antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE-
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gardening

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THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE
edited by Giovanni Aloi

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Front cover: **Rosie Carr,** *Tomatoes,* Risograph scanned print, printed by Park Press, 2025 © Rosie Carr

Back cover: **Rosie Carr,** *Tomatoes,* Risograph scanned print, printed by Park Press, 2025 © Rosie Carr

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gardening

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editorial

Giovanni Aloi

Gardens are autobiographical spaces, relentlessly co-authored by constantly evolving communities of gardeners, some equipped with spades, others with claws and some more endowed with long roots. In collaboration with the soil, this process of co-authoring results in open-ended narratives that emerge and dissolve, leaving behind traces of minerals and decomposing matter is steeped in open ended narratives that emerge and dissolve leaving behind traces of minerals and decomposing matter. Gardens are endless processes of resistance, resilience, and regeneration; sedimentations of past and present participations that always edge into a mostly unpredictable future of germination, dissemination, and attraction. But first and foremost, gardens are chapters of multispecies-desire.

In a garden, acts of control—pruning, planting, fencing—intertwine with gestures of surrender to decay, chance, and change. Gardens are simultaneously curated and wild, political and ecological, personal and collective. Once displays of aristocratic power, gardens have evolved alongside our shifting relationship with nature. In Renaissance Europe, manicured beds and sculpted paths soothed the elite, who tamed nature to mirror their authority. By the nineteenth century, in the shadow of industrialization, gardens became more complex: geopolitical microsites, oases among the hustle and bustle of the city, safe spaces for women and children. The latent politics of gardens surfaced in the work of women artists like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, who, unlike their male Impressionist peers, found freedom in gardens rather than in the public streets. Their painted gardens were proto-feminist spaces of resistance—where light, color, and emancipation intertwined.

Frida Kahlo's garden at the Blue House in Mexico offered both solace and inspiration after the accident that forever changed her life. Wide paths for her wheelchair and lush, vivid plants made the garden a sanctuary of bodily resilience and creative rebirth. Thorns, roots, and blooming flora populate her work, weaving her pain into living, regenerative metaphors.

Over the past fifty years, gardens have emerged in contemporary art as vital artistic media. In the 1960s, amidst rampant urbanization, Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* regenerated a corner of New York into a patch of native forest—a monument to ecological memory and resistance against colonial erasure. Liz Christy's guerrilla gardens in 1970s Manhattan transformed derelict lots into vibrant communal spaces. Without city permission, Christy sowed seeds of reclamation and hope, challenging neglect with beauty and community spirit. Gardening became an act of insurgency, a reclaiming of urban environments for collective well-being.

In 1987, Derek Jarman grew the fiercest of all artist's gardens with stones, driftwood, rusted metals and other found objects surrounding salt-bitten plants: each was gathered and placed with care, writing a living poem across the barren ground. In Dungeness, in the Southeastern tip of Great Britain, where the air is filled by the all-pervasive hum of a nuclear power station, the garden became a testament to survival, and the quiet art of making kin with the land.

Today's avant-gardeners build on these roots, using gardens as living artworks prioritizing remediation over aesthetics. Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1991) and Frances Whitehead's *Slow Cleanup* (2008–2012) demonstrate how plants can heal industrial damage. Their projects invited communities to engage with ecological processes, turning gardens into participatory sites of regeneration and knowledge. Yet the most urgent shift in contemporary garden practices lies not only in restoration, but in resituation. Precious Okoyomon's *Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light Touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty* (2022) embodies this new philosophy. Over eighteen months, Okoyomon cultivated a dense rooftop garden at the Aspen Art Museum, blending native and invasive species, poems inscribed on stones, and live performances. Her living, breathing installation embraced paradox: the beauty of entanglement born of colonial devastation. It asked viewers not simply to admire nature but to inhabit its impermanence, its layered histories, its precarious abundance.

It might not be inappropriate to state that today, gardens in contemporary art have become more than a new genre—their unstoppable and ever evolving fluidity are a challenge to the austerity and fetishization of purity and timelessness that has characterized our western museums for many centuries. Gardens are the new open-sky museums: outdoors, accessible, generous, and always a diverse multitude at once. They might just cradle new forms of art that our future truly needs.

For all these reasons, this current issue of Antennae, and the two that will follow, are dedicated to gardening as creative process. We need to take them very seriously as legitimate artistic sites and media—organic tissues generated by resilient and dedicate nurturing capable of uprooting our disciplinary and institutional certainties to show us how we can reimagine art from scratch.

My gratitude goes to all the contributors to this issue, to Antennae's academic board for its ceaseless support and expertise and to everyone else who has made this exploration possible.

Giovanni Aloi
Editor in Chief of Antennae

Poliphilo
Prospect Cottage, Derek Jarman's home on Dungeness, public domain, photo taken in July 2015

Coils, twines, notwithstanding

This short lyric essay, based on an on-going engagement with one particular species, is among other things a response to Deleuze and Guattari's assertion in *A Thousand Plateaus* that "[i]t's not easy to see the grass in things and in words". The plant under examination here is a creeper, *Lathyrus latifolius,* the everlasting pea, investigated through notes and a speculative glossary.

text: **Anna Reckin**

Does looking, drawing, thinking count as gardening? Are you gardening if you simply pay attention to one plant, one specimen of one plant?

I spent much of last year thinking about everlasting peas, one specimen in particular, a *Lathyrus latifolius* growing in the flowerbed I call my garden. There are various reasons for focusing on this plant, including a commitment to a collaboration with the poet Susie Campbell, and the fact that it grows very close to my front door, next to a spot where I can sit in a garden chair. Finding places to sit matters a good deal to me right now, with twists and tangles in my spine, slides and slippages that make it hard to walk or stand for very long.

However, I can sit and look, make sketches, take numerous photos. Here's some of what I found, put into words as notes, almanac entries, and a narrative glossary.

***

It's a question of looking in to look through, looking through to see the edges. Something in me that insists on trying to see figure *and* ground: simultaneously: the tendrils that are actually leaf-structures, the winged stems so broad they come to look like leaves, the continual forking and branching and reaching. What's line? What's mass?

And noticing splitting. The split that runs along the seam of the pod, ready for it to dehisce and throw out the seeds; the splits that appear on the larger leaf-blades as they grow older, aligned with their parallel veins; the splits that threaten to open up between the ridges of the winged stems, then do so as autumn wears on.

***

The flowers are welcome, when they come (late in the season for this particular plant, this year), but it's the tangle of stems and leaves that holds my attention, from the first sight, in early June, of fresh blue-green leaves folded around paler, broad stem-structures, with one or two tendrils coiling outwards and up, to a green curtain taller than I am, strung over a bay tree behind, reaching out to flower-stems of Japanese anemone. Nervous that the whole thing might be brought down if someone passes too close, I train back the tendrils that are too daring, encroaching on empty air above a concrete path. When, finally, I take it down, in late December, it comes away easily. The one stem that seems resistant is one I'd tied in with twine, now brown, invisible.

***

I notice that some people refer to *Lathyrus latifolius* as the wild sweet pea, though it doesn't have a scent (so is not "sweet") nor, strictly speaking, is it "wild": Simon Harrap (who, like other botanists, calls it the Broad-leaved Everlasting Pea) says it was "introduced to cultivation from Southern Europe and first recorded in the wild in 1670".[1] I prefer "everlasting" or "perennial". Which feature winds itself to the fore, becomes definitional?

2 June 2024

The ox-eye daisies have returned this year, rather stronger than last, when I don't think they flowered at all. Discs held high in the air; they'd overtop the wall if they weren't buffered by a tangled mass of species geranium, Japanese anemone and valerian.

And, back after all, the everlasting pea, a good, strong shoot hauling itself upwards with tendrils twirled onto yet more geraniums. I'd thought it had vanished, abandoned my plot for the gravel outside someone else's windows, but this must be the same plant, still sprung up from last year's roots, showing itself much later. The other one, in a much sunnier spot, is already blooming.

20 November 2024

(Seen from the window) plenty of leaves still on the trees, so when there's a little snow – just dusting, not settling – and a light breeze, leaves and flakes whirl in the same space, drift down together.

30 November 2024

Last year's everlasting-pea vine, full of rattling pods, many already opened, got brought indoors when I'd pulled it down, to make an appearance in September's art project. But I shan't bring this year's one in. Instead, I'll let it decay, *in situ*; or maybe, wearing gloves, I'll break the stems into short lengths and scatter them on the ground, where the rain can settle the haulm (some rags and tatters of leaves as well as stems) into the soil, so worms can pull it further downwards into the earth.

Frances Presley
Installation view showing dried plant materials at ArtDepot, Norwich
Photo by Frances Presley
2024

29 December 2024

I had assumed that when I took the stems down, I'd keep at least some of the pods, and put by some seeds, to plant for 2025, but now I look at the remains of the pea-vine, I see the pods are all stained with dark mildew. Not one has split and curled open. The seeds must be in there still, in mould-stained coffins. The long, wet summer has ruined them.

Kenicer and Parsons report that "the perennial species of *Lathyrus* are remarkably resilient to pests and diseases",[2] which concerns me, and makes me disinclined to spread any of the haulm on the ground. Instead, I pull it down gently into a bag and tip it into the garden waste bin, on top of a pile of leaves.

Now the fall of green-turned-straw-yellow-and-brown has gone, I can see deeper into that part of the bed. More primula rosettes are showing up, one with a white label next to it. A cowslip I'd forgotten I'd planted.

30 December 2024

First green bulb-shoots showing, in a terracotta pot. Maybe miniature daffodils, maybe *Narcissus poeticus*.

Derivatives and dependencies: excerpt from a narrative glossary

Adventitious
(Not to be confused with opportunistic), accidental, having to do with external happenstances, serendipities, even. Whereas the etymology has to do with arrivals from far-off places: "from Latin *adventicius*, 'coming to us from abroad'." One synonym might be "non-native". Takes in things that spread and sprawl, making the most of their circumstances, allowing for the possibility of many origins. Like thinking.

Coalesce
This last year, beyond working on *Lathyrus*, I'd focused on the word "coalesce", initially as a blanket term for the way I was working, putting all kinds of current interests and connections in the same sets of notebooks and sketchbooks, to see what, if anything, happened, then splitting the word, on etymological principles, I pulled the "o" away from the "a" to reveal not a diphthongal merging, but relation: one thing nourishing another, helping it to grow and flourish ("Latin *alescere* 'grow up *(from alere, 'nourish')*").

Node
Here, distinguished by crowns of bracts, they act as a kind of platform, or staging, a counterpart to the grip of the tendrils, the floating vanes of the leaves and stems.

Paripinnate
In their description of *Lathyrus latifolius* in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, Gregory Kenicer and Sylvia Norton characterise its leaves as "paripinnate, unijugate terminating in a robust, branching tendril".[3] In other words, what appear to be leaves are in fact leaflets, of equal size, borne in one pair (unijugate) or in a series of opposite pairs. The leaves have near-parallel veins on them: not quite parallel because they seem to fade out near the margins.

Rhizome
Kenicer and Norton describe *Lathyrus latifolius* as having "[r]hizomes [that are] thickened, woody, giving rise to many stems".[4] But these remain mysterious to me. When I had thought that the plant in my bed wouldn't return, I'd tried (with permission) to transplant one that had appeared in a pebbly area near a neighbour's window, but had to give up. The beautiful broad stems seemed to vanish suddenly. I scrabbled for something firm, close to the ground, to pull at, but all I could find was a very fine strand, tough as wire, and utterly immoveable. The ground was too hard to dig, so I tried another plant, but it was the same story, the same contrast between floaty, friable growth of stems and leaves (weak points showing up at the segment junctions) and resistance at ground level.

Where (or what) is the rhizome that the botanists describe? I expected to see something as solid and chunky, as rootlike and persistent as an iris rhizome, but all I've been able to find are the first segment or two of the stem: broad and tough, turning brown, lying on the ground, looking increasingly fragile. I look again in early January, in case there's something I've missed, but all that's left are fragments of dried stem.

Concerned there's some major structure I'm missing, I look online through the herbarium specimens at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Still nothing. To my untrained eye, the stems stop at ground level.

Another view might be that the whole plant might be a rhizome, that I am, in effect reprising Kafka's observation (as filtered through Deleuze and Guattari) about things.

> that . . . occur . . . not from the root up but rather only from somewhere about their middle. Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass and hold fast to it when it begins to grow only from the middle.[5]

Sub-tends
May be where a bract "supports" or "enfolds" a flower, but I want to think about its possibilities for other kinds of botanical underpinning; as, for example, the trio of bracts that surround a new flower-stem on the everlasting pea. Again, I'm attending to tending, to the possibilities for reach and extension, only eventually to the matter of flowering and fruiting.

Anna Reckin
Discarded plant material
Photo by Anna Reckin
2024

Anna Reckin
Plant in full leaf
Photo by Anna Reckin
2024
© Anna Reckin

Tendril

An embodiment in the botanical form of tending/attending; etymologically, "probably a diminutive of Old French *tendron 'young shoot',* from Latin *tener 'tender'";* tendril is tender, tentative. Reaches, then clings, tight as a tiny baby's finger.

There is a distinction to be made between plants that twine – which twist their stems around whatever it is they are climbing, like bindweed, and those that attach themselves to supports by means of tendrils, which may, as in the case of *Lathyrus*, develop at the tips of leaf-stems (see also Paripinnate).

If I let it, the bed would be full of bindweed. Unable to do any strenuous gardening, I choose to ignore advice that the bindweed should be eliminated completely and that not one root, shoot, or stem be left behind. All I can do is try and keep on top of it, literally, lifting the raft of heart-shaped leaves and white trumpet flowers from where it seems to rest lightly on the brick wall, on the hedges, on anything growing up nearby, and taking scissors to it. Resisting the temptation to tug at it and pull it all away: the vine stems are so strong and wound so tightly that when they're yanked, they tear off the leaves of the plants they grow with, stripping the stems. Sometimes I trace a bindweed stem down, back to the soil. Peering into the darkness under a laurel hedge, where little else grows, I find a set of slanting lines catching the light, the bindweed's first forays into host branches and foliage. They look like guy ropes, kite-strings, or the cords people arrange around a pole, for beans to grow up. But there is no pole, no tree trunk, no singular support.

Endnotes

[1] Simon Harrap, *A Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of Britain & Ireland* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 56.
[2] Greg Kenicer and Roger Parsons, *Lathyrus: The Complete Guide* (Peterborough: Royal Horticultural Society, 2021), 110.
[3] Greg Kenicer and Sylvia Norton, "*Lathyrus latifolius*," *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 25, no. 4 (November 2008): 330.
[4] Kenicer and Norton, "*Lathyrus latifolius*," 330.
[5] *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, as cited in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), tr Brian Massumi, 23.

The definitions and etymologies quoted in the glossary are from the online version of The Oxford Dictionary of English, version 2.3.0.

Anna Reckin is a British poet and writer living and working in Norwich. In 2023-24 she received a DYCP grant from Arts Council England to expand her practice beyond the page, enabling her to develop collaborations with other poets, performers and visual artists. Work in progress was exhibited in September 2024 at ArtDepot Norwich, under the title "Coalesce", with performances with Susie Campbell and Nicola Simpson. Her most recent collection is *Line to Curve* (Shearsman, 2018). Other publications include *Three Reds* (Shearsman, 2011) and poems, essays and reviews in *Long Poem Magazine*, drain and *Chants de la Sirène*.

