

PANEL • PERILS IN THE SUBLIME: A Poetic Consideration of Ecology, Landscape and Reconstruction

Moderator: Neil Forrest Panelists: Kim Dickey, John Roloff, Clare Twomey

The Garden as Model and Muse

by Kim Dickey

The exhibition *Perils in the Sublime* is all about viewing nature in a multitude of ways. The garden – its historical development, myriad forms, and metaphoric language – have informed my work for many years, and is a primary lens through which I understand my environment. The “garden ethic,” as Michael Pollan describes in his book *Second Nature*, is an approach to man’s relation to the natural world that doesn’t assume that man’s impact on the environment will always be negative¹, a notion that has influenced my continued interest in the garden as a model and source of inspiration.

Artists have regularly taken up the subject of the garden in their work in the last few years. In New York alone, the garden has featured prominently in a number of recent exhibits. *After Nature* at The New Museum in 2008 was an apocalyptic vision of the future inspired by the W.G. Sebald’s epic poem; *The Garden Show* at Deitch Projects in 2006 included such artists as Yoko Ono, and Liza Lou; *Down the Garden Path* was an ambitious survey of contemporary work at the Queens Museum of Art in 2005; and MOMA opened *Groundswell* in 2004 to showcase contemporary landscape architects. Similarly, educational botanical gardens, such as Wave Hill in the Bronx, are now curating shows in their exhibition spaces.

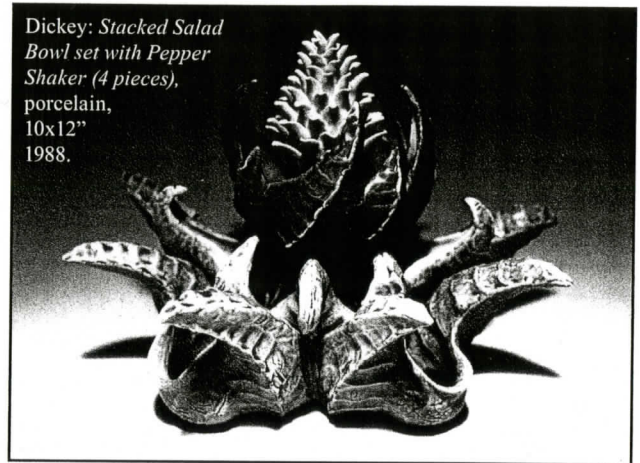
The garden has taken hold of the imaginations of so many artists because it straddles the seeming opposition between nature and culture. It is a man-made creation, a constructed site that includes us in its design. This inclusion – and our role in its cultivation, growth, and flourishing – suggest the possibility of a relation with the natural world predicated on care. As Mara Miller writes in her book, *The Garden as an Art*, the act of creating a garden “is an attempt at the reconciliation of opposites which constrain our existence... as such it is always an act of hope.”²

I had the opportunity to pose the question, “*What is in a garden?*” to my daughter’s class of five-year-olds recently. The first eager response was “dirt.” Some contemporary landscape architects have defied that notion, but I decided not to challenge this audience with that thought. “Seeds” another said, and “bugs” was the next reply. I found their attention to the microscopic refreshing. Bernard Palissy, a 16th-century French Huguenot, chemist and potter, was also fascinated with the miniature. He cast life forms of reptiles, crustaceans, plants and insects, to adorn what he called his rustic basins, or *Grotto ware*. His obsession with minute life forms yielded small worlds, ecosystems that transformed how we understand the ceramic vessel; they represented both the site and the material it was made from.

The idea that an object could speak simultaneously at the scale of the landscape of the table and the land affected

my own work profoundly. My early work explored similar tensions in scale and drew inspiration from *wunderkammern*, or early natural history collections where man-made and natural objects shared the same space. I was interested in creating a sensation akin to our explorations of the natural world. I explored how objects could invite interactions that resulted in unsuspected discoveries, as in *Stacked Salad Bowl Set with Pepper Shaker* (1988). At first glance,

