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The Oldest Living Things In The World



Synopsis

The Oldest Living Things in the World is an epic journey through time and space. Over the past decade, artist Rachel Sussman has researched, worked with biologists, and traveled the world to photograph continuously living organisms that are 2,000 years old and older. Spanning from Antarctica to Greenland, the Mojave Desert to the Australian Outback, the result is a stunning and unique visual collection of ancient organisms unlike anything that has been created in the arts or sciences before, insightfully and accessibly narrated by Sussman along the way. Her work is both timeless and timely, and spans disciplines, continents, and millennia. It is underscored by an innate environmentalism and driven by Sussman's relentless curiosity. She begins at year zero, and looks back from there, photographing the past in the present. These ancient individuals live on every continent and range from Greenlandic lichens that grow only one centimeter a century, to unique desert shrubs in Africa and South America, a predatory fungus in Oregon, Caribbean brain coral, to an 80,000-year-old colony of aspen in Utah. Sussman journeyed to Antarctica to photograph 5,500-year-old moss; Australia for stromatolites, primeval organisms tied to the oxygenation of the planet and the beginnings of life on Earth; and to Tasmania to capture a 43,600-year-old self-propagating shrub that's the last individual of its kind. Her portraits reveal the living history of our planet and what we stand to lose in the future. These ancient survivors have weathered millennia in some of the world's most extreme environments, yet climate change and human encroachment have put many of them in danger. Two of her subjects have already met with untimely deaths by human hands. Alongside the photographs, Sussman relays fascinating and sometimes harrowing tales of her global adventures tracking down her subjects and shares insights from the scientists who research them. The oldest living things in the world are a record and celebration of the past, a call to action in the present, and a barometer of our future.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“As a kind of time-traveling expeditionist” a chrononaut? “Sussman lets us drink from primeval wells. One of the great satisfactions of her book is that it allows us to peer at the almost eternal even as we’re mired in a culture quick to praise the new and ephemeral.” (New York Times) “The Oldest Living Things in the World serves us the humbling profundity and pathos of things that live almost forever. We see our abstract selves and feel the terrible bludgeon of that which we cannot have and are fated only to behold. Rachel Sussman brings you to the place where science, beauty, and eternity meet.” (Jerry Saltz, New York Magazine) “The Oldest Living Things in the World” adds in dramatic manner a fascinating new perspective “literally, dinosaurs” of the living world around us.” (Edward O. Wilson, Harvard University) “Contemplate life through the time scale of The Oldest Living Things, and you’ll find your mind expanded and heart inspired. I’m thrilled to see Rachel’s powerful TED talk develop and deepen into this captivating book.” (Chris Anderson, TED curator) “Longevity means continuity. Long-lived people connect generations for us. Really long-lived organisms, like the ones Sussman has magnificently collected photographically, connect millennia. They put all of human history in living context. And as Sussman shows, they are everywhere on Earth. This book embodies the Long Now and the Big Here.” (Stewart Brand, cofounder, The Long Now Foundation) “Something astounding happens when Rachel Sussman photographs the most ancient organisms to be found across our planet. A fraction of a second of time in her photographic exposures animates forms that have evolved across nature’s deep time to create a profound experience of being alive. Sussman’s ten-year investigation of the symbols of the earth’s ecology is rigorous and exploratory, realized with such generosity to the reader and her ambitions make an impossibly vast subject both felt and understood.” (Charlotte Cotton, author of The Photograph as Contemporary Art) “I am in awe” awe staring at my planet’s old sages, who know the way things were, will be, and should be” awe when I appreciate Rachel Sussman’s epic quest to round them all up and her daring in stealing their soul with her photographs.” (Paola Antonelli, senior curator, Museum of Modern Art) “There’s a sense of wonder imbued in these photographs of

organisms that seem to be a physical record of time, but there's also a call to action. Many of these subjects of Sussman's portraits are under threat from habitat loss or climate change or simple human idiocy. • (Time) Beautiful and powerful work at the intersection of fine art, science, and philosophy, spanning seven continents and exploring issues of deep time, permanence and impermanence, and the interconnectedness of life. With an artist's gift for aesthetic force and a scientist's rigorous respect for truth, Sussman straddles a multitude of worlds as she travels across space and time to unearth Earth's greatest stories of resilience, stories of tragedy and triumph, past and future, but above all stories that humble our human lives. • (Brain Pickings) The series, and now book, is part art, part science, and part travelogue, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Because whether you look at these as documentary photography or scientific snapshots of millennia-old species that are now being threatened by the looming specter of climate change, there's something in this book for everyone. • (PetaPixel) A gorgeous book of stunning portraits which almost seem to capture the wise, wizened personalities of these scraggy pines, rippling sea grasses, and otherworldly mosses. Accompanying the photo are Sussman's essays, which serve as both a scientific explainer and a captivating travelogue, transporting the reader to often freakishly remote locations on all seven continents. The book and its subjects are at once inspiring and terrifying—a testament to the resiliency of nature, of course, but also a reminder of its fragility. • (Gizmodo) Photographer Sussman has spent the past decade looking for the oldest things alive. Her search has led her to every continent, to specimens such as a 2,400-year-old fungus in Oregon to an ancient shrub in Tasmania (age: 43,600). She documents 30 of those organisms in her new book, *The Oldest Living Things in the World*. To find them, she enlisted the help of biologists and explorers—and even collaborated with the Polar Geospatial Center to get arctic satellite maps to reach a rare moss. • (Wall Street Journal) *The Oldest Living Things in the World* by contemporary artist Rachel Sussman features photographs of 30 of the oldest continuously living organisms in the world. They're a dry, scraggly lot, like 5,500-year-old, weather-worn Antarctic moss (first picture, below), and a 2,000-year-old, brittle-looking pafuri baobab tree in South Africa (second picture). Like the very oldest human beings, tucked away in nursing homes, the oldest plants tend to live in out of the way places, stolid in the desert or reproducing slowly beneath the permafrost. But unlike human beings, who fade away, these organisms quietly thrive, diligently repairing their aged molecules and stonewalling generations of pathogens. Most of the time these old things are an afterthought, but collected together, they begin to appear as the main event on earth. • (Boston Globe) We need more artists, musicians, dancers, and poets to give humanistic expression to the pursuit of