Areeya Tivasuradej The Stimulators set three objectives for Suanphak: an urban agriculture learning center, a leisure park, and a market. For Achum, Suanphak is her experimental plot to grow the familiar vegetables in a new setting and to feed her children, 2021, photo by Areeya Tivasuradej © Areeya Tivasuradej

Letting go

Join me, with Achum, at the landfill-turned-garden, Suanphak Khon Mueang Chiang Mai, or the Chiang Mai Urban Farm, where trash was omnipresent but now buried under vegetables. Occasionally, the litter resurfaced like the everyday fun stories and struggles that Achum shared with me. As The Stimulators collectively allotted state-owned cemetery land, her actions spoke to how she gardens her life and jointly cultivates slow systemic changes. Beyond the mainstream Thai Buddhist goal of individual transformation, her empathic willingness to share her time to advise me on life and gardening cultivates different kinds of responsibilities for a researcher.

text: **Areeya Tivasuradej**

One afternoon, mid-rainy season in 2021, Achum and I stood on the dirt slope at the back of the garden. The sun was setting behind the granite mountain Doi Suthep-Doi Pui, the tallest mountain near Chiang Mai city, Thailand. Concrete buildings stood in the vicinity: commercial shops, international chain hotels, shopping malls, schools, temples, and dense residential houses. A cremation site for Buddhist funerals was on the other side of the slope to the south. A row of large rain trees spanned their foliage canopy by the wall that drew the boundary between this growing space and the adjacent Muslim burial ground to the north. Occasionally, the deep “oop-oop-ooop” sounds of black Greater Coucals dominated the soundscape over the calls of other birds. Achum poured a dozen pink-coated corn seeds into her left hand and another dozen into my left hand. I looked up nervously. Achum had already walked a few steps downward towards the sunset. Her right hand pressed a small hoe into the soil and created a tiny trench. Her left finger pushed three seeds down into the trench, immediately followed by her right hand pushing the hoe to cover the trench before moving to the next spot. Another trench opened. Seeds went down. The trench disappeared amid ankle-height weeds, broken ceramic tiles, and plastic bags.

Emergence of Suanphak

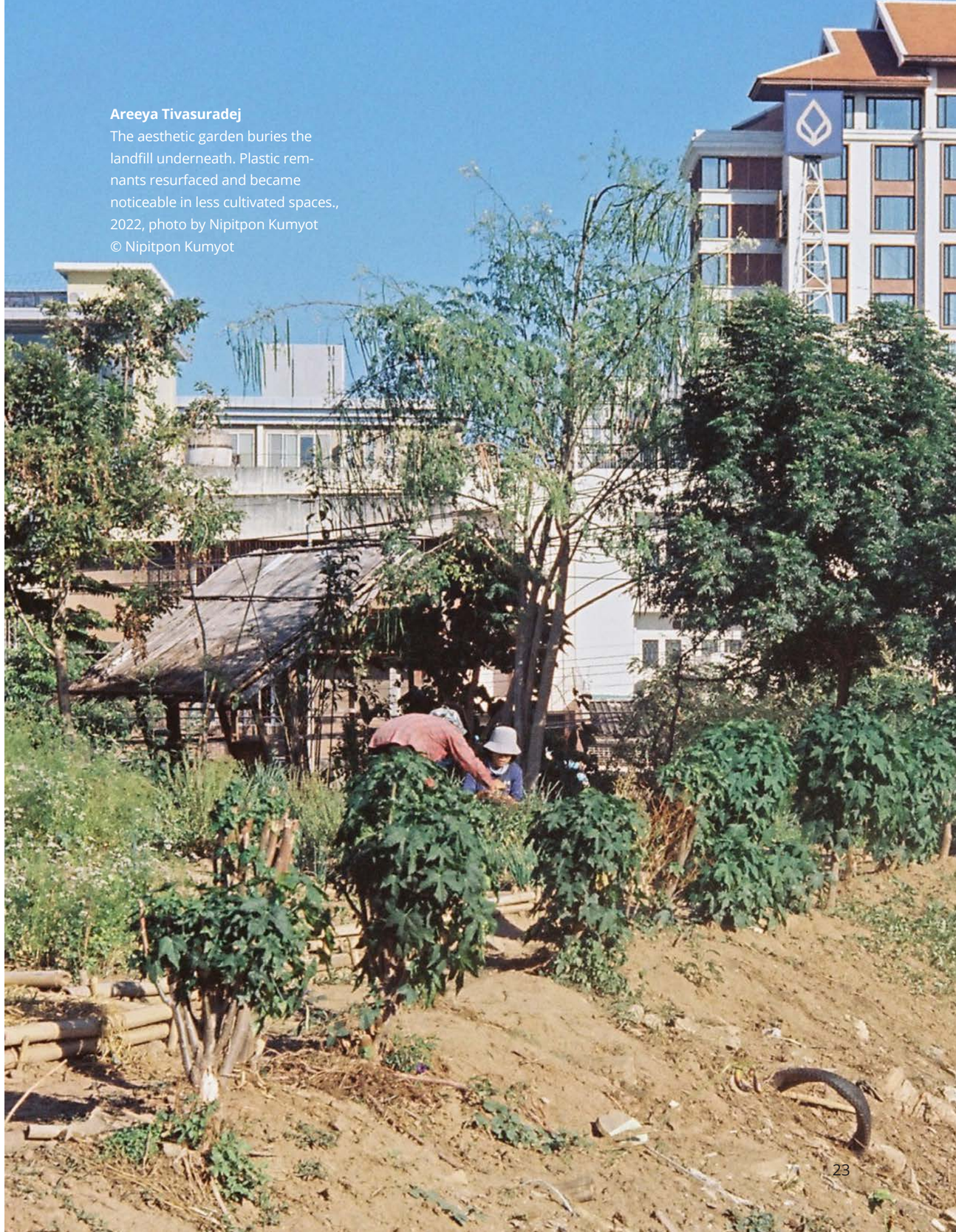
Buried waste partially resurfaced at this urban growing space, Suanphak Khon Mueang Chiang Mai (สวนผักคนเมือง-เชียงใหม่) or the Chiang Mai Urban Farm. Its name celebrated the unprecedented participatory multisectoral process that gave rise to its development during the 2020 pandemic.[1] An architectural firm, JaiBaan Studio, designed the space following their vision for nature-based landscapes in urban renewal and housing projects. Local culture advocates and environmentalists joined hands–under the name of Khana Kor Kan (คณะก่อการ) or The Stimulators–to bring unhoused persons, international students, and nearby residents to plant vegetables. Solid cement walls were torn down to create an entrance and make space for a lower, more welcoming fence at the edge of the road. Local authorities embraced the project to meet the new, uncertain phenomenon of a virus that had just triggered a global pandemic. In addition to food donation stations, The Stimulators questioned how we might enhance food security for vulnerable groups, especially those who had lost their daily income in the service and tourism sectors. They proposed to open a state-owned parcel of vacant public land within a cemetery and turn it into a pilot public suanphak.

Suan has Multiple Meanings

The word “suan” (สวน) in Thai is fluid and multiscalar. It includes home gardens, plantations, parks, and more. The plants that attach to the word suan are what distinguish the type of suan one is referring to. Suanphak (สวนผัก) is used for vegetable farms and gardens, normally a small-scale plot situated adjacent to a house. Suanyang (สวนยาง) directs us to neatly placed rows of rubber in plantations, likely monocultural but not always so. Suansatharana (สวนสาธารณะ) brings us to a public park with myriad types of flowers, greenery, and paved routes for visitors.

Supawut Boonmahathanakorn,[2] one of the project’s leading architects, once calmly explained with a smile that he was glad Suanphak Khon Mueang Chiang Mai (hereafter shortened to “Suanphak”) appeared both like a farm and a garden. He hoped that Suanphak would be situated at the edge of a blurry line between the known and the unknown, the controlled and the uncontrolled. By mixing meanings, interpretations, and activities at this place, he hoped Suanphak could shift people’s expectations and trigger them to interpret the place differently than before.

“We see an aesthetic in the landfill,” explained Supawut, “But we couldn’t make other people sense the aesthetic as we do. That’s why we linked the landfill



Areeya Tivasuradej
The aesthetic garden buries the landfill underneath. Plastic remnants resurfaced and became noticeable in less cultivated spaces., 2022, photo by Nipitpon Kumyot

to what already exists, like the Doi Suthep mountain. In this case, the design boundary is beyond the acre-sized landfill. We connect this space to something larger and hope that the existing aesthetic would be powerful enough to allow a kind of a co-evolving aesthetic." This article hopes to show that Suanphak's landscape reflects such aesthetic design and objective as an experimental model for a garden, rather than as a farm that prioritizes food production and livelihoods.[3] This garden is also more than just a public space or a space for individual life subsistence.

Animating Suanphak

I returned to Suanphak a few days after my contemplative walk through the garden with Achum. Like most mornings, the gardeners began the day holding hoses to water the plants. Each gardener had their allotted watering areas that they had divided among themselves. Achum took this chance to guide me in an exploration of the plants in each zone of Suanphak. Along the way, she pointed to seeds that she had just sown and seedlings that she had just planted. "I see only weeds. Do you remember where you planted the corn with me the other day? If I let you walk alone around here, I bet you'd step on all the tiny corn plants and kill them. It's not that easy to tell tiny corn from weeds", she joked. She was not that far off. As soon as she finished the sentence, I looked down and found a tiny corn plant right next to my foot.

Achum burst into laughter while I looked down and felt perplexed by my lack of attention and memory. "Could you grow lettuce like me?" She smiled and laughed as she asked the question. Of course not. I could never claim myself to be a gardener or a farmer. What I've been doing so far was only learning to experience and absorb as much as my body could from observing and repeating the actions that Achum and other farmers showed me. I still feel nervous to start growing. If anything, I would only hope to succeed as a researcher with the growers and the vegetal worlds. But that was not the point. Achum pointed to a vast plot in front of us and then moved her finger closer to where we stood. "I sowed the seeds there and they also grow here! Could you grow lettuce like me ?" laughed Achum. She was directing me to see the seeds that ants took from her plot and stored at a different spot. The seedlings they carried now emerged as a trail along the ground.

Many plants, like ants, emerged from the garden uninvited and unintended. Roots[4] of bitter black nightshades branched out extensively,[5] but not too deep to pull, and not deep enough to reach the landfill underneath. Emerging haphazardly from moister and looser soil, the nightshades tended to be missing their young leaves. Dry brown marks lingered at the stem tips, remnants of a hungry visitor. Occasionally, young light-green berries hung in bunches, waiting to blacken and ripen. On farmland, black nightshades are considered weeds, although their medicinal benefits—which include suppressing diabetes symptoms and cooling the body—were researched alongside their toxic effects.[6] In this garden, black nightshades were among the favorite "weeds" for Akha gardeners and visitors. Nobody knew how they arrived. Achum speculated they came with the dry cow manure that was brought in to make compost.

Many plants such as bananas, limes, papayas, and lemongrass were crowdsourced and bought with donated funds since the beginning of the garden. In addition to vegetables and flowers, large trees were brought in to give auspicious meaning to the place, planted by the hands of powerful people including politicians, government officials, and local executive authorities aiming to bind their commitment (or at least to demonstrate that they had visited the place one time). Technical support–large backhoes and discounted well-digging service–was also brought in to enable basic infrastructure such as electricity and water that plants needed to survive. Over the months, volunteers diminished, and weeds started colonizing the space. Grasses grew taller and spanned widr than humans as the rain poured down for several consecutive days. As the season turned drier, limes and bananas became withered, and the soil turned dusty. A few nearby residents, including Achum, were hired to tidy up the garden.

JaiBaan Studio

Previous page: In mid-2020, during the pandemic, a landfill in a cemetery was covered with riverbank soil and turned into a garden. By November, 2020, Suanphak was covered in lush vegetation. 2020, drone photo by JaiBaan Studio © Chiang Mai Urban Farm

Areeya Tivasuradej

Weeds spanned haphazardly in marginal spaces of Suanphak during the rainy season. Maintaining the whole garden as designed needed more than volunteers. Achum was hired, along with her neighbors, to help The Stimulators to take care the garden beyond her allotted plot, 2021, photo by Areeya Tivasuradej © Areeya Tivasuradej

Noticing vs Being With Trash

Throughout my time at the garden, I aimed to learn about vegetal agency by observing how Achum grew corn and (to put it another way) how corn grew. My eyes would fixate on the plants. Only when my hands touched the soil and dug holes to make space for plants did I start to notice the presence of garbage in the soil–a part of the vegetal beings here.[7] The wet sticky soil disgusted me more than the dry dusty soil because it stuck to my fingers. I imagined the dirty contamination in the soil mixed with plastic remnants, broken glass bottles, and used cotton buds that touched my skin. My hands became weaker. I didn't want to touch any of this anymore. What else was piled up here? I looked over to Achum. Of course, she already finished planting the eggplants and okra. Although I had only five to plant, I couldn't even get started with the first one.

The sun brightened the ground amid the rainy season's damp gray. The

Areeya Tivasuradej
Achum's preference for coriander's flowers attracts bees and other Akha residents to Suanphak. Along with The Stimulators, Achum tends the garden for herself and communities of beings, 2021, diptych, photos by Areeya Tivasuradej © Areeya Tivasuradej

newly dug hole's soil was as moist as the air in the sky. Achum shouted again, "Faster! We're not going to make it! We still have to chop the banana trunks for the chickens and collect all the vegetables for sale at the front gate!" An Akha single mother who has been growing plants in the garden since its commencement in June 2020, making her the longest-standing grower among all, Achum became a friend and a teacher. She was my guide for everything related to knowing and taking care of the garden and the community here. At the time, her daughter was only two months old. Before she moved to urban Chiang Mai, Achum worked in various locations in Thailand as a housekeeper at a chicken farm, a worker in a rubber glove factory, and a farm worker in sugarcane and tea plantations. Back in the rural highland, she grew cabbages and other vegetables for sale while working as a craftsperson in a royal agricultural project. She decided to leave her former partner after a series of physical abuses and arrived in Chiang Mai with her three younger children.

Achum moved closer. I still stood and stared blankly into the open air, contemplating slowly about the half-buried trash in the soil. She pointed to the ground and drew a line in the air. This would be the row where we dug holes and maintained distance between each hole. Instead of digging the soil, I used a small hoe to push torn cloth away towards the pile of other waste: untorn packets of instant noodle sauces, Styrofoam pieces, fruit foam nets, drinking straws, plastic cups, candy wraps, sponges, and broken bricks that I just gathered. I felt disgusted. It reminded me of my first visit to this place when I joined a group of volunteers to grow basils and marigolds near the entrance. While digging the soil and preparing the bed, I pulled out plastic materials and long clothes that seemed to not belong to the soil. Pulling out trash from the soil in a farmland is not unusual. Discarded bottles, cigarette buds, fertilizer sacks, and snack wraps are easily found ubiquitously in farmlands. But there is usually not so much congregated in one place and appeared more as I dug the hole to make room for seedlings. Other volunteers were cheerfully joking with one another as they spent the afternoon outdoors during the pandemic. I gave up trying to compile the plastic waste that I kept unearthing. A small old and torn plastic wrap reminded me: this urban growing space sat on a 4-m high landfill.

