



Chrystel Lebas: Re-visiting – *Pinus silvestris* [illeg] – Plate n°1245 Aviemore, Rothiemurchus, August 2012 57°8.691'N 3°50.304'W

NATURAL HISTORIES

In 2011, Chrystel Lebas and her camera set out in the footsteps of botanist Edward James Salisbury, who photographed his studies of the British landscape a century ago. The juxtaposition of their work reveals the changes wrought by climate and man. By *Liz Jobey*

The French photographer Chrystel Lebas spent the first 10 years of her life in Sérignan-du-Comtat, a village in the Vaucluse in south-eastern France. To the north the village is bordered by scrubland and pine forest, and during her childhood, first with her mother and then on trips with her school, she had begun to study the life of the forest and make her first “*histoires naturelles*”. From Paris, her interest in theatre design took her to Poland, the Czech Republic and then to London, but her love of the natural world never left her.

At the end of the 1990s, after a masters degree at the Royal College of Art, she began to photograph the natural landscape. Working in colour, she preferred to work at night, or at twilight – what the French call *l’heure bleu* – when the world becomes more mysterious and yet, if one can capture it, reveals itself anew. “I was fascinated by night itself, by the absence of light and the impossibility of photographing,” Lebas told Nanda van den Berg, the director of the Huis Marseille in Amsterdam, where an exhibition of her most recent work opens next month. “I was interested in challenging ►

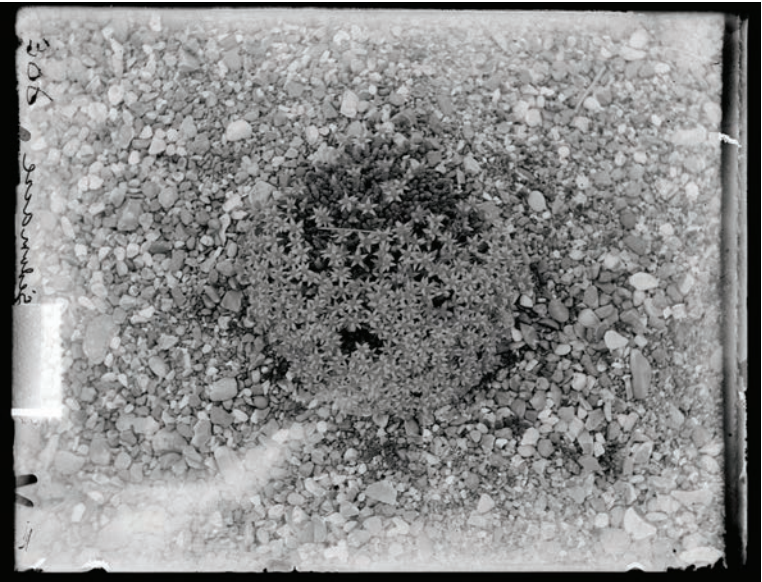


Edward James Salisbury: from box 1237-1249 – Aviemore *Pinus silvestris* [illeg] – Plate n°1245



Chrystel Lebas: Re-visiting – *Sedum acre* – Plate n°306. Blakeney, June 2014. 52°58.039'N 1°2.250'E

‘The significance of Lebas’ project is gradually being realised’



Edward James Salisbury: from box 290-307 – Blakeney Plant Portraits/Photos. *Sedum acre* – Plate n°306

◀ how I used the cameras, but also challenging the landscape.” For this latest project, however, the challenge was set by the landscape and its past.

In 2006, her work was included in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, *Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour*. Meanwhile, over the road at the Natural History Museum, Dr Mark Spencer, senior curator of the British and Irish Herbarium, was about to investigate an unidentified archive of some 1,400 glass negatives, mostly of landscape views of various parts of the British Isles as well as close-up plant studies. Introduced by Bergit Arends, the former curator of contemporary art at the Natural History Museum, Lebas and Spencer

began to work together. Lebas printed up some of the photographic plates and, with Arends’s help, the identity of the photographer was finally discovered.

Sir Edward James Salisbury, born in 1886, was a British botanist who became the director of Kew Gardens. He had made early studies of the relation of plants to their natural surroundings. Between about 1907 and 1938, armed with a camera and a notebook, Salisbury had worked in four geographical areas: Arrochar, in Argyll and Bute, south-west Scotland, now part of the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park; Rothiemurchus Forest, an estate in the Highlands near Aviemore; Culbin Sands, a long spit of sand along the southern shore of the Moray Firth; and Blakeney Point in Norfolk, where



Chrystel Lebas: Re-visiting – Colonisation of boulder by *Mosses & Oxalis acetosella*, EJS/1928 – Plate n°1254 Arrochar, May 2012 56°13.041' N 4°44.146'W



Edward James Salisbury: from box 1250-1258 – Arrochar 1928 Colonisation of boulder 4 *Mosses & Oxalis acetobetta* EJS/1928 – Plate n°1254

as a student Salisbury had made a study of the vegetation, and which is now a nature reserve.

In 2011, Lebas set off in Salisbury’s footsteps. Using both a medium-format and a panoramic camera, and with GPS to help her establish the same locations, she focused, as he had, on three subject areas: habitat, locality and specimens. Comparative study is one of photography’s most valuable uses and the significance of Lebas’ project is gradually being realised.

In Arrochar, for example, a species of sedge that Salisbury had studied had disappeared, driven out, probably, by the construction of roads and a car park. On the hills, birch and fir trees had replaced much of the ancient woodlands. At Blakeney Point, it was possible to compare the vegetation with the

analysis Salisbury had made 100 years earlier. As Spencer points out in his essay for a new book about Lebas’ project, “conveying the impacts of environmental change (or ‘biodiversity’ in current parlance) to non-specialists is challenging”.

What better way to alert them to the changes wrought by man and the climate on the landscape, than by drawing them in through these photographs to consider how fragile it has become. **FT**

“*Chrystel Lebas, Regarding Nature*”, *Huis Marseille Museum for Photography*, Keizersgracht 401, Amsterdam, December 10-March 5 2017; huismarseille.nl. A book, “*Field Studies: Walking Through Landscapes and Archives*”, is published by Fw:Books