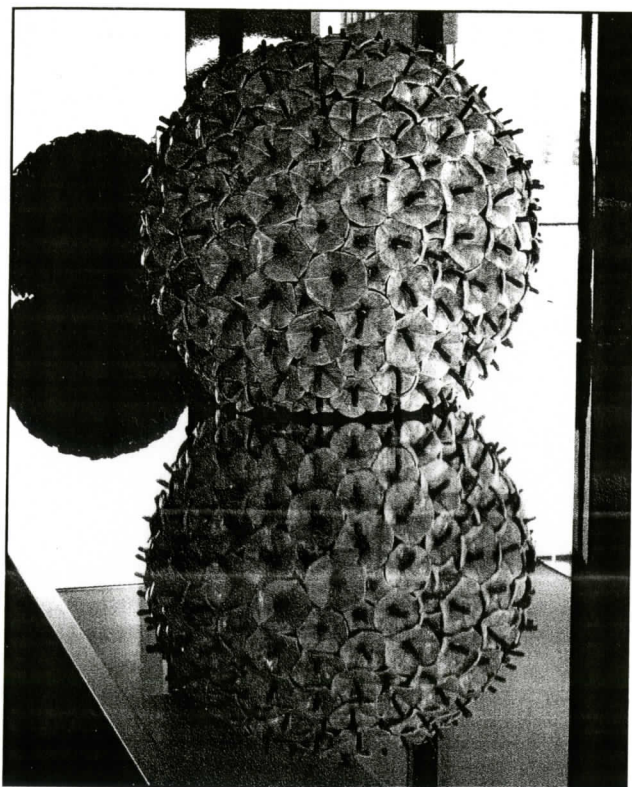
Dickey: *Stacked Salad Bowl set with Pepper Shaker* (4 pieces), porcelain, 10x12” 1988.



this object appears to be a plant, transporting the viewer to a lush and mysterious landscape within the private domain of the table. As the user lifts the top, she discovers it is a peppershaker and, on further investigation, finds multiple bowls nested beneath. As with the garden, this work is defined largely by its dialogue with containment.

Fast-forward twenty years to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, where I have just completed a permanent commission of nine terracotta sculptures for their rooftop café. Entitled *Museum as Theater as Garden*, this group of objects reflects the eclecticism of a garden collection where each plant may represent a specific place, culture, culinary, or pharmaceutical use. My collection, however, engages different histories of the decorative and monumental arts. *Hybrid* examines the realm between manipulated nature (the genetically modified perhaps) and the unadulterated. Its pure geometry references modernist reductiveness, while the profusion of flowers covering its surface denies this and embraces an aesthetic rooted in the decorative arts tradition. Each sculpture, reminiscent of bushes, is about 30” high and 24” in diameter, and sits upon mirrored surfaces against enormous windows that act as a membrane between inside and outside. This café space addresses the inbetweenness I am concerned with in my work. I strive to address the ‘both and’ rather than the ‘either or’, so that the pieces function as object and site, character and setting, prop and theater. Similarly, gardens have always been about here and elsewhere.

In an exhibit titled *Cold Pastoral* from May 2007, six

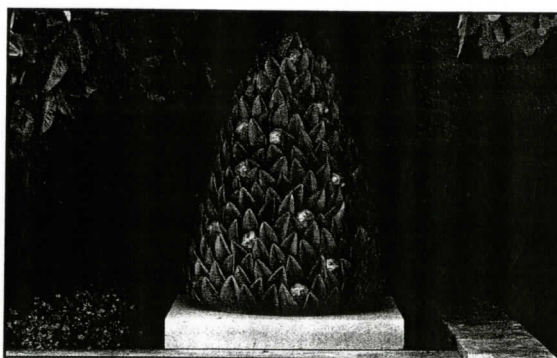


Dickey: Hybrid, from Museum as Theatre as Garden, glazed terracotta, 24x24", 2007.

photographs of dramatic and artificial landscapes served as a backdrop to six sculptures. The large, square (3' x 3') photographs of the formal gardens of Villandry, Versailles, and Vaux-le-Vicomte, promoted a theatrical effect by casting the visual space of the gallery as a stage. I constructed a mirrored tile wall to reflect the glass front of the gallery, bringing the outside landscape indoors and visually doubling this long and narrow space. The resulting mirage of a promenade allowed viewers to see themselves in this illusionary landscape. The six sculptures reinterpret the overlooked tradition of garden statuary, functioning as memento mori to fleeting youth, fecundity, and beauty, and suggesting that all disbelief and care be suspended upon entry. The ceramic sculptures were both setting and character in a performance that partly engaged the history of modernism.