Yet throughout the few months that I spent visiting the garden with Achum, trash was mostly outside of my scope and attention. The vegetal worlds dominated the landscape. In hindsight, my own ignorance blinded me from paying attention to the trash. When anyone asked me about it, my response was blank. I wanted the place to survive and flourish so that it could showcase a happy multisectoral collaborative ending. If you're visiting this place for the first time and have no history with it, you won't see the trash and landfill underneath. Chemical testing in the laboratory might prove something. But would that be necessary?

Not that no one worried about the potential toxic leaks and leaps from the underneath landfill. Much earlier, The Stimulators had tested soil and water samples and the results were acceptable. Compost and soil dredged from the nearby Ping riverbank now accumulated and are buried the landfill. Visitors and I who roamed on the garden grounds rarely noticed the trash underneath. Occasionally, someone would remind us about the landfill.

"Can't they see the vegetables are growing?" responded Achum after I shared that few people asked about the landfill and the fear of contamination. She looked at the lettuces, beans, eggplants, and chilies. "The vegetable roots don't go deep. The topsoil is about a meter on top of the landfill." As I cultivated and picked plants with her, I heard stories from other people at the garden about access to fresh and cheaper vegetables that were of better quality and lacked chemical substances. I also heard about discrimination against highlanders like the Akha people, the illiterate poor, and those with different ways of living, especially women who needed to navigate through the city and bear the responsibility of being mothers. When it rained, the soil became saturated with moisture. Some

Areeya Tivasuradej

Picking tomatoes as Achum and another gardener converse in Akha language. I try to speed up my hands to pick the right tomatoes as Acum shows me by her actions. 2022, photo by Nipitpon Kumyot

eroded, cracked, and exposed the multiple layers of soil, grassroots, plastic, and other waste on the slope.

Aesthetic and Green Privilege

The gardening landscape resonates with both the rural agricultural scene and urban design, depicting the tension between the different gardening practices that strangely and collaboratively transformed a landfill into a garden. The project showed the influences of the municipal sustainable city plan, obligated to follow the national 20-year strategy;[8] architectural nature-based designs; hilltribe Akha gardeners' hands; and rooting plants themselves. The politics of aesthetic values that aimed to preserve the green, wild rural landscape date back to the Siamese era and the influence of Western colonial forestry and agriculture.[9] Many other ethnicities and indigenous peoples in Thailand, like Achum's highland community, had been displaced or forced to grow commercial crops as part of Thailand's development. Today, state-led greening policies, such as tree planting, eco-tourism, and growing organic vegetables, intertwined with the Thai imagination for the self-sufficient[10] economy became another neoliberal taming project. For a middle-class Thai from the central lowland like me, it's easy and slippery to romanticize[11] Indigenous peo-

Areeya Tivasuradej
Fungi like Schizophyllum commune Fr. emerge randomly at Suanphak. Achum guides me to see unplanted beings which she also takes to make lunch at the garden, 2021, photo by Areeya Tivasuradej

ples as forest guardians.[12] If I come to affirm the architects' vision of aesthetic values in the waste underneath the garden, would I be ignoring the structural and cultural violence that are enabling green gentrification?[13]

These critical views became clearer only during a conversation I had with Achum a few years later.

Shifting Toxicity, Compassionate Power-sharing

At home, my cousin had been quiet for a few days. His genuine smile looked solemn. The loud noise from online comedy channels is muted. He finally broke the silence: "Could you help me? I need to pay back to the money lender because my friend just ditched me". The amount he asked for would require a person like Achum to work at a minimum daily wage without spending for a whole year. I wanted to help my cousin because I feared he would return to jail. He wasn't making much as a delivery gig rider to pay for his teenage daughter's living expenses and tuition. I became stressed. I didn't know what to do. I called Achum.

Achum consoled me by telling me to "ploi wang" (ปล่อยวาง) go—and reminding me of her own life stories. An illiterate single mother who was raising a teenager and four children, she worked days as a gardener and nights selling bracelets and keychains with colorful elephants to tourists. When she moved to Chiang Mai, she stood in the sun most days as a construction worker. When the city shut down during the pandemic and tourists dissipated, Achum gave birth to her youngest daughter. On some days, she stood in long queues waiting for rice donations. She reminded me that now she's paying rent on top of other daily expenses and also saving to participate in the affordable housing project unfolding over the coming decade. If she could have her own house and land, she would be growing and selling whatever she wanted without worrying that someone could tell her to move again. She told me if she could still do all this and dream about her house, I had to let my cousin go.

Ploi wang (ปล่อยวาง), "letting go", combines two words: to release and to put something down. It implies detaching oneself from the stress trigger, and then taking a breath, pausing, and putting your heart together to grow larger than the problem. Buddhist dharma practice suggests that ploi wang may lead to inner peace.

Although I grew up in a Theravada Buddhist society, I feel reluctant to turn to Buddhism for spiritual refuge. Numerous rules restrict and discipline our daily practices. Most people follow the ceremonial procedures and give offerings as dana to accumulate merits in this life to alter the afterlife. The unknown actions in the past dictate our presence and the cycle of karma. If this is the life cycle, would it even be possible for me to help my cousin become a bit better in this life? Why should I care?

Paying attention by interrogating and linking what discomforts us about social structures–to consider why I should or shouldn't care–is part of letting go. It is not disassociating ourselves,[14] but rather, it represents a different way to understand karma and how to live with others. What I have been told about karma actually "supports cultural violence" and legitimizes structural violence by keeping people "passive and subservient".[15] Although I grew up in a Buddhist-dominant society, I cannot claim any expertise in Buddhism. I never thought about being a spiritual person nor found myself devoted to any world religion. I associated Buddhism with authoritative and dictatorial power: with the state-making project and patriarchy.[16]

"From the Buddhist perspective, the source of altruism comes from the capacity to feel another's pain", wrote the Venerable Bhikkhuni Shih Chao-Hwei, a prolific Buddhist scholar and monk in a conversation with Western ethicist Peter Singer "With this ability, we are able to break the barrier between self and others and generate a feeling of empathetic consciousness—called compassion in Buddhism and conscience in Confucianism... As long as we are willing to cultivate it, this quality can be developed from the inside. We are all capable of expanding our

Areeya Tivasuradej

Achum is harvesting chilies and eggplants. I keep trying to learn to notice the different shade of chilies and do gardening work as she shows me how to dwell in the garden, 2022, photo by Nipitpon Kumyot

compassion. It turns out that no individual is closed or isolated from the outer world. Our sensations and intentions are connected with other lives through obvious or hidden channels, and through these channels, we are able to perceive others' pain and suffering".[17]

Achum's response, her account of her own life, consoled me. I didn't feel she was trying to inspire me that I could do better. But her life struggle reminded me of the hardship that we all have to endure. I was moved by a moment when she was willing to share her life stories loudly and confidently rather than speaking in the soft humble tone she tended to use when she spoke with a person who was an authority figure or had a higher social status. I understood these moments as trust–feeling you have someone to go through hard times with you in your life. It's this connection that allowed me to learn to let go of the suffering and look forward to taking action to understand its causes. The cause of suffering was my ego: feeling I could find a better solution for my cousin. It's also the same ego that urged me to think a researcher could find the solutions or advocate for a better world, which might actually mean just a world that better suits me.

Towards the end of the 2021 rainy season, the deputy district officer arrived at Suanphak to investigate how the public land had been used and to verify its

JaiBaan Studio
Khana Kor Kan or The Stimulators of Suanphak Khon Mueang Chiang Mai or the Chiang Mai Urban Farm are a collective of active Chiang Mai residents in various sectors and professions who took the opportunity to turn the landfill into a garden during the pandemic, 2020, photo by JaiBaan Studio

existence. As he signed the verification document–adding gardening as another type of land use for the cemetery–with the signatures of a municipality authority and The Stimulators as witnesses, Suanphak emerged in the bureaucratic system. When Achum's hands tended the soil and let seeds go , she was re-imagining the garden and sharing her world. At a different scale, The Stimulators aimed to maximize the utilitarian values of vacant lands by involvin[18] the municipality to fit the garden into its plan. Gardening with Achum has taught me to notice her relations to her world. Noticing the growing plants, especially those unlike what we are accustomed to every day, reveals ways to encourage interdependent collaboration[19] and to emancipate ourselves.

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The garden as earth observation artwork

This article explores the design and implementation of a *Tree Circle Garden* at the National Gullele Botanic Gardens in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with a focus on its development as an innovative public space. Its use is uniquely diverse supporting mentorship of the next generation about indigenous knowledge, preservation of native plant species, and role in creative climate earth observation.

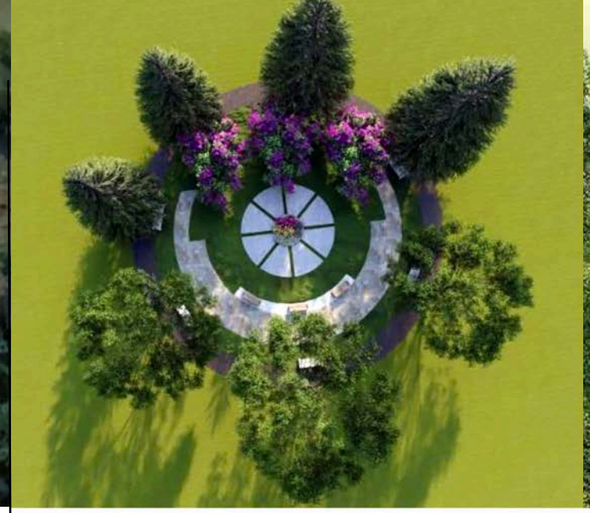
text and images: **Nura Mohammedata Beshir and Sylvia Grace Borda**

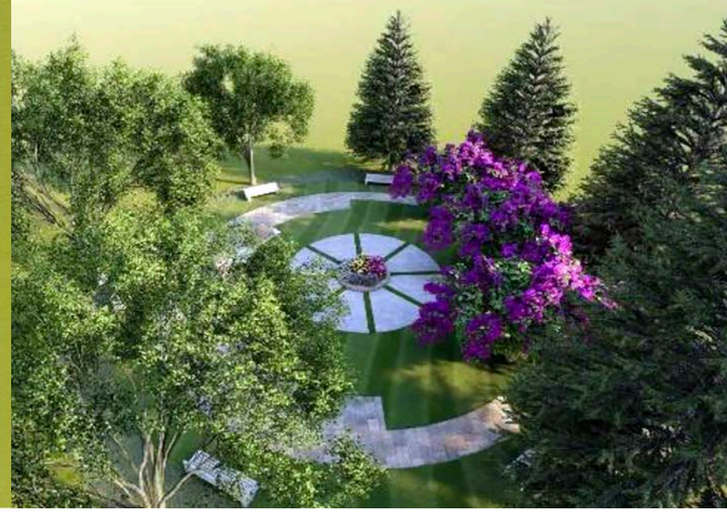
Throughout human civilization, gardens have had a significant role in representing both a socio-cultural and a custodian relationship between humans and their natural surroundings. Gardens have been variously identified as types of socio-environmental and nature-culture arrangements [1] labeled as sacred places, as private and public leisure spaces, and as sites of well-being and subsistence. Many countries have a long history of building prominent 'national' public gardens, coalescing around national identity interests, conservation and education.[2] Ethiopia, for instance, is representative of a more recent history related to similar national garden movements.[3] Food gardens dominate the culture in Ethiopia having both a public and a private role.[4] They permeate the life of Ethiopians from balcony planters to allotments and farms. In Ethiopia, the garden possibly represents the most complex indicators of social life, revealing many clues about socio-economic and health indicators.[5] It also offers insights into how Ethiopians perceive landscape and their surrounding flora, and the relationship between urban and rural groups and individuals to their environment. [6]

For example, many households throughout the country are involved in the planting of what would be referred to in the West as kitchen gardens.[7] These small garden spaces provide vegetables, medicinal herbs, fruit and even wood, offering families important food for the table, medicinal ingredients, fuel for the fireplace, and even animal fodder. A common staple among the population of 20 million is the *Ensete ventricosum* (Ethiopian banana) and coffee plants which many Ethiopians tend. [8] Often kitchen gardens incorporate food and medicinal herbs that also appear in Mediterranean climates, such as oregano, thyme, rosemary, and bay, where water is similarly limited. Kitchen gardens in Ethiopia are also doubly important in terms of local food security and climate challenges, but biodiversity can be threatened by the focus on limited crops. Malnutrition, food security and food safety become further compounded as Ethiopia continues to suffer from climate changing weather conditions that prevail from extreme flooding to drought. [9]

In this context, there is patchy evidence of aesthetic and leisure gardens in Ethiopia. The largest botanic garden in the country is the Ethiopian national Gullele Botanic Garden (GBG) in Ethiopia's capital city of Addis Ababa.[10] The GBG is considerably younger than heritage gardens such as Kew Gardens in the UK (established 1759). The city of Addis Ababa and the Addis Ababa University signed a memorandum in 2005 to jointly develop and manage the GBG. This agreement enabled 705 hectares on the outskirts of the nation's capital city to be developed.

Earth Art Studio
Tree Circle Garden as seen by Google Earth. Google Maps, Maxar Technologies (10/4/2023) Map coordinates: 9°04’21”N 38°43’16”E (optional URL https://tinyurl.com/3znhswtb) © Earth Art Studio





Nura Beshir
Landscape concept designs depict the Gullele National Botanic *Tree Circle* as an area for refuge, contemplation, and learning. Indigenous trees, shrubs and medicinal plants were selected for this planting un order to reflect Ethiopia’s diverse flora. 2022 ©Nura Beshir.

GBG was opened to the public in 2018. The garden is used for research, education, eco-tourism and conservation and currently hosts 780 of the country's estimated 6,500 plant species, representing agro-ecological zones ranging from 125 meters below sea level to 5,000 meters above sea level.[11] Ethiopia has one of the richest flora heritages in Africa[12] and the GBG is responding to this challenge in partnership with the National Herbarium at Addis Ababa University (100,000 herbarium specimens).[13] A particular impetus is to evolve a plan for how the country can mitigate significant climate concerns, amongst other research questions.[14]

Against this backdrop, the co-authors, Nura Mohammedata Beshir, landscape architect, and Sylvia Grace Borda, climate artist, were invited to apply and develop a new space at the Garden. The garden would build on the mission values of the GBG, namely:

(1) Provide a public space for recreation and climate learning and
(2) Facilitate dialogue with individuals and communities in working together to address climate change at local and global levels through tree planting.