environmental knowledge. I wish major research institutions supported artist-in-residence programs alongside labs. Sussman believes that “[t]he best art and science projects enhance and extend each other, bringing something new to both; they are not about simply making the research pretty, or making artworks using novel scientific tools.” By this measure, *The Oldest Living Things in the World* is a work for the ages.

- (Science) “Anyone who sees Sussman’s images will be struck by their beauty, but the photos also have the power to make one ponder our fate, and the planet’s.” (San Francisco Chronicle)
- “At a time when science is increasingly specialized, her artist’s vision transcends the divides between disciplines, and she highlights the importance of analyzing longevity across species as a way of understanding our world.” (Boston Globe)
- “The photos are beautiful, and even more so when you learn how ancient each living thing is. Her youngest subjects are 2,000 years old (such as brain coral she found in Tobago, and a strange exotic plant called welwitschia spotted in Namibia), and these are mere toddlers compared to their elders, like the 80,000-year-old aspen trees from Utah (pictured above) and the 400,000-600,000 year-old continually living Siberian bacteria! A photography book filled only with these incredible miracles of nature would have certainly made for a gem to be displayed. But Sussman surprised me with what most coffee table books don’t do — she told an engaging story, filled with humor, intrigue, and fascinating science, based on her experience over the last 10 years researching, traveling and photographing this book. If *Oldest Living Things* contained no photos, her story would still easily stand on its own as a captivating memoir — or an engaging science textbook — or both, actually.” (Boing Boing)
- “The images, collected in *The Oldest Living Things in the World*, are vast in size and accomplishment, the colours startling. Readers are left with a sense of wonder at these miracles and at Sussman’s retelling of her journey.” (New Statesman)
- “Sussman’s ten-year journey going back in time thousands of years through photographs offers a unique perspective that will inspire current and future biologists. Recommended.” (Choice)
- “This unique, ambitious book sets out to review the interdisciplinary and fragmented work of those who have discovered by accident or purse perseverance an incredibly ancient living thing. . . . Sussman’s quirky catalog of travel and photo-documentation is both artistically and scientifically one of a kind.” (American Scientist)

Rachel Sussman is a contemporary artist based in Brooklyn. Her photographs and writing have been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Guardian*, and *NPR’s Picture Show*. She has spoken on the TED main stage and at the Long Now Foundation, is a MacDowell Colony and NYFA Fellow and is a trained member of Al Gore’s Climate Reality Leadership Corps. Her

work has been exhibited in museums and galleries in the US and Europe, and acquired for museum, university, corporate, and private collections. She is fiscally sponsored by the Brooklyn Arts Council. To make 100% US tax-deductible donation to support her ongoing work, please visit: <http://rachelsussman.com/donate>

I agree with the other two reviewers who gave this book five stars, but I don't think they touched on what was so meaningful to me about the book. The photography is good, even though many of the subjects don't really lend themselves to easy framing or notable settings - try photographing a fungus if you don't believe me. The theme is engaging as well, but what really made this book for me were the stories, thoughts, ponderings that accompany each chapter. Despite writing only about living things over 2,000 years old, Sussman has made this into an intensely personal book, part story, part quest, and all heart. Please read this, you'll be better for having done so.

Beautiful photos, and interesting text. My only complaint is that the print is small and very light, so it is difficult to read without really good light.

This book, which I bought at full price last year as a birthday present for my husband, has beautiful images and is based on an interesting concept. The writing, however, is rather disappointing, but the absolutely worse thing about the book is the astonishing number of typographical errors it contains. The publisher, CHICAGO UNIVERSITY PRESS, ought to be ashamed! Something went seriously wrong with the copyediting process here.

I love the exploration of very old things, and there are some fantastic photos. The commentary is a little strange though, with meandering narratives that mention personal romantic dramas that are totally irrelevant to the topic.

Beautiful and informative. I've shared this book with many of my friends and they've all just loved it. I picked it up for myself for the pure enjoyment of the facts it holds and the pictures but it's taken me on quite a journey. The author leans toward evolution - something I just cannot stand behind - but it doesn't take away from the gathered information.

A hilarious gift for my elderly mother!

pretty pictures, text only soso

I haven't sat down and read it cover to cover but I like the audacity and the work itself. It's clearly far more than a coffee table book - it's a labor of love and conscience.

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