetails, etc.* Volume 2. 1905. Contributed in BHL by The Luesther T Mertz Library, the New York Botanical Garden.

Follow Up Activity

- Visit this website to learn more about Anne Pratt and the time period where her and many other women took part in illustrating these plants for books.
<https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2019/03/anne-pratt.html>
- What are some plants in your backyard that look interesting? Carefully draw one that you see.
- Google a list of the medicinal plants found in the Cayman Islands. Look and see if any are located right in your own backyard. If not, see if you can draw a few from references online.
- Do Anne Pratt's illustrations convey a similar story to that which Kathryn Elphinstone's piece does? Why or why not?