In 2007, I designed and constructed five 40" tall, glazed terracotta sculptures for a 53' long pool for a private residence in Austin, TX. The spare axis and leafy backdrop of the site was attractive to me and allowed me to design a formal procession of sculpture that echoes the ornamental gardens of the 18th century. The juxtaposition of my work against real plants engaged my interest in the real versus the artificial.

Numerous other artists draw on themes relating to the garden. Whether inspired by the garden's formal structure,



Dickey: Pomegranate Tree, private garden, Austin, TX, glazed terracotta on limestone, 40x28", 2007.

its inherent juxtaposition of the real and the artificial, or on the idealized and mythic examples of garden history, their works address some aspect of human desire, and perhaps even a search for intimacy. Below I examine just a few examples. The selection is by no means comprehensive, but suggests ways in which these issues resonant across disciplines.

The Garden as Container

The *Hortus Conclusus*, a Latin term meaning literally "enclosed garden," defines the garden in one critical way: by its sense of enclosure. Gardens share this aspect of containment with the history of ceramics, in its forms and metaphoric language. Walter McConnell beautifully explored this parallel in his greenware work (a raw clay installation) in a 2004 exhibition at the CU Art Museum, co-curated by Lisa Tamiris Becker, Scott Chamberlin, Jeanne Quinn and me, and titled *Because the Earth is 1/3 Dirt*. For the exhibition catalog I wrote that McConnell's *Itinerant Edens: Perpetual Spring* (2004) "seems to have emerged from a mound of liquid stone, forming a hothouse of exotic flora, and perhaps, revealing the guts of the earth. . . . Seen through a column of fogged plastic, the piece takes on the soft focus nostalgia associated with imaginary landscapes: refuse left behind after a bacchanalia, Disney sets, or enclosed gardens of paradise."³

This same exhibit included pieces from Leopold Foulem's series *Abstraction* from 2000. These vessels suggest a riotous explosion of surface pattern and the complete impossibility of containment by their impenetrable forms, as there are no openings. They are both tomb and flowerbed, exclusion and profusion.

Jim Hodges explores the growth of the body likened to the rings of a tree in his piece titled *Landscape* from 1998, where each size shirt is nestled within the next larger size. Time is understood within another kind of containment.

The (Fortunate) Fall

To return to the five-year olds for a moment, it wasn't until well into the discussion that flowers, trees, leaves, and water factored into their descriptions of a garden. In my college years I became fascinated with the formal composition of the paradise garden as described in,

among other texts, *Genesis* and the *Song of Solomon*. What unified these visions were trees; water, often in the form of four rivers or sometimes a fountain; as well as a wall or fenced enclosure. One was either inside the garden or out, often with no possibility of return. The biblical story of the fall and its many readings has provided rich territory for artists to explore in their visions of the first garden

and this post-lapsarian moment.

A work by Jim Hodges, *No Between* from 1996, seems to speak about a literal fall. As an artist, Hodges aims to re-

turn his materials back to their origins. In this piece fabric flowers have been deconstructed and returned to their fabric nature, sewn end to end to create a curtain of falling petals. Liza Lou's life scale *Backyard* from 1996 took five years to construct. Every blade of grass is beaded, offering a utopian vision of the American dream that is glittering and impossible, and forever un-enterable. Similarly, Jan Vercruyse's *Utopian* garden drawings refer to no real site. They are self-contained, meticulously-described mazes meant for a pair of lovers to lose themselves in. All of them are far from natural: "a lawn with no flowers at all, a pond with goldfish bordered by black-veined red marble."⁴ The artifice is enhanced when one realizes that the aerial view of each design is a slightly obscured, sexual representation of genitalia. "Images of penetration abound, and the pleasure garden is taken one step further", as Michael Tarantino writes. "By showing us these spaces from above, Vercruyse exposes the game for what it is... to the sexual encounter behind the bushes is added the look of the voyeur, who revels in the sheer pleasure of how these spaces construct and control desire."⁵

Sandra Trujillo's MFA exhibition at CU in 2003 featured hundreds of found ceramics painted with china paint and hung as a calendar describing the life of *Verne and Shirley as Adam and Eve* cavorting in their Garden of Eden. It is a magical tour-de-force in the form of the *everyday for the Everyman*. Time and gravity play a role in Johan Creten's *The Garden*, 1996 which seems to meld fruit, earth and snake into seductive grotesques bringing to rot. Meanwhile, Anthony Gormley's *Fruit* (1991-3) hangs from an invisible tree in the air suggesting an eternal temptation and suspended "fall" in this one recuperative gesture.