The commission provided the authors, Beshir and Borda, an opportunity to continue their work together following an international partnership and community project where agro-pastoralists from Kofele, West Arsi, Oromia in Ethiopia directed by Hussein Watta from ROBA (Rural Organization for the Betterment of Agropastoralists), delivered a large scale planting for climate resilience, supported by an international creative team of Borda and Beshir, and Scottish artist, J. Keith Donnelly. [15] The group specifically established a community tree nursery as a nature based solution to assist with soil rehabilitation. Two thousand *Eucalyptus globulus saplings were planted*—a highly exploited plant in Ethiopian agroforestry as it is largely inedible to animals, but the leaves, bark and wood of the tree are staples in medicine and building materials.[16] Of relevance to the GBG commission, this former project incorporated a portion of the flora saplings for community climate monitoring on the ground and through earth observation.

Beshir and Borda engaged with ROBA and community members from Kofele to co-generate ideas for the GBG. The group explored the concept of ‘what if’ we could design a garden artwork where anyone in the world could see it. What would it look like? How could it justly serve local communities and climate resilience? The idea of creating a garden at scale in the shape of a symbolic set of concentric circles (*a Tree Circle*) was put forward for consultation. For the Oromo people (an Indigenous Ethiopian community),[17] the form of a circle represents cyclical time, nature, and balance.

In this way, the *Tree Circle* Garden, comprised of native trees planted in circle forms on the ground, would honor indigenous values. The Oromo people, see, live, and respect their world operating in cycles or interlocking circles. As such, the concept of circular time and learning eludes to knowing the past, present, and future as an assembly of equal parts that function and must be considered together.[18] For example, the Earth offers land which encircles all things and gives it life. The rain, for instance, cloaks and encircles the Earth with much needed water that sustains animals, plants, rivers and oceans. This circular movement of water from earth to atmosphere and back helps life flourish. Nature and people are linked together. It is important to observe rainfall, plants, and the world in circular seasons.

Beshir, in her role as landscape architect for the GBG commission, envisioned the *Tree Circle* as a space for reflection and education, wanting to create a place where more city people could connect with nature and each other. Growing up in Addis Ababa, a city with limited green spaces, Beshir experienced first-hand the challenges of urban living in the face of climate change. Frequent floods and extreme heat shaped her understanding of how fragile the balance between nature and human settlement could be. These early experiences deepened her appreciation for the role that plants played in sustaining life. For her, the Tree Circle was more than a design project—it was a return to roots.

For Borda, art is a powerful tool to communicate complex ideas in a way that resonates with communities and stakeholders. As a climate artist, she drew on invaluable perspectives emphasizing the role of art in making complex climate issues tangible. As a point of difference from the land artwork of the 1970s, the *Tree Circle garden* at GBG was intended to have multiple authorships with a common goal of ecological restoration and stewardship.

Borda also considered that if the *Tree Circle* is planted at a large scale, it could be tracked by satellite as an earth observation artwork. What this means is that the planting could be discovered in Google Earth, identifiable by its distinctive concentric circles, and thus anyone globally with a mobile phone and Google Earth browser could track the development of the garden.

The *Tree Circle Garden* at GBG draws particular inspiration from earli-

Nura Beshir
Laying out the Gullele *Tree Circle* at the National Botanic Garden, Autumn 2022. Photo courtesy of Nura Beshir. 2022 ©Nura Beshir

er land art movements. Land Art or Earth Art emerged in the 1960s and through the 1970s as a new contemporary art discipline, in which artists were using Nature—earth, air, light, and water—to create site-specific artworks.[19] Land Art during this era emerged at a time when artists were wary of the art scene in New York and other metropolitan centers, and wanted to break free of being constrained in 'white cube spaces' and physical institutional boundaries in order to interact with the environment. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in Utah is a seminal example—it exists in a state of continual change, to be observed and recorded in situ. Entropy as a theme continues to be critical in the development of restorative biological systems and is reflected in climate-based artworks, such as the pioneering eco-climate artist, Agnes Denes (b. 1931) who shifted perspectives on the nature-culture divide towards mediating forms of eco-justice.[20]

The GBG *Tree Circle*, similar to the creation of land art, is composed of Nature, located in situ, and not replicated for gallery display. Hence the artwork requires photographic evidence and maps to validate its presence. In this case, satellite imagery can provide part of that evidence, available through web-based browsers using Google Earth, for example. The concept of creating an earth observation artwork that could be tracked by satellite over time via a mobile phone was excitingly adopted as a key aim of the project by the GBG staff. Google Earth is seen as a public commons, and ideally, anyone in the world with an Internet connection can access satellite views of different points in the globe. GBG staff selected several locations for the proposed *Tree Circle* and settled on the site coordinates *9.07245142993744*, *38.72127330562939*. This site offers the most unobstructed area in the park where satellites can track the growth of the flora. It is also a site in need of ecological restoration, where adjacent urban residents could benefit from improved community health and well-being in the form of water table recharge, soil erosion prevention, and a garden for reflection.

By arranging the trees in circular patterns visible from satellite imagery, the GBG *Tree Circle* takes the form of a global symbol of connectedness—a living artwork that visually narrates individual and community commitment to a sustainable future.[21] The *Tree Circle* garden was designed by Beshir with five circles. Each concentric circle showcases different flora and two rings of tree circles. The GBG staff profiled local and self-initiated community tree nurseries as significant contributors to the country's reforestation and climate mitigation efforts. Some of the trees that form part of the GBG *Tree Circle* include saplings sourced from the ROBA Kofele community-managed tree nursery. For visual contrast, flowering plants like asters, lilies, and herbs were planted in the innermost circle to add texture and height variation to the project. These plants reference the variety of flora which may appear in home allotments, particularly herb varieties. On completion, the site has a remarkable diameter of 39m, covering 1,200 m2 of land, and featuring over 43 native trees, including *Olea africana*, *Croton macrostachyus*, *Cordia africana*, *Juniperus procera*, *Acacia abysinica*, and *Phoenix reclinate*.

As shown in the Google Earth image, the native trees selected for the tree circle are still relatively immature. They will become much more dominant in the following years as they flourish and spread their canopies. The *Tree Circle* implementation encountered certain hurdles, such as the steep site requiring slope stabilization in which retaining walls using locally sourced stone were built to prevent soil erosion. Heavy rains and flooding not only delayed construction, impacted the selection of plant species suitable for the area but also required a scheme to carefully channel runoff away from young seedlings and the built areas. The resulting tree circle offered a nature-based solution that specifically works with green infrastructure to provide connectivity points required to drive environmental change and enable further rewilding approaches.[22]

Critically, the garden is intended to be a contemplative space as much as it is an educational one, and this is reinforced by its design (inclusive of seating) and proximity to a forested area.[23] This garden is characterized by its paving structures forming repetitive geometric forms, and reflecting an exploration of indigenous landscaping, pushing the boundaries of its application to how we can plan, design and understand both physical and virtual space (i.e. Google Earth representation) and our place across these planes.[24]

In Ethiopia, there are the traditional practices of cultivating diverse crops and medicinal plants in kitchen gardens, not just for survival but as a form of land care that interconnects humans, plants, and ecosystems. The *Tree Circle* embodies these principles by showcasing native and culturally significant plants, each chosen for its ecological and symbolic value. Such as *Olea Africana* known for their resilience to drought and their deep roots in Ethiopian culture. *Croton macrostachyus* and *Cordia africana*, are species that provide shade and habitat for local wildlife. The innermost circle features flowering plants like asters and lilies, which add bursts of color and attract pollinators, while medicinal herbs, such as rosemary and thyme, nod to Ethiopia's tradition of using plants for healing.

Such partnerships between different science and traditional knowledge-holding communities are often referred to as *two-eyed seeing*, that is representing the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and traditional ways of knowing and

seeing from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and using both eyes together to strengthen both western and Indigenous science and knowledge sets.[25]

The GBG creative team represents peoples of science and nature and two-eyed seeing[26] is manifested in the co-created design of the *Tree Circle* garden as a site for learning but also for healing and spiritual connection bringing together intergenerational communities—youth, adults, and elders. To look at a piece of wood—we need to view it as an extension of the natural world (as part of a tree) and not as a commodity.

Drawing further from a joint Western and Indigenous perspective**,** the earth observation *Tree Circle* is also a living artwork. Living artworks, as defined by the authors, comprise the most powerful unit in an earth artwork, that is the unit of Nature. It is this perception of Nature as a subject rather than as an object. Nature becoming its own co-author has been critical to the sustainable future of this work. Living artworks activate local audiences from the ground up.[27]

The resulting earth observation climate artwork at GBG represents a public commons of accessible biodiversity, what the 2020 UN Convention on Biodiversity referred to as building an ecological civilisation.[28] Gardens can benefit from the incorporation of cultural practitioners, artists, creatives and storytellers, to act as enablers, not only to facilitate awareness but to embed knowledge about native species conservation into our day-to-day dialogue.[29]

Connecting and communicating represent a coalescence of these approaches to be effective. The adaptability of the living artworks must be foregrounded so that they can be experienced by local residents in situ, and for those unable to do so, to experience the artworks in other ways.[30] It was a core objective for the team to ensure that the *Tree Circle* becomes virtually accessible through Google Earth. For Ethiopians, where digital infrastructure is limited, the opportunity to have immediate access to satellite data for their own climate and bio-diversity monitoring and observation of land is potentially empowering. The *Tree Circle* garden was designed as a visual-spatial entity to enter the digital commons to capture, preserve, and make it available to the global public to follow climate monitoring of the land and observe biodiversity in action. The garden erodes the stasis of a space to be viewed at only ground level—its X,Y axis of viewing online open opportunities that move beyond the five senses of touch, smell, taste, hear, and see—it enters into a sixth space of digital capture and dimensional interpretation.

These dimensions are especially tangible in a number of forms, supporting the real, remote, and virtual that co-exist in tandem and part of the garden's interpretative potential to connect and communicate. This potential is equally about bridging the space between urban and rural corridors, and reinterpreting the nature-culture discourse.[31] By acknowledging and utilizing rural Indigenous practices in urban centers and more widely, a more balanced evolution and respect for nature care can be understood.[32] Equally, the importance of the arts as a facilitator[33] enables wider communities to more effectively reflect, communicate and visualise impactful biodiversity futures where all citizens are stakeholders.[34] These combined partnerships are critical to how we can articulate changing climates, e.g. through the arts and storytelling,[35] and especially in a real-world context of the lived experience of Ethiopians.[36]

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Clare Fuery-Jones
The Monaro plains, 2024
© Clare Fuery-Jones

A muse and model for a way of being

In southern New South Wales, Australian artist Imants Tillers inhabits a home and garden surrounded by bushland. The son of Latvian refugees, Tillers works through issues of displacement and self-finding throughout his oeuvre, identifying the garden as a context in which connections to past and present experiences are simultaneously possible. Here the author explores how conections between Tillers' painting practice and his garden have shaped his approach to questions of "belonging".

text: **Clare Fuery-Jones**

From his studio, set within and sheltered by the garden he has inhabited for almost thirty years, Australian artist Imants Tillers (1950-) paints according to his canvasboard system—a method he invented and that has defined his practice, along with appropriation, since 1981. Both aspects have been rigorously analysed elsewhere, primarily by Graham Coulter-Smith (who coined and theorised Tillers' "Canvasboard System"), Wystan Curnow (whose main interest lay in the sources from whom Tillers appropriates) and Ian McLean (who has explored the philosophical implications of Tillers' system).[1] Tillers' own writing exemplifies his artistic development from a practice steeped in postmodernist doubt regarding the importance of place and origin, to a later reappraisal of the meaning inherent in these same locaters.[2] This reappraisal has itself been traced to a combination of factors. One, explored by Elita Ansone, is Tillers' developing a sense of connection to his Latvian heritage.[3] Another, developed by Deborah Hart, is his move to a small town in southern New South Wales, and the imposing conditions of its landscape.[4] What has not been addressed in literature to date, however, is how this relocation involved also, and primarily, Tillers' developing a relationship with the decrepit garden at his new home, Blairgowrie, and his growing consciousness of its effect on his own sense of "belonging". As Tillers has described, at its most fundamental level, his work is about "belonging" and "not belonging".[5] Informed by his own experience of being between (Latvian and Australian) cultures, a more general interest in the diasporic condition (common within multi-cultural Australia) defines his work.

Tillers' garden is, at times, explicit subject-matter in his paintings. More basically though, his garden has served to inform, and give shape to, Tillers' artistic interests and practice. It is to a series of connections, between Tillers' work and his garden, that I attend here.[6] The connections I identify and will proceed to explore consist of the following: firstly, the connection between long-standing themes in Tillers' paintings—namely, ancestral memory, and how it is manifested, and mediated by the present—and his experience of these themes actualising within, and by virtue of, his garden.[7] Secondly, the connection between Tillers' canvasboard system, and his garden's way of being, which is realised through their sharing of two conditions: what Tillers has defined as a "model of tolerance"—an openness, that is, to variety—and constant, non-linear process—a kind of incessant motion, and becoming. Looking to Tillers' paintings and his garden as primary guides I adopt a reflective approach that seeks to evoke the sense and feel of both more tangibly. Alongside this, I analyse the artist's writings, interviews I have conducted with him, and secondary source material to develop the connections I outline above. Ultimately, this joint approach seeks to illuminate how Tillers' garden is, to his painting and practice, both a muse and a model for a way of being.

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It is a crisp April morning when I journey southward from Canberra to the artist's garden. My drive takes over an hour, the highway wending its way, slowly upwards, through an open highland region in southern New South Wales called the "Monaro". Situated between Canberra and the Snowy Mountains, the Monaro is characterised by gently rolling grasslands and sparse bushland. Dating its geological formation back at least 34 million years,[8] it is the traditional land of the Ngarigo people.[9]

In 1996, having lived in Sydney all his life, Tillers moved with his family to a small town situated in the Monaro region, with the mountains almost at their doorstep. Tillers relates how, whenever they travel to or from their homestead called "Blairgowrie", "every journey [...] entails contact with the austere local [...] landscape tempered by heat, frost, drought and decomposing granite".[10] Built in the 1860s, Blairgowrie, like all such colonial structures and land settlements across Australia, is mired in the basic fact of Aboriginal dispossession. This human history, and its inherent entwinements with the surrounding landscape—how the latter has been farmed, built upon, and *settled*—also impressed itself upon Tillers. Having Latvian parents who arrived in Australia as "Displaced Persons" following World War II, Tillers has always been discomfited, troubled, by Australia's violent founding, and uncertain about how his own history of ancestral displacement might be accommodated here.[11]

In the Australian context (and other European-colonised nations around the world) the very presence of (Western-style) gardens, their making and maintenance, is held in tension with the history that has made them possible.[12] Blairgowrie's garden, laid out in its current form during the 1930s,[13] is no exception to these conditions. Yet, the presence of the surrounding bushland, sloping upwards towards the back and side of the property, is constantly felt and visible here. This blurred boundary between garden and non-garden evokes how both landscapes, and the histories they signify, pertain alongside each other, share the same ground, and yet still maintain their own associations, and ways of life. On moving to Blairgowrie, Tillers, and his wife Jennifer Slatyer thus found themselves not only as caretakers/makers of its garden, but observed by and bidden into contact with, the extending Monaro beyond.[14] As such, Tillers' own liminality—his wondering "Where am I?"—was by no means erased at Blairgowrie, given that "where" is, in that location (and many others), both complex and multiple. Rather, the garden provided a space in which such conundra of belonging could lie more lightly.

