

Curator's Statement

Down Garden Paths

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"Down Garden Paths" has been a long time in the making. Previously referred to as "Bounty" the exhibition was first planned to gather photographers who focus on what the earth yields. The overarching idea was to consider the natural world and intertwine conversations on how to protect our resources while also examining the ramifications of inaction.

Jerry Takagawa's exhibition "False Food" came directly out of the research for "Bounty." It began with a keyword search on "Art Photo Index." A search for photographers that photographed "food + bounty" gave way to Jerry's subsequent exhibition on the North Pacific's plastics vortex. His work had appeal because it wasn't heavy-handed. The photographs achieved the desired narrative without showing the trauma of splayed bellies of albatross and spared our audience.

Even with the success of "False Food," we couldn't let go of the idea of an exhibition that pointed to the positives of our earth's resources. This, and the relentless diet of political news, led us to "Down Garden Paths." Spring was coming and our public could benefit from feelings of well-being, and sanctuary to contrast and combat the daily broadcast turmoil.

Personally, I wanted something simple, without lessons attached that just nourished the soul. I wanted gardens in the gallery metaphoric for refuge, safety and richness of spirit and capable of transporting us to a state of mind beyond the twitter sphere. And I wanted to find photographers who provided different ways of placing us "in the garden".

The resulting artist roster includes eight exhibiting photographers, each presenting solo exhibitions under the overarching idea called "Down Garden Paths." The photographers are Craig Barber, Joan Lobis Brown, Jimmy Fike, Ivana Damien George, Emily Hamilton Laux, Marcy Palmer, Paula Riff and Vaughn Sills.

Craig Barber creates tin type portraits of those who tend to gardens. The antiquarian technique he uses adds a timelessness to each photograph. It is as if the moment of capture is of an age when hands worked the soil, an age before mechanized solutions like the seed drill or thresher machine. We take our time cues from the objects found within Barber's photographs. Sometimes it's truly hard to discern. A baseball cap, a printed t-shirt, a plastic case give pause, but it is from the experiential nature of his photographs that we learn the most. One senses the author's yearning too, as tending the earth by hand is a receding practice. Barber uses the garden as backdrop for some of his portraits. In others, he portrays the subjects encompassed by their gardens' lush growth as if they, the cultivators, were thriving as well and part of the earth's bounty just like the near-ripened squash.

Joan Lobis Brown brings her outdoor gardens indoors by way of the many reflecting windows in her home. She photographs the resulting layered effect and names the work "Phantasmagorical." By definition this word means "having a fantastic or deceptive appearance, as something in a dream or created by the imagination." It can also mean "having the appearance of an optical illusion," as well as "a changing or a shifting, as a scene made up of many elements." In Lobis Brown's gardens all these definitions seem to apply. While the

photographer states that this fantasyland can be friendly or sometimes menacing, I see these photographs as safe harbor or alternate realities straddling fact and fiction. I see her images focused on the experience of consciousness where we slip in and out of our customary time constraints as we would when reading fiction. How easily we enter the fabricated realms of novels. Here too in Joan's kitchen, we are swallowed whole by the lyrics of her garden distractions.

It is said that over 5000 years ago, a Chinese naturalist collected specimens of roses. Other records cite occurrences of plant collecting in 1495 BC as search parties went to Africa to gather samplings of the incense tree for an Egyptian queen. British plant hunters of the 18th and 19th centuries were obsessed with foraging the far corners of the world for plants that rivaled the Roman discoveries of plumbs, roses, walnuts and parsley. Often these adventures led to injury and sometimes death. Photographer Jimmy Fike's excursions in search of botanicals are far less perilous. From his collection of 140 edible plants, Fike is exhibiting photographs of plants indigenous to our Northeast region. In them he colorizes the edible portions of the plants as studies that seem to intersect the histories of science and discovery, eliciting a sense of wonder inspired by botanists and photographers who lived more than a century ago.

In Ivana Damien George's photographs assembled for the Griffin exhibit as "Sustain," what comes through for the viewer is how much she enjoys "the fruits" of her garden toil. That pleasure is made visible through the yield itself. She presents her crop of lively greens with other ripe and luscious, full-bodied produce as if precious works of art. Depicted also are the sensory pleasures of gardening and its earthly delights told perhaps with a wry wit and a twist on biblical references to Eden.

Emily Hamilton Laux's photographs address biodiversity and ecological systems at play, as well as questions of what is beauty. My focus however, in choosing the work for this exhibition was primarily for how it would make our audience feel when viewing. My thinking was that after the first encounter, viewers would eventually dig deeper into further examination of the photographs and come to an understanding of Laux's root topic. What I hoped would surface was a childlike yearning for collecting objects and surrounding oneself with items that bring great pleasure just like 16th century *Kunstammer*, or cabinets of curiosities. The plants themselves suspended in water seem reminiscent of fluid filled jars that are meant to preserve specimens for future scientific study. In addition, I hoped that some visitors in search of the sublime might focus on the silence and meditative aspect of plants floating like jellyfish hovering and drifting at sea.

Marcy Palmer quotes writer and philosopher John O'Donohue in her statement on "Flora." O'Donohue states, "I think that beauty is not a luxury, but that it ennobles the heart and reminds us of the infinity that is within us." The concept of infinity is really rooted in the abstract. It has been pondered by minds greater than mine over the ages. We think of it in terms of something being never-ending or having no limit. Yet the concept of infinity has never really been proven as all living eventually comes to an end. Nor has infinity been measured as even the biggest of numbers can become larger by just adding more numbers. Perhaps O'Donohue is speaking of the potentiality of what we hold within us. In any case, the largest entity we know is the universe itself and this is how I began to understand Marcy Palmer's "Flora."