Gardens as Theater

In some ways gardens are like cinema or TV, a form of illusion that transports us from real life into a fantasy world. By enclosing the space and separating it from the world, gardens leave us either inside or outside, spectator or player. In films such as Peter Greenaway's *Draughtsman's Contract*, the formal garden is the stage for murder and intrigue, while the topiary and maze garden in *The Shining* become the metaphor for the madman who has lost his mind and his way. In Jerzy Kozinski's novel *Being There* and the 1979 film of the same name, when Chance the gardener is left alone after the death of his employer, he retreats from the garden and goes inside to watch TV. His simple use of gardening language acts as a metaphor for everything from politics to life philosophy to his sexual desires, as interpreted by those around him.

Yinka Shonibare's installation, *Garden of Love*, at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris stages a seduction scene inspired by Fragonard's *The Progress of Love* paintings, with headless figures from the 18th century dressed in Indonesian/African textiles. Shonibare says, "the warning in my work is that you can have all this luxury, but you will have it at the expense of your head."⁶ Shown in a new museum of African art, the work references multiple sites simultaneously while exploring themes of colonialism, cross-cultural pollination, and transplantation, all imbricated in a labyrinth of meaning. Although a site of con-

tested meaning, the garden is always about theater, where the landscape is reflexive, a construction that refers to its own construction.

1. Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (New York: Dell, 1991), 209-38.
2. Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25.
3. Kim Dickey with Kirk Ambrose, "The Earth and The Earthly," in *Because the Earth is 1/3 Dirt* ed. Lisa Becker (Boulder: CU Art Museum, 2004), 34.
4. Michael Tarantino, "Enclosed and Enchanted: Et in Arcadia Ego," in *Enclosed and Enchanted*, ed. Kerry Brougher (Oxford: MOMA, 2000), 30.
5. *Ibid*, 31.
6. Bernard Muller, "Interview with Yinka Shonibare, MBE," in *Yinka Shonibare, MBE Jardin D'Amour* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 17.

Since 1990, **Kim Dickey** has had nine solo shows throughout the U.S and been in group invitational shows in Germany, Japan, Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Internationally renowned galleries in New York City that have shown her work include Bronwyn Keenan, Garth Clark, Jack Tilton, Pierogi, Thomas Healy and White Columns. She has exhibited at Mass MOCA, the Everson Museum (Syracuse), the American Craft Museum (New York), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Honolulu. Dozens of universities and museums have invited her to present her work, which has been reviewed in numerous articles and books. Dickey is an *associate professor* of ceramics at University of Colorado, Boulder.

Fragility and Dialogue

By Clare Twomey

My major concern within my practice as an artist is dialogue, that is, the material dialogue. The material holds the physical understanding of the conceptual knowledge of my work's aim. In differing formats, I have continually been drawn to the conceptual notions of fragility and transition. The materials I have used to express these concerns and questions are the metaphor and the dialogue of the concept.

Amy Dickson, curator at the TATE Modern, has an exceptional knowledge and devotion to material activity in the gallery. This is evident in her recent curation of Cildo Meireles, which created a visceral material experience for visitors as they walked through rooms filled with talc and trampled over galleries paved in glass. In the recent Jerwood prize catalogue she wrote of my work:

"The tension between Twomey's palpable delight in the materiality of clay and a delicious subversion of the properties of that medium are tangible across her oeuvre.

The butterfly is an appropriate metaphor, for Twomey's creations often undergo transformation during their time-bound existence. Often this change is the direct result of interaction with the viewer. Twomey's adventures in theatrical spectatorship often explore the taboo in terms of museum etiquette, inviting the visitor to touch, break or take, acts usually forbidden in the gallery context."