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My mind quietened by the journey and the Monaro's gradating golds, shifting cloudscapes, I creep my car up the shady drive and park next to a stand of old cypresses sheltering the garden's edge. Beyond the wire fence line, scraggy broadleaf peppermint gums nestle between rocky outcrops, and dust-coloured wallaby grasses sway in their unkempt autumn habits. As I amble around to the sunny porch that runs the length of the house, the garden reveals itself. And it is beautiful, easing into its year's rest, late anemones holding up their delicate faces to a more temperate sun. Near the front door, a crab apple lounges in the last of its burgundy leaves. Hydrangeas sit closer to the earth, turning their own foliage through yellow, rust and pink coral. From the porch three shallow terraces descend back towards the road, the lowest with a glimmering pond at its centre, and each with banks of perennial plantings that look different each time I visit, their numerous varieties keeping to their own rhythms of dormancy and splendour. On the edge of the second terrace, and most striking when approaching the house from the artist's studio at the bottom of the garden, a birch grove looks delicate and exotic against the bushland visible at its back. This is Blairgowrie. I have arrived.

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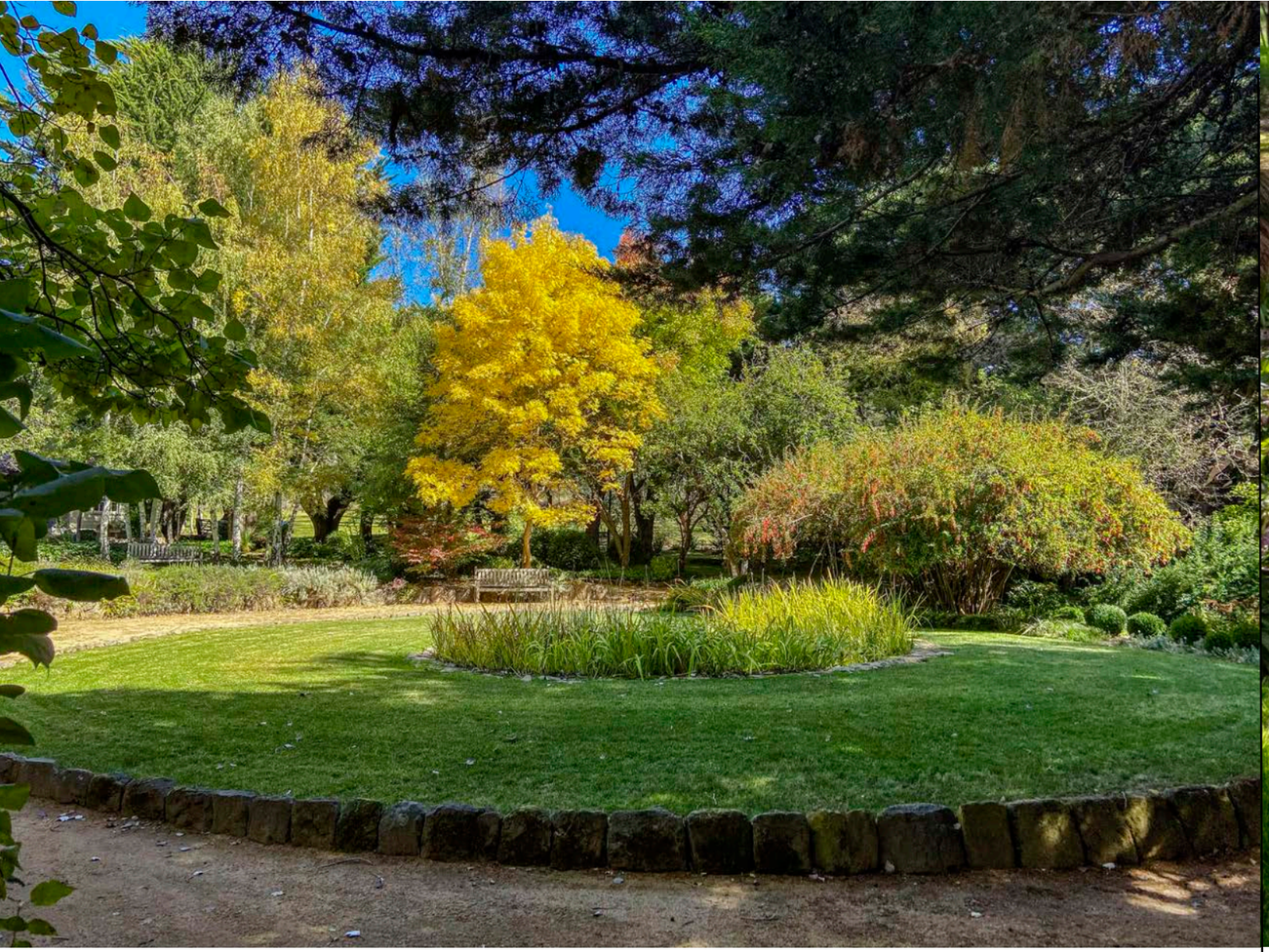
Part of the appeal for Tillers in moving to the Monaro was its climate, and the prospect of a differentiated four seasons.[15] Unlike in Sydney's subtropical humidity, northern hemisphere plants that rely on cold and temperate heat can thrive at Blairgowrie. The garden was thus amenable to vegetation described by Tillers' mother in her stories of lush, gentle, shaded Latvian landscape.[16] Though he did not visit Latvia until his mid-twenties these stories established its landscape in Tillers' imaginary as a kind of otherworldly paradise, far removed from grey-green Eucalypt canopies, their potent, sinus-cleaning scent after rain, and Australia's stark white light that heats and shimmers the air. The first artworks Tillers ever saw were reproductions of popular Latvian landscape paintings, which acted as visual aids to his mother's oral history. In one such work, Tillers recalls how, "It was early spring, with ice melting, stands of birches, and I thought: "look at that"".[17] On visiting Latvia as an adult, birch and lilac's native profusion impressed themselves on Tillers. His experience of visiting family friends who lived surrounded by birch trees, and drinking with them its fermented sap—a local delicacy—created for him a lived connection to these plants, which had always been ancestrally familiar, though foreign and markedly out of place where he had grown up.[18]

Trees in particular, because of their size, age, presence, seem potent points of actual and metaphorical connection to both our individual and collective pasts. A grove of silver birches was amongst the first plantings Tillers and Slatyer made at Blairgowrie.[19] Now well-established they appear at ease, their cascades of serrated leaves often heard chattering from the porch; roots carpeted by forget-me-nots in springtime. Immediately behind the young birches are a row of sturdy cypresses. Perhaps the oldest trees on the property, they hold significance for Tillers also. As he describes,

> I look out [from] the studio and see those cypress trunks and think, "Wow, they're one hundred and fifty years old", I think it's a kind of... you develop a respect for these forms of life really. It's not just a pretty garden [...] I think [it's more than that].[20]

Clare Fuery-Jones

Old gate, and boundary fence behind,



Jennifer Slatyer
The pond in autumn, 2023 © Jennifer Slatyer

Whereas the birches act as ciphers to a landscape Tillers has not lived in but nonetheless feels connected to within himself, the cypresses are touchstones to Blairgowrie's history, where he finds himself now. The bushland behind, dominated by varied species of Eucalypt and Casuarina adds yet another layer of emplacement. Though the individual trees are of differing ages, their collective presence maintains an environment that existed long-prior to the cypresses, the birches, and the Blairgowrie garden.

As a system reliant on and responsive to human-shaping, the garden is also self-propelling; like any organism, its processes are in constant flux. It this interminable activity that repels total human control.[21] And, it is such activity that, if left unchecked, would be practised on *it* by the broader, native ecosystem beyond.[22] Images of the garden's state on Tillers' and Slatyer's arrival indicate early signs of this: beds spilling beyond their boundaries, grasses wild, and paths overgrown. It is the regular processes the garden demands that establishes relationships between gardeners and what they grow, and consistently iterates the present as both tangible and happening.[23] All the while, this is balanced or held in place by deeper-time structures (geological formation) and longer-term processes (decomposition, tree maturation) that serve to locate the garden in terms of its situating landscape, and the gardener in terms of both. Though he now gardens little, Tillers observes his

Clare Fuery-Jones
Blairgowrie birches, 2022 © Clare Fuery-Jones

garden's intricate motion on his repeated journeys between the house and his studio. As he describes,

> [With] all the plants here, I'm very attuned to when they blossom, and some of the bushes blossom just for a couple of days, and then they recede, and it's like… a moment when they're kind of asserting themselves as some kind of being – "look at me, isn't this incredible" […]; the blossoming is a crucial moment.[24]

For Tillers, it is this practice of paying close, and careful attention that continues to activate his relationship with plants in his garden like the birch trees, thereby layering his ancestral memory of them with encounters from daily experience.

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In 2007, Tillers painted *The Birch Trees*, a *kind* of study of the young grove in his garden. I qualify "study" here because the nature of Tillers' work is such that his subjects are not drawn from life, but from other sources. An appropriation artist since early in his career, Tillers "quotes" (the term preferred by the artist) from sources across art history. References to Latvia—through symbols, language,

Clare Fuery-Jones
Blossom cuttings on the artist's desk,
2023 © Clare Fuery-Jones

Imants Tillers
The Birch Trees, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on canvasboards, 152 x 142 cm, 2007 © Imants Tillers

Imants Tillers
Fierce Paradise, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on canvasboards, 228.6 x 213.3 cm, 2021 © Imants Tillers

Jennifer Slatyer

Water irises, 2024 © Jennifer Slatyer

and other Latvian artists' work—are common across Tillers' oeuvre.[25] After his arrival at Blairgowrie, these references were joined by plants, found, (by virtue of his own nurturing of them) both there and in Latvia. As well as birch trees, lilac, violets, irises and cornflowers are all examples.[26] Since the late 1980s, text (including Latvian) has also been central to Tillers' work. He stencils and etches letters into his canvasboards, thereby layering text and images in a way that integrates the dual kinds of mark-making. Tillers looks to poetry, philosophy, novels, as well as newspapers and graffiti as sources. Though working directly with and from other artists' works, Tillers' paintings are all informed by his inner and outer worlds. His paintings' subjects, atmospheric qualities, and composition (how he combines and relates different sources across his canvasboards) evidence the artist's attention to his physical location, historical conditioning, and particular collective concerns and experiences. Tillers' working to accommodate his ancestral memory within a different place and culture that holds its own layers of difficult history, and questioning, more generally, the possibility of belonging therein, are prime examples of such foci. In *The Birch Trees*, spending time in the garden is evoked as a way to acknowledge—perhaps even ease—though not resolve these difficulties.

Composed across twenty-four canvasboards arranged in a 6 x 4 grid, three slender birch trunks linger amongst earthy and damp gradations of cold soil to rainy greys and blue mists. Though painted with the presence of his own birches in mind, Tillers draws the trees in this painting from Gustav Klimt's *Farmhouse with Birch Trees* (1900),[27] re-siting them in this minimalist setting that evokes the sparseness of a Monaro winter. Tillers has added other artists' expressions to the painting also, which in turn seem to resonate with the place he paints from: Rosalie Gascogine's rune-like markings appear like faint glimmers of resistant autumnal grasses, or slivers of late-afternoon sun, hints of gold at this otherwise restrained time of year.[28] There is text here too, drawn most notably from poet Ezra Pound. Quoting from the latter's *Notes for Canto CXX* (1956), the lines "Do not move / Let the wind speak / that is paradise," in the context of Tillers' painting suggests the peace, or quietude at least, that comes from such an outward-focussed meditation. Pound's lines, along with the uppermost quotation in Tillers' work, "For example: the birch trees," propose that it is by encountering the more-than-human beings in Tillers' garden, and its encompassing weather conditions that a sense of steadiness, and acceptance might be arrived at; that living reminders of one's own history can provide a connection to both past and present. A similar sentiment is found across other paintings, evidencing how Tillers' contact with the garden effected a renegotiation of how he might begin to feel at home.

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Fierce Paradise (2021) is another such work in which the garden's enveloping life is experienced as both a reminder and salve to the past.[29] This time, however, rather than working to entwine an ancestral connection within a present context, the past in question is more immediate, and one which Tillers lived through. Painted in the aftermath of Australia's 2019-20 catastrophic fire season that burned 19 million hectares of land,[30] *Fierce Paradise* seeks solace in the garden's presence, and cyclical time as antidotes to this traumatic loss of human and more-than-human life, including vast-scale destruction of bushland.[31] Blairgowrie survived intact, though suffered from the conditions that accompanied what is now known as "Black Summer": smoke haze, ash, and heat were oppressive, and collectively endured by all life along Australia's eastern seaboard during the fires' reign. The following year, however, in the garden at Blairgowrie were signs of nature's renewal, signalling the processes at play all around, in it, and beyond its liminal boundary. A resplendent walnut tree, basking amidst lush grass, under breezy blue sky, dominates *Fierce Paradise* and celebrates this event. Drawn from Ferdinand Hodler's *The Walnut Tree* (1906),[32] Tillers saw in the Swiss painter's work a resonance to Blairgowrie's own walnut, which stands sentry by the vegetable patch. As is Tillers' way, however, he layers Hodler's image into his own painting by adding detail, and atmospheric conditions that relate Hodler's tree to his, at Blairgowrie. Like in *The Birch Trees*, gold is key here. Warmer than in the latter work, and set off by contrasts of deep shade, flecks of sunshine glitter amongst the grass. Such is the light on summer early-mornings at Blairgowrie, before turning bright-white and steely in the heat of the day. The ephemerality of these light conditions, along with movement—apparent by virtue of Tillers' stencil work, which adds layering, and shifting form to the grass, the clouds—lend a *momentary* quality to the scene, contrasting against the tree's solidity.

This tension is reinforced by text quotations Tillers has included in *Fierce Paradise*. Though some, such as "To be abiding" and "The vast enchanted skies" allude to endurance and continuation, others speak to change.[33] "Bringing forth the world" and "I am building a self" both indicate processes, rather than fixed states of being.[34] More than this, questions like "What is Beyng?" and "Where am I?" evoke an existential uncertainty which has long infused Tillers' paintings.[35] Particularly evident to Tillers in the wake of Black Summer, Blairgowrie's garden embodied the fragile promise (in our current climate crisis) of nature's constant rebirth and change, alongside its resilience and continuation. *Fierce Paradise* alludes to these varied capacities, and in so doing, indicates, perhaps a different approach to those questions which express so basically Tillers' struggle with (not just his, but the more general human concern of) belonging. Rather than treating "belonging" as a fixed state into which one arrives, *Fierce Paradise* (and, indeed, *The Birch Trees*) implies it to be both ever-present, and everchanging.

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Tillers' interest in memory and belonging has been shaped by his experience of his garden, and this has, in turn, found expression in his paintings. There is, however, both a deeper and broader connection between Tillers' practice and his garden, that, towards concluding, I turn to now. I propose that Tillers' garden can be considered as a model for his "canvasboard system"—the way of working that governs his canvasboard oeuvre, and defines his practice. Though the term "canvasboard system" has been used to refer in different ways to Tillers' work,[36] here, I use it to refer collectively to the following distinct aspects: firstly, Tillers' process of numbering each canvasboard he paints. Secondly, his appropriation method. And thirdly, to the long-running conceptual project that continues to motivate his work—what Tillers' terms the "Book of Power"—in which all his canvasboard paintings are contained.