Palmer's "Elegant Petals" and "Spinning Flora" launched visions of galaxies in my imagination. They could be the view from under either the microscope or telescope. It doesn't matter as both are beyond what we know in our everyday, the substance of which scale from grain of sand to pulsing star. In actuality Palmer collects plant specimens on her daily walks that act as the fodder for her studies. Her muses are Anna Atkins and many of the surrealist photographers.

Maurice Tabard's "The Walking Tree," produced in 1947, is called to mind when looking at her "Twisted Stalk." One can see the influence from the surrealists on "Electric Flowers" such as in Tabard's untitled solarized landscape print. Marcy Palmer's "Flora" can also just be viewed as the beautiful object studies that they are, but I encourage you to dive deeper into what is yet unknown for you.

Using a combination of the Cyanotype and the Gum Bichromate photographic processes, Paula Riff says that her art practice focuses on the elemental. She searches for simplicity when developing new ideas and when rendering new art work. For "Shibui," her solo show now running under the umbrella of "Down Garden Paths," the context is based on the natural world. Riff shares with us her connection to her surroundings, utilizing leaf shapes and plant matter as subject. She is greatly influenced by Japanese aesthetics after working in Japan for several years after college and working as an interpreter for a Japanese production company in Los Angeles upon her return to the United States.

Often Japanese design is simple and effective in communicating meaning and is usually not meant to be realistic. Rendered artifacts can be reduced to the barest essentials with even the colors not being true to life. For example, Riff's use of bright clean color communicates a cheerfulness coupled with a playful intent. Some of the darker pieces have a more somber timbre. In her photograph called "Girl Crush" the viewer experiences a lightness to the leaves. It is as if their weight is that of feathers and the leaves are floating and drifting to the ground on the whim of the wind. There is complexity however in how the leaves take shape through the overlays of color. The shades of pinks, blue, yellow and green have a sweet softness to them as if made of candy. "River Wild," "Harvest Moon," "Indigo Dream," "Up Stream" and more all seem to float just as kites would with their tails streaming. "On Brooklyn Ground" it is as if the ginkgo's fan-shaped leaves are wafting as the overlays of color vary across the page. Throughout Asia the ginkgo tree has great significance as a symbol of longevity and enlightenment. According to the Smithsonian Center for Learning, four ginkgo trees survived the blast at Hiroshima and are still growing today. An unrelated fact or one of Riff's "subtle details that balances simplicity with rich complexity"?

Vaughn Sills was given a tremendous gift the day she entered Bea Robinson's garden in Athens, Georgia on a visit with a friend. That day Sills began a 20-year endeavor to document traditional African American gardens in Athens and subsequently expanded. All the while what Sills was looking to find was the same "energy, spirit and magic" that she felt in Bea Robinson's garden yard. Sills says, "These gardens speak a certain language – a language, I'm convinced, that is about the earth, about beauty and about spirit."

Dianne D. Glave, author of "Rooted in the Earth; Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage" says that as first enslaved and then free Southern African American women either worked with men or were responsible for the gardens. Generally, but not always, the men worked the fields and the women took care of vegetable patches and the flower gardens and made them their own. *"By using yards often in different ways than men, women took possession of [the gardens] and filled the space with sustenance, comfort, joy and sometimes profit,"* she said.

Sills photographs gardens created and shaped by both men and women. Assembled as black and white archival pigment prints, the photographs straddle two worlds as document and fine art. As a whole, she combines portraits of the gardeners as well as portraits of the gardens themselves. This rhythm works to offset the monotony that often happens with topological

studies. As a result, the movement she creates brings us through the landscapes with a number of satisfying pauses. At the same time, the viewer has the opportunity to carefully assess the character of both creator and creation.

Pearl Fryar's garden in Bishopville, South Carolina is a fine example of the magic and spirit imbued into these gardens. Fryar through his topiary skills has created a garden that doubles as abstract art installation. In his hands the ordinary has become sculpture. The upward thrust he shaped brings our gaze upward towards a daily reminder of what once was and what is still to come.

Author Alice Walker says of her mother's garden (not one of Vaughn Sills traditional African American garden photographs), *"I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from flowers. I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. I notice that only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as creator with hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have; Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty."*

What is the incentive behind making any garden? I think the answer is manifold and unique to every individual. For the enslaved African American gardener, according to Dianne D. Glave, it was about finding a space of one's own separate and apart from the slaveholders. It was about simple tools and sweat and using what was accessible to get closer to the soil and to the past, and to grow food. For the freed Southern African American gardener, it was carrying on what was known and loved for future generations with available resources. The quirky garden artifacts are reminiscent of Southern Baptist Christian icons coupled with an Afrocentric experience. With the growing integration of multicultural exchange and commercialized garden decoration options, these traditional African American yards and gardens are disappearing. Sills' photographs remain as historical record and these yards remain forever in our cultural memory.

Through "Down Garden Paths" it is our hope our public continues or begins to find ways to build gardens into the everyday. We also hope we have shown that while a garden's yield is traditionally fruits, vegetables and flowers it is so much more than this. May you find time to create your garden and enter often. - PT