Tillers' system is informed by his interest in General Systems Theory (GST), which he explored in his 1972-1973 Honours thesis,[37] recognising what he termed a "systems-oriented aesthetic"[38] at play in work by conceptual and land artists contemporary to the period.[39] Tillers drew on Ludwig von Bertalanffy's work on "open" and "closed" systems to frame his argument that "art is not merely making objects and making judgements about them but it is about making judgements on the complex interrelationships and systems which affect the artist".[40] Tillers thus saw art that actively engaged with its influences and positionality as participant in an open-systems aesthetic.[41] According to Tillers' reading of Bertalanffy, whereas open systems are responsive to their broader environment, and grow in complexity and organisation (known as "negentropy" or "negative entropy"), closed systems are isolated from their broader environment, without a continuous energy source, and therefore entropic. Tillers argued that conceptual artists (some of whom are also land artists) like Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, Richard Long and Hans Haacke practised an "open-systems approach" whereby they sought to effect active connections between art and life.[42] Throughout his thesis, and significant to the connection I am tracing between Tillers' system and his garden, Tillers relates GST to ecological thinking. Primarily drawing on Ian McHarg's ecological demonstrations and theory of design, Tillers describes how a basic premise of ecological thinking views humans not as, "a separate entity [from nature] but as part of many interdependent systems. The complexity and holistic organisation of a system is in direct contrast to the simple relational man-nature dualism of the anthropocentric world view."[43] The fledgling canvasboard system Tillers developed eight years later evidently draws on this theoretical basis, and through its practice, Tillers has sought to add continuously to his oeuvre's complexity and connectivity. His consciousness of our collective ecological positionality was also, perhaps, a deep-set primer for the active relationship he later established with his garden.

Begun in 1981 when Tillers adopted the canvasboard support, his system requires him to, on completion of a painting, number the canvasboards of which it is

comprised, and thereby enter that painting into his "Book of Power". Inspired by French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's obsession with a book that encompassed the world,[44] Tillers' idea is that each canvasboard constitutes a "page", and each painting a "chapter" within an ever-expanding "book".[45] His method of appropriation defines the Book's content, and around this, he places no parameters. As Tillers has explained, "All modes of art can be accommodated within this book and all modes of expression."[46] There is both a freedom, and a weight, an immensity, that comes with Tillers' project—one that he cannot ever complete and will forever be unfinished.

A fundamentally open system, Tillers' Book is both shaped and affected by its external conditions (the sources Tillers incorporates, his current interests and experiences, the state of the world), and generates responses and reactions from within itself; as it grows in complexity, Tillers' sources' connectivity—the range and variety of relationships between them—also expands. At the heart of his system, then, are two things. Firstly, continuous process, and change, embodied by Tillers' counting his canvasboards from "1 to ∞", and his constant reception to more sources.[47] Secondly, what Tillers has termed "a model of tolerance." The artist explains,

> The all-inclusive potential of my project [...] allows for the idea of incommensurability [...] For me, this sense of incommensurability is a model of tolerance – of the accommodation of differences where elements do not have to justify themselves to each other or subordinate themselves to a larger, more important schema.[48]

Though the idea of the Book frames Tillers' oeuvre, it projects no goals other than its continuation. All the elements of which it is comprised are thus allowed to retain their autonomy within the schema. For Tillers, it seems, this open-systems approach to his practice is a kind of theoretical answer to the question of "belonging"—that it pertains within a context in which there is always more room, and that has no motive other than *being*; that it is fundamentally relational, and consists in the forever-in-motion creation and maintenance of these relationships. Though nature more broadly could be considered a muse for Tillers' Book, his garden is more approachable; it is also a place in which that ecological sense of being part of and subject to nature's processes is immediately apparent. On meeting, tending, and simply being-in the garden at Blairgowrie, the theoretical basis for belonging Tillers' Book proposes gained some tangibility.

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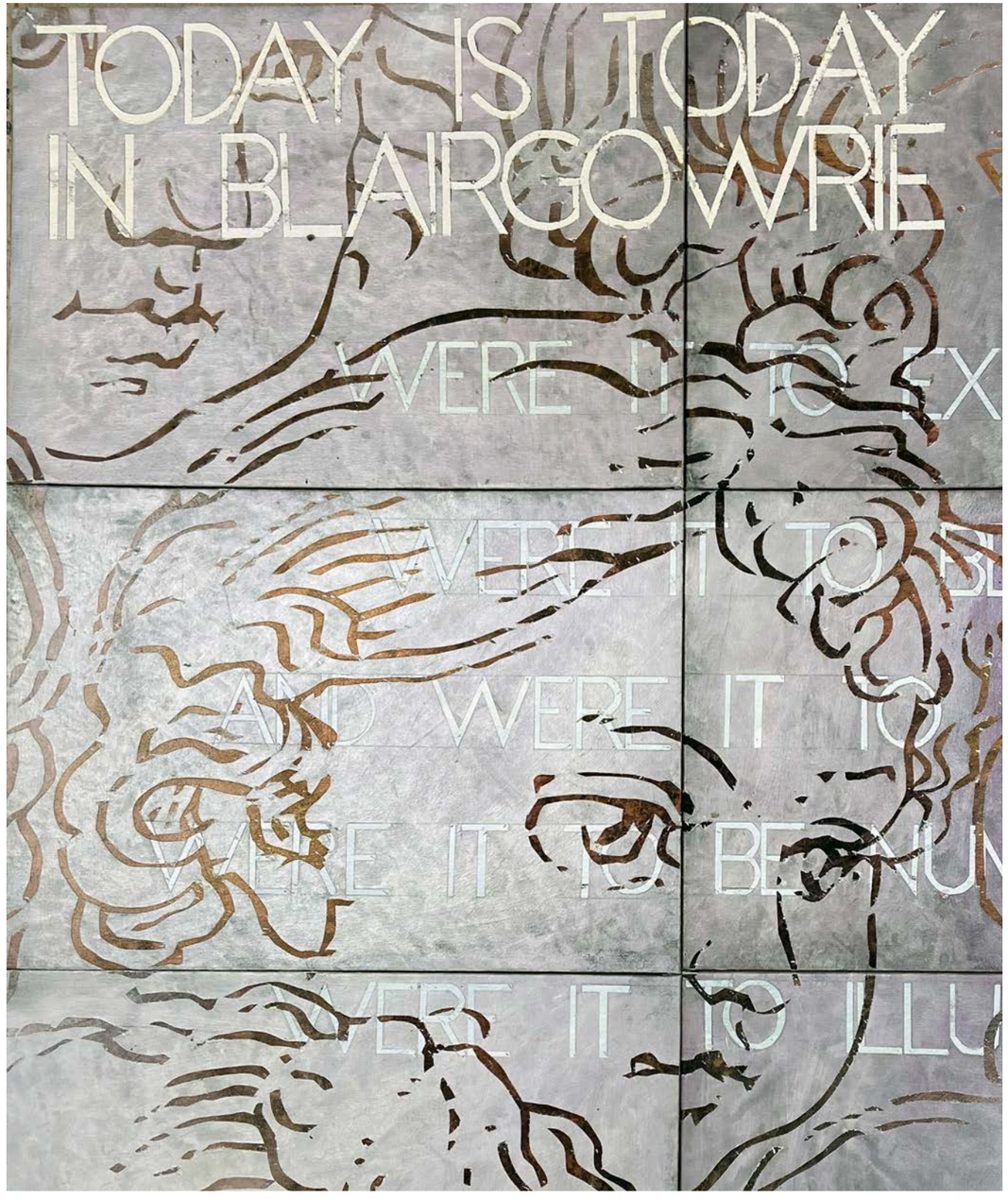
John Dixon Hunt has called gardens "hugely inclusive realm[s]".[49] The birch trees' survival at Blairgowrie (along with the lilacs and walnut tree, amongst other non-native plants) is a simple but effective exemplar of this claim. As Tillers' Book relies on its openness to create and maintain the connections it sites, the garden's openness allows Tillers to create and maintain connections within it. Along with this basic resonance between Tillers' canvasboard system and his garden, I have explored how instances of Tillers' memories are activated and shaped by the garden's incessant becoming. As both The Birch Trees and Fierce Paradise express, it is Tillers' attentiveness to his garden's processes that has ensured this emplacement of his memories within the garden's "inclusive" and ever-changing present.

From his studio at the bottom of the garden, Tillers' canvasboard system practises its call and response with that living, most open of systems outside. Though a more collective existential questioning of what "belonging" is and means persists in Tillers' work, his own doubts regarding where and how he might locate his own sense of self appear somewhat assuaged in the paintings he creates from within this garden context. I suggest this is an effect of the connections I have identified and analysed above. In some of his paintings, Tillers expresses this effect simply as "Today is today in Blairgowrie".[50] [51]



Imants Tillers
Were it To Exist, (detail) synthetic polymer paint and gouache on canvasboards, 76.2 x 71.1 cm, 1998 © Imants Tillers

Endnotes

[1] See Graham Coulter-Smith, *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers : Appropriation En Abyme, 1971-2001* (London: Fine Art Research Centre, Southampton Institute and Paul Holberton Publishing, 2002), Wystan Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), and Ian McLean's contribution to "NOTES FROM THE FIELD: Appropriation: Back Then, In Between, and Today," *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 2 (2012): 179-181.

[2] See, for example, the change in Tillers' thinking evident from his 1982 article "Locality Fails", first published in *Art & Text*, to his 2004 article "When Locality Prevails", first published in *HEAT*, both reproduced in a collected volume of his writings, *Credo* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2022). The following notes on these sources will refer to *Credo's* pagination.

[3] See Elita Ansone, "Finding Out About Latvia," in *Imants Tillers: Journey to Nowhere* (Sydney: Latvian National Museum of Art and Power Publications, 2018).

[4] See Deborah Hart, "Nature Speaks," in *Imants Tillers: One World Many Visions*, ed. Deborah Hart (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006), 59-83.

[5] Imants Tillers, "A Story About Belonging and Not Belonging: An interview with Australian artist Imants Tillers," interviewed by Daiga Rudzāte, *Artterritory*, February 5, 2018, accessed accessed January 7, 2025, https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/21241-a_story_about_belonging_and_not_belonging/.

[6] The study of connections between human and more-than-human life is a key focus of ecological thinking across the environmental humanities. I acknowledge here the convergences and developments that could arise in my paper from a more dedicated engagement with this diverse field, for example, Donna Haraway's work on "making [odd]kin" and Anne Whiston-Spirn's studies of landscapes as "product[s] of interacting processes" could be fruitful approaches when considering Tillers' relationship to his garden in a broader field. Constraints of time and space have, however, necessitated my narrower focus. My aim here is to look closely at Tillers' paintings, within the very particular context of his garden at Blairgowrie, showing how his relationship to the latter affects the former.
Towards possible extrapolations see Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). And, Anne Whiston-Spirn, *The granite garden: urban nature and human design* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). See also, (from which I drew the quote above), ""One With Nature": Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination," in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Rachael Ziady DeLue and James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2008), 47.

[7] For an analysis of how ancestral memory and trauma have impacted upon Tillers' work, see Diana Anna Kreicberga, "Remembering the Unknown: Intergenerational and Transgenerational Postmemory in the Works of Imants Tillers (1950)" (M.A. Thesis, University of Leiden, 2023).

[8] Paul Lennox, "Geological History of the Cooma Area," accessed January 7, 2025. https://www.snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au/files/assets/public/v/2/recreation/cnrr/geological-history-by-dr-lennox.pdf.

[9] Suzannah Plowman, *Thematic History of the Cooma-Monaro Shire 1823 – 1945* (Berridale, NSW: Cooma-Monaro Shire Council, 2007), 6-7.
Though much of the current day Snowy-Monaro region is traditional Ngarigo Country, other Indigenous groups also have connections to this area. These include, as the local council acknowledges, "Walgalu in northwestern parts of the region, Ngunnawal in northeastern parts, and Bidhawal (sometimes spelled Bidwell/Bidawal) in the south around Delegate."; Snowy Monaro Regional Council, "Aboriginal heritage in the Snowy Monaro region," accessed January 8, 2025. https://www.snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au/Community/Aboriginal-Communities#section-3.

[10] Tillers, "When Locality Prevails," 87.

[11] For a reflection on his dual sense of Latvian and Australian identity, see Imants Tillers, "Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict," in *Credo* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2022), 44-6.

[12] A primary myth upon which Australia was settled and defined its identity, (an action of which was the creation of Western-style gardens) is that of "terra nullius". Literally meaning "land belonging to no one," terra nullius was proclaimed in 1835 by New South Wales governor Richard Bourke, to base and justify British colonisation of Australia, and negate the existence and humanity of First Nations peoples. Laura McBride and Mariko Smith, "Terra nullius," February 2, 2024, accessed January 9, 2025. https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/recognising-invasions/terra-nullius/.

[13] Steve Meacham, "Inspiration runs hot and cold," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 22-23, 2005.

[14] In his text, "When Locality Prevails", Tillers discusses how "issues of locality and identity" reinforced themselves in his work after moving to Blairgowrie and experiencing this European-style garden amidst Australian bushland. Rather than a separation between these two contexts, Tillers implies there to be a relationship between them – he finds "nature speaks" in both. Tillers has proceeded to attend to this governing impetus, exploring it through a (still-ongoing) series of paintings, also called "Nature Speaks".

[15] Tillers, "When Locality Prevails," 88-89.

[16] As Tillers describes, "Here, in the garden at Blairgworie, natures speaks in the Latvian vernacular of my childhood," referring both to how his childhood experience of nature was shaped by his parents' Latvian lens, and to how he is able to connect to echoes of this at Blairgowrie's garden; Tillers, "When Locality Prevails," 89.

[17] Imants Tillers, interviewed by the author, Cooma, January 28, 2022.

[18] Tillers, "Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict," 45.

[19] Though my focus here is on the significance of silver birch trees to Latvia, I thank my reviewers for pointing to the cultural significance birches carry across many parts of the northern hemisphere, including in Celtic and Slavic cultures. The fact that national boundaries, and hostilities, do not define plants' native distributions, nor preclude relationships between peoples and their plants (as the birch's veneration in both Russia and Latvia affirms) is an inherent tension that could be explored in relation to Tillers' connection to birches and their place-making effect for him.

[20] Tillers, interview, January 28, 2022.

[21] Whiston-Spirn, ""One With Nature","Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination," 45.
For a reflection on these aspects of the garden, see Laura Tingle's essay "A Patch of Land," published in *The Monthly*'s 2022/23 summer issue.

[22] For a helpful introductory outline on how native vegetation reclaims human-shaped landscapes (one kind of process of "secondary succession") see Jaboury Ghazoul, "Communities," in *Ecology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) Ch. 4. 22-23.

[23] For a series of case studies on how gardening effects connections between gardeners and nature, which prioritises attention to present experience, see Sue Stuart-Smith, *The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2020).

[24] Tillers, interview, January 28, 2022.

[25] For more details on these Latvian references see Elita Ansone, "Finding Out About Latvia".

[26] See other paintings by Tillers, for example, *Nature Speaks: P* (2006), *Nature Speaks: F* (2006), *The Lilac* (2009), and *The Poet of the Blue Flower* (2013).

[27] Gustav Klimt, *Farmhouse with Birch Trees*, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 1900.

[28] New Zealand-born artist Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) lived in Canberra for much of her life. She created assemblage works that evocatively referenced the Monaro, and used found materials from its landscape there. In *The Birch Trees*, Tillers is referencing works Gascoigne created out of materials like road signs and packing crates, in which remnant text creates a kind of half-language. See, for example, *Monaro* (1989), *Loopholes* (1996), and *Medusa* (1998).

[29] An interesting avenue here would be to consider Tillers' use of "paradise" (seen not only in *The Birch Trees* and *Fierce Paradise*, but in other works like *Pardiso*, 1994, and *Trees in the Studio Garden*, 2012), and the term's direct association to the ancient form of "paradise garden". DeRushie's outline of the paradise garden's Persian roots, and its particular significance in both Muslim and Christian cultures, is a helpful starting point: Nicole DeRushie, "Horticultural Landscapes in Middle English Romance" (M.A. Thesis, University of Waterloo, 2008), 24-25.

[30] Natural Hazards Research Australia, *Understanding the Black Summer bushfires through research: a summary of key findings from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC* (Melbourne: Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2023), 2.

[31] "More-than-human" is one term amongst others (including "other-than-human" and "multispecies") in environmental humanities that seeks to counteract anthropocentrism and instead highlight the integrity and significance of beings (plant and animal) outside the human. Terms like these also imply humans' ecological positionality – that is, humans' existence as part and by virtue of, a complex ecosystem of life and environmental processes. For discussion on the term "more-than-human", and its role and associated research agenda within environmental humanities, see Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor, "More-Than-Human Histories," *Environmental History* 25 (2020): 711–735.

[32] Ferdinand Hodler, *The Walnut Tree*, 1906.

[33] "To be abiding" is drawn from Martin Heidegger; "The vast enchanted skies," from Charles Baudelaire.

[34] Tillers has not specified where "Bringing forth the world" is drawn from (though I suspect it is also drwn from Heidegger). "I am building a self" is drawn from American-Latvian artist Vija Celmins.

[35] "What is Beyng?" is another Heidegger quote ("Beyng" is a translation of Heidegger's use of *"Seyn"* – the archaic, rather than modern German word for "Being"). "Where am I?" is from the poem "Heide" by the Greek-born Australian poet π. ο. (Pi. O.)

[36] Coulter-Smith introduced the term "Canvasboard System" as an alternative name for Tillers' canvas-

board oeuvre. Though Coulter-Smith's application of this name captures the sense of process which defines Tillers' approach to canvasboards, and cites his "highly original" "appropriational strategy" as its defining characteristic, it is difficult to make out the distinctions between: how Tillers' constructs his work (using groups of individually-painted boards), his method of painting (appropriation) and the title Tillers himself gives to his canvasboard project – the "Book of Power", and prior to this "One Painting". Coulter-Smith argues that the concept of "Book" does not do justice to the non-linear complexity of Tillers' project, hence his preference to refer to it alternatively as the "Canvasboard System". See Coulter-Smith, *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers*. (For the above quote on appropriation, see p. 2 in this text; for Coulter-Smith's analysis of Tillers' "Book" concept, see pp. 164-165.)
[37] See "Appendix A", A1-A34, in Coulter-Smith's *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers* for a full reproduction of Tillers' thesis "The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting". The following notes on Tillers' "Beginner's Guide" refer to their pagination in Coulter-Smith's appendix.
[38] Tillers, "The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting," A3.
[39] Both land and conceptual art were key movements of influence for Tillers. A shaping experience for the young artist was his participation in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast* installation work at Little Bay in Sydney in 1968-1969, which highlighted to Tillers how art can work to both clarify and mediate our embodied relationship to landscape and nature. Richard Long's use of language and mapping as a conceptual expression of his embodied landscape practice has also been a central influence for Tillers. Tillers' overarching conceptual work the "Book of Power" incorporates traces of his own embodied landscape practice – manifest through processes like gardening, walking and close-looking – within his garden and the Monaro. Though it is beyond the parameters of this paper, analysing these processes as the primary (performance, land-based) artworks, and Tillers' "Book of Power", including its paintings, as artefacts of these processes, could be an interesting avenue of exploration.
[40] Tillers, "The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting," A17.
[41] As well as von Bertalanffy, Tillers was influenced in his writing by the work of Jack Burnham, who applied a systems-aesthetics theory to interpreting post-object art, and Ian McHarg's ecological and ecopolitical theories that McHarg applied to landscape design. For a thorough analysis of these influences on Tillers' "Beginner's Guide", see Coulter-Smith, *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers*, 11-19.
[42] Tillers, "The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting," A22-A27.
[43] Tillers, "The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting," A11.
[44] As Tillers' quotes from in "Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict" (see p. 48), the origin of this inspiration is Mallarmé's line "Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book." The quotation itself comes from Mallarmé's essay "*Le livre, instrument spirituel*" ("The Book, Spiritual Instrument") found in his 1897 text *Divagations*.
[45] Differently to Coulter-Smith, Curnow argues that Tillers' name for his canvasboard project, the "Book of Power" is "most descriptive" because it points to the living relationships that are created and active within Tillers' canvasboard oeuvre and the power dynamics inherent therein. As Curnow also suggests, however, there are other connotations to this name, including the Christian idea of the "Book of Life" (in which God records all those bound for heaven or eternal life), and the Ancient Egyptian "Book of the Dead". See Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, 71-72. Further connotations present themselves, such as the bible, or the "Good Book" (especially resonant given the philosophical and aphoristic text Tillers includes in his paintings), and, as my reviewers suggested, the "Book of Nature". This latter concept developed from a Middle Ages Christian metaphor for reading God's works in nature, to the Darwinian sense that human evolution, not God, is evident in nature. It may be a pertinent context for considering how Tillers' ecological thinking comes through in his "Book of Power", and thereby relates to this "Book of Nature" lineage.
[46] Imants Tillers, "Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict," 48.
[47] Jennifer Slayter and Imants Tillers, "An Interview with Imants Tillers," In *The Australian Bicentennial Perspecta* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1987), 111.
[48] Imants Tillers, "Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict," 51.
I thank my reviewers for pointing out the potential political implications of the term "tolerance", the associations of which are not necessarily positive. This is particularly evident in Herbert Marcuse's work on "repressive tolerance", which explores how tolerance taken to its extreme can have an insidious effect in societies, allowing intolerable "policies, conditions, and modes of behavior" to continue unimpeded. See Herbert Marcuse "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 82.
Tillers' use of "tolerance" is more reflective of the conditions that underpin an ecological system, which Ghazoul outlines in the following terms, "An ecological system has [...] emergent properties derived from interactions among myriads of organisms and species that give rise to complex outcomes, born of processes such as reproduction, predation, competition, mutualism, dispersal, and growth [...] It is this interaction of parts and processes across scales that gives ecology its most pronounced characteristic, that of a 'holistic' worldview." See Ghazoul, *Ecology*, Ch.1, 11.
[49] John Dixon Hunt, "The Garden as Cultural Object," in *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 30.
[50] See, for example, *Were it to Exist* (1998), *In Equals Here Speaks* (1998) or *Reversible Destiny* (1998).
[51] This text has evolved out of a paper, delivered on 21st June 2023, at St Anne's College, Oxford for "The Place of Memory and the Memory of Place" international conference, organised by The London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research. My thanks to Ian McLean, Imants Tillers, Jennifer Slatyer, the Tillers' Studio team, and my family, for your dedicated reading, conversation, and editorial assistance in developing this text. My thanks also to my peer reviewers whose engagement, questions, and suggestions were crucial to realising this paper's final form.

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Dao Nguyen
Tree of Heaven grows between two compost bins, photography Dao Nguyen © Dao Nguyen

A weed
is a weed is a weed

Communal dreams and immigrant heirlooms conjure a garden of forking paths, less a story, and more so a frenzied catalog of time and material obsessions within an expanded practice. I dig through gardens real and re-membered to consider questions of belonging. A lyric essay collects fractured narratives, anecdotal and scientific, and brings porosity to the messiness of wrestling with rampant desire, human, more-than-human, and life twisted by growth and tangled by a lust for light. Small garden tasks telescope into strange encounters—navigating conversations with my neighbor about crime, rats, and invasive plants, discovering window shards, clay, and glow worms while excavating my own plot of grass.

text and images: **Dao Nguyen**

Someone ripped a plant from the Earth at *La Huerta Roots & Rays*. Theft of tomatoes beckoning to be picked in their ripeness, whether by human or squirrel hands, is not uncommon at community gardens across Chicago, but this uprooting and loss of life that I had nurtured from seed felt violent. Gardeners erected cages that let in filtered light and locked away precious fruit from prying hands. They painted them bright colors to match the mosaic stepping stones that meander beneath these impressive and elaborate structures of protection. Borders require human labor and vigilance to maintain. Nature does not abide by them. By the end of the season, paint hangs peeled, and frames sag and warp from weather, while weeds have found their way inside and proliferated in neglected corners.

Japanese creeper (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*), a plant deemed invasive on the east coast,[1] runs rampant over garages, walls, roofs and decks throughout my neighborhood. Its weight breaks a section of ten foot tall wooden fencing, creating an opening for the movement of cats, feral and domesticated. Fencing does not stop my neighbor's blackberries from establishing on my side, nor me from eating them.

European immigrants brought *Ailanthus altissima*, which is native to Asia, to North America, passing on a story of resilience, ambitious growth, and tenacity, through its common name, Tree of Heaven.[2] It grows out of cracks between concrete—in the alleys on two sides of *La Huerta Roots & Rays* and the one adjacent to my garage.

Its ability to grow in poor soils with little water and to release chemicals that are detrimental to the growth of other plants enables it to displace native plants and the wildlife they host.[3] Thirty states in the United States list it as invasive, a classification of nonnative species created by Executive Order in 1999 to prevent and minimize ecological, human health, and economic harm.[4,5] Invasive plants don't play nice with other plants. Native plant enthusiasts online share horror stories and triumphs fighting acres of re-emergent invasives and strategies for talking to neighbors without sounding like a fanatic. Cutting without complete removal of its roots will trigger the plant to send out shoots tenfold, as far as 50 feet in all directions.[6] I can see the mother tree in a yard two houses down from mine. State extension offices and land management experts recommend using specific her-

bicide treatment for effective removal—from late summer to fall when plant life retreats underground and moves nutrients and toxins into roots.[7]

The familiar image of a fruit-filled orange tree in Los Angeles dissolves in an Instagram reel as raging fires fueling an apocalyptic sky come into view behind it, rendering in real time a blockbuster film turned reality show of the city's umaking. A demarcation of evacuation comes within seven blocks of my brother's home. An artist and teacher who influenced my own practice lost her home and studio. Fires burn across Los Angeles, destroying homes and whole communities, human and more-than-human.[7] Invasive and nonnative grasses have contributed to the spread and frequency of wildfires, and subsequently, the destruction of soil nutrients native plants and the life they host need to regenerate.[8] I have to look outside my limited perspective to appreciate the agency of vibrant matter beyond my control and other natures that are simply doing what is in their natures to do when taken from their native environments.

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Norway Maples (*Acer platanoides)* grow in a line along parkways down my Chicago city block. This invasive tree's dense canopy and water-demanding, shallow root system deter even shade-tolerant plants from growing under and near it. In this environment, invasive plants fight each other for dominion.[10,11] When I moved in, European Ivy (*Hedera helix*) blanketed the parkway and circled the Norway Maple while Winter Creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) and Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) pushed through thick winding roots in the understory. Invasive plants don't recognize property lines. Norway Maple grows up to the foundation of my house. Removal would be costly and complicated as the city owns the parkway, and ordinances protect trees, invasive or not, barring street and sewer construction that requires the city to dig it up.[12] With a lifespan of up to 150 years,[13] it will likely outlive me.

***

At our house in Texas, my mother grew cilantro, small purple eggplants for pickling, rau muống (*Ipomoea aquatica*), an herb that smelled like fish whose name I can't recall, familiar plants from our native homeland. In a faded photograph, my mother poses in front of roses. She grew them in a variety of colors—pink, red, yellow, and white—along with peaches in the front yard. They expressed her love of beauty. As a gardener and an immigrant, I can't help but think about my status as a non-native transplant from Asia as I endeavor to remediate the ecology around my current home.

***

Fall spells the end for some gardeners and gardens not adapted to a Midwestern climate. Overzealous tomato and cucumber plants vining over makeshift, leaning frames on the verge of collapse must be harvested and cut for compost before the frost takes them. For natives and perennials, it is the best time to plant as energy shifts into root growth to bolster survival as everything that can be seen dies back.

A rush against time to dig ensues.

Dao Nguyen
Percolation test, photograph by Dao Nguyen

When I dig a hole, I measure the land's capacity to hold water.
When I dig a hole, I stratify soil into silt, clay, and sand.
When I dig a hole, six inches deep, I discover tightly bound clay particles nearly impenetrable to hands and roots.
When I dig a hole, at night, luminescent larvae butts glow and flicker in the darkness.

Gardening gets messy when I dig. I unearth a history of disturbance—construction conglomerates, plastic bags, screws, glass shards, iridescent landscaping rocks, a pen cap, a concrete vault the size of a small closet in my front yard. The previous homeowners left bags of turfgrass seed and broadside herbicides designed to kill everything but grass in the garage. I trace the history of one ingredient, 2,4-D, back to war, and its use by the U.S. military in Vietnam, where it was heavily sprayed to remove tropical foliage and enemy crops.[14,15]

A sign that reads *I plant for pollinators* suggests to neighbors that underneath my chaotic, lumpy garden-in-progress lies a story of belonging. My chatty neighbor to the west of me takes an interest in all the digging and expresses concern about the free movement of people and animals that could go where they don't belong. *Have I seen rats?* He's convinced they're digging in his yard. They're not as cute as the squirrels who are the likely culprits burying their nuts.

He never fails to point out when I have forgotten to close and lock my garage door or the gate to my backyard. He has seen questionable people in the alley. We exchange contact information so he can let me know the next time I leave my garage open. Later, I email him offering to take care of the Canada thistle, an invasive plant growing unchecked between the roses and the hostas in his yard. Like the Tree of Heaven, it is allelopathic and spreads by horizontal roots.[16] I try to impress upon him the need to remove the flowers before they set seed and wonder if my need for control is also borne of fear.

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A gardener in an online community asks about a caterpillar they found on dill. A few years ago, most would have advised flinging it to a chicken. Now a gardener says *no, it's a Monarch*! And many others say *no, it's not, but it's a pollinator too!* The evolution of similar markings to monarchs, which leave a bad taste derived from their milkweed host plants in the mouths of predators, now affords a survival advantage with humans as well as birds. Their change in status from garden pest to beneficial insect gives me hope.

The jury is still out for tomato hornworms. There's less love for moths than butterflies, especially when their babies are eating a prized tomato, and it's harder to make a case for their role as food for parasitic wasps and birds. Few gardeners can appreciate the aesthetics of slugs slumbering in the folds of lacey hole-riddled Napa cabbage. Perhaps if they were as flamboyant as their ocean counterparts they'd escape drowning by beer or worse, a "natural" starvation death from Sluggo.

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In a recent spring, bouts of uncharacteristically warmer days disrupt bodies at the level of biology. Bokchoy and cabbage seedlings winter-sown in makeshift milk jug greenhouses bolt before they can be put into the ground. A black swallowtail butterfly that overwintered on my deck emerges when food, mates, and host plants remain scarce. Clusters of dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*), and tiny

Dao Nguyen
A manhole leads to a concrete vault and pump for managing the flow of sewage between a house and the main sewer line
© Dao Nguyen
Next page: *A section of perimeter tape that once read "Danger" is unearthed in my front yard*
© Dao Nguyen

Dao Nguyen
Slug sleeping in a sunflower does its part as detritivore to build soil,
photograph: Dao Nguyen © Dao Nguyen
Next page: *An American Goldfinch sporting winter plumage scavenges seeds from a native Evening Primrose* © Dao Nguyen

suns on a grey day, offer the only nectar source this time of year. A naturalized, nonnative plant, they grow along garden edges, between sidewalks and soil, where thick taproots strategically push into and under lawn grass, whose fibrous roots live mostly in topsoil.[17] They are the first to show up in spring, and among the last nectar sources for insects before the frost.

Once considered a weed, dandelion made its way into human stomachs and hearts through local farmers' whole food markets and upscale restaurants, fetching more than a head of lettuce.[18] Ask a botanist, and they'll likely say *there's no such thing as a weed*—a weed is a plant that grows where it is not wanted,[19] and human wants are fickle. Thus strange fruit becomes an antidote to whole plant theft. Wing beans and pink celery from China, bitter melons, white pendulous eggplants, and green tomatoes look alien among rows of tomatoes, peppers, and squash. Like spikey, brightly colored caterpillars, they warn predators that perhaps they're not to be eaten.

***

On a frigid January day, I sort native and non-native seeds collected from last year's plants and ready them for swaps and winter sowing.

Outside my window, thick stalks of Rattlesnake Master, which someday could dwarf me in height, curving branches of Evening Primrose, a popular spot for Goldfinches, and wispy, pink-tinged Little Bluestem—which at two and a half feet high, is not so little compared to grass that grows on every other lawn across a residential city block—, stand defiantly above several inches of snow.

When the ground looks barren I imagine that what was planted will take root—that what looks dead grows underground.

Insects, soil, and seeds sleep dormant under snow until conditions change.

*

Endnotes

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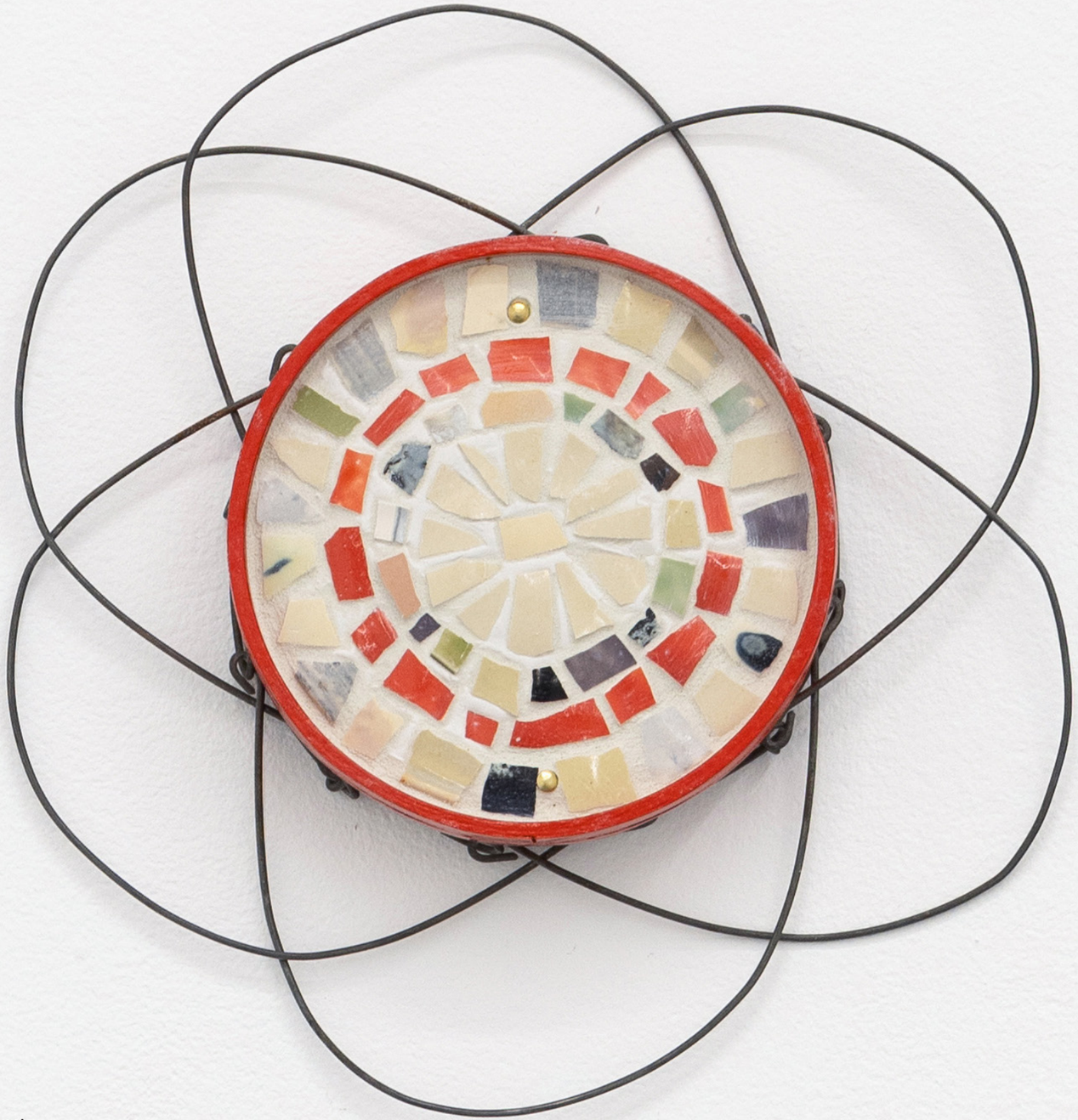
Dao Nguyen is a Chicago-based, interdisciplinary artist. Their name is a homophone for the Vietnamese word for knife. They are the compact, red Leatherman multi-tool your aunt gave you for Christmas ten years ago. On sale at Marshall's. Versatility and hidden strength in a small package at a discount. Stealthy enough to pass through security checkpoints on three continents on four separate occasions. They can cut, screw, file, saw, and open your beer. Bonus applications include carving miniature graphite figurines, picking locks, and sculpting tofu. They have exhibited and performed in backyards, bathrooms, stairwells, highways, white cubes, and black boxes.

They received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was Artist-in-Residence at ACRE, Vermont Studio Center, Ragdale, Elsewhere: A Living Museum, and Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts.



Maggie Groat
Flower Clock, found objects, concrete, ceramic shards. Courtesy of the artist and Zalucky Contemporary © Maggie Groat

Temporal rhythms

A durational correspondence with interdisciplinary artist Maggie Groat serves as the basis for this exploration of practices of care and labour, foregrounding the shared experiences—both visible and invisible—between humans and other-than-humans in cultivated spaces. Together, they trouble the concept of the 'garden' by engaging with Groat's artistic practice, which employs a range of methods and media to build thoughtful, layered connections to time and place. Central to this exchange is Groat's commitment to a slow, site-responsive, and decolonial approach to making, which offers an intentional framework for rethinking relationality and responsibility.

text and images: **Elysia French and Maggie Groat**

The following conversation intentionally took place in parts, slowly, over a short period spanning this past fall through winter. This durational correspondence was an approach we discussed during our first meeting in Maggie Groat's garden studio, and became reflective of a shared motivation to sit with our words alongside the cultivated spaces we work with/in.[1] In some ways, this was an effort to slow traditional interview style methods in a manner that anticipated the care and labour we intended to explore, as well as be, in part, steered and supported by seasonal shifts. The seasonal shifts we observed, which gently signaled this passage of time, are embedded within our conversation as a form of preface or marginalia for each reflective inquiry.

Unseasonable fall; Arrival of cooler breezes; Garden beds covered by foliage.
Elysia French: Shortly after our initial meeting I wanted to revisit Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Gathering Moss*, a text that I felt resonated with many of our discussions centered around forms of care. I was yet again taken by the attention and seriousness Kimmerer offers to the significance of intimacy, for instance, very early in the text writing: "Intimacy gives us a different way of seeing when visual acuity is not enough".[2] This passage, introducing intimacy with perception, had me thinking about our conversations around timescales and life cycles (planting, growing, and harvesting), as well as expectations, or perhaps preconceived notions, about dormancy and decay. I would like to spend some more time thinking with you about how care, and intimacy, inform your materials and methods. I am struck, for instance, by the relationship between your 2021 performance, *13 Minutes in a Garden,* and later your 2022, *proposal for webs.* With both works, there is a clear depth of care supporting a practice that, in part, visualizes the seemingly invisible and symbiotic labor taking place between human and more-than-human beings within cultivated spaces. I wondered if you could share a bit about these pieces alongside some of your observations regarding relational care.

Maggie Groat: These two works you mention are interrelated, following a direct line from one to another in my practice. Firstly, I feel that it is important to note that they were significantly informed by the context in which they were made, not just in terms of the physical sites I was engaging with, my residential backyard in St. Catharines, Ontario, and an allotment in North-Western Berlin, but also what we were living through with regards to the social-political context of this time. As a mother of three young children during a time of isolation and distance, I was hyper-aware of the time and labour involved with relational care, and what it took to balance my own needs with the care of my children, my partner, my extended community, and for the small patch of land we had been rewilding, the so-called 'garden' in which we spent so much time, especially through these particular years, alongside teaching and practicing. I was interested in finding ways to collapse acts of care as direct gestures in my practice, on the one hand as generative spaces to consider these issues, and on the other hand, as a way to 'dig two holes with one shovel', a kind of multitasking that allowed for the gestures of care to further collapse and be made visible through acts of making rather than feeling in addition to.

13 Minutes in a Garden was a two-channel, live virtual performance where I spent the duration quietly and slowly deadheading, trimming, and 'weeding', and from this accumulated material made a ritual pile of late-summer compost, as a kind of planning and preparing for the seasons that followed, and acknowledgment of the tethers between soil, care, and growth. I wore a handmade outfit that was made from custom-printed fabric of handmade collage *flowers also gardens, gardens also seeds*, and behaved as a kind of gentle floral camouflage; from the perspective of the camera, I was often hidden in plain sight with only brief appearances of hands rustling in the overgrowth or glimpse of a leg walking by. It was intentionally not recorded, and viewers were invited briefly into this space, as a kind

Maggie Groat
proposal for webs, installation view: La Datcha, Berlin. Photo: Jessica Groome. © Maggie Groat

of portal access to these ritualistic and intimate gestures of maintenance, often repeated, but rarely observed.[3] With this work, I was most interested in creating something that evidenced this kind of continued engagement with methodological approaches to observing, gathering, and salvaging, and how my works are so frequently guided by considerations of deep-time, reciprocation, and animacy. It was also a way to do something that needed to be done, or would have been done anyway, whether anyone was watching, yet was transformed through the presence of the audience into an intentionally performative realm.

I followed the generative threads of this performance into the summer following, where I spent ten days as an artist-in-residence at La Datcha, an artist-run schrebergarten in Wedding, Berlin DE. Uncommonly, I was able to attend this residency with my partner and three kids, whose ages at the time ranged between 3 and 9 years old. As it is central to my methodologies as artist-parent, I wanted to find activities that they would be able to engage in, or the least, things I easily could do alongside them. It was also central to me, as a guest to this place, to consider in what ways can one get to know a place they have never been before, and to authentically and respectfully engage or intervene in such a short period of time. The answer to these two considerations came sort of naturally, as after a fallow period that prevented artists from attending for the previous two years,[4] I worked closely with my host, Jessica Groome, initiating transformative, often seemingly invisible acts of care for the place itself, activities like sweeping, raking, weeding, watering, watching, playing, searching, renovating, gathering, and assembling. We were grappling with the difficult proposition of hope and celebration amidst continued times of uncertainty and emergency, and in response, we were interested in the question: 'What darkness grows a garden?'[5]

proposal for webs was one of several sculptural interventions that I made in response to this question that focused on fostering collaborative engagements with nocturnal other-than-human relations. The work was fabricated from found materials from the schrebergarten[6] and from collected materials at Berlin open-air flea markets as well as discarded materials gathered while walking in the city. The manipulated and assembled components, largely made of metal and wood, were hung in a series of lilac trees to be completed by the Orb Weavers I had noticed inhabiting that space, in particular what I know as the European Garden Spider (*Araneus diadematus*). Heading into the project, I was interested in collaborating with species of worms, spiders, and snails that would commonly occupy both sites (back at home and in the allotment) due to processes of introduction, invasion, and adaptation. At first, I was surprised at how quickly and how well the work was engaged with. Each day I noticed new webs that had been built, and how they were best activated for around an hour each morning and evening by the rising and setting sun. The sculptures and webs that hung among the trees were hard to see, and as a result, even harder to document. I see this particular work as linked to many recurring interests in my practice; the quiet thing that results from an intimate encounter, the small thing that asks for a more curious or deeper look, and the lived thing that easily resists documentation.

Uncanny morning light; Vibrant and saturated garden; Dewy webs;
New blooms on an inherited rose bush; Pink and coral florals remain in the garden
EF: As I am reading and sitting with your response, I am also anticipating our first snowfall and the animacy, as well as resistance, that emerges in spaces of dormancy and rest. I really like your discussion of collaborative engagements and labours, as well as ritualistic, and intimate gestures of maintenance. I understand (if not feel) the scene and image you have shared within your discussion of *proposals for webs*—those physical things that are hard to see, and even harder to document, not unlike the ecologies and relationships that sustain them. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's explorations around inclusion, love, and the art of noticing come to mind; writing about relationships to fungi in times of extinction, she pos-

Maggie Groat
proposal for webs, installation view: La Datcha, Berlin. Photo: Jessica Groome
© Maggie Groat

Maggie Groat
Spiral Stone, concrete, ceramic shards, 2024, 16 x 16 x 1.5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Zalucky Contemporary
© Maggie Groat

es: “How do lovers of fungi practice arts of inclusion that call to others? In these times of extinction, when even slight acquaintance can make the different between preservation and callous disregard, we might want to know”.[7] The ‘slight acquaintance’, and that important act of observing more intently, or intensely, seem to align in many ways with your reflections on watching or observing *as* labours and acts of care. I hoped we could spend a bit more time thinking about the physical things that are hard to see and even harder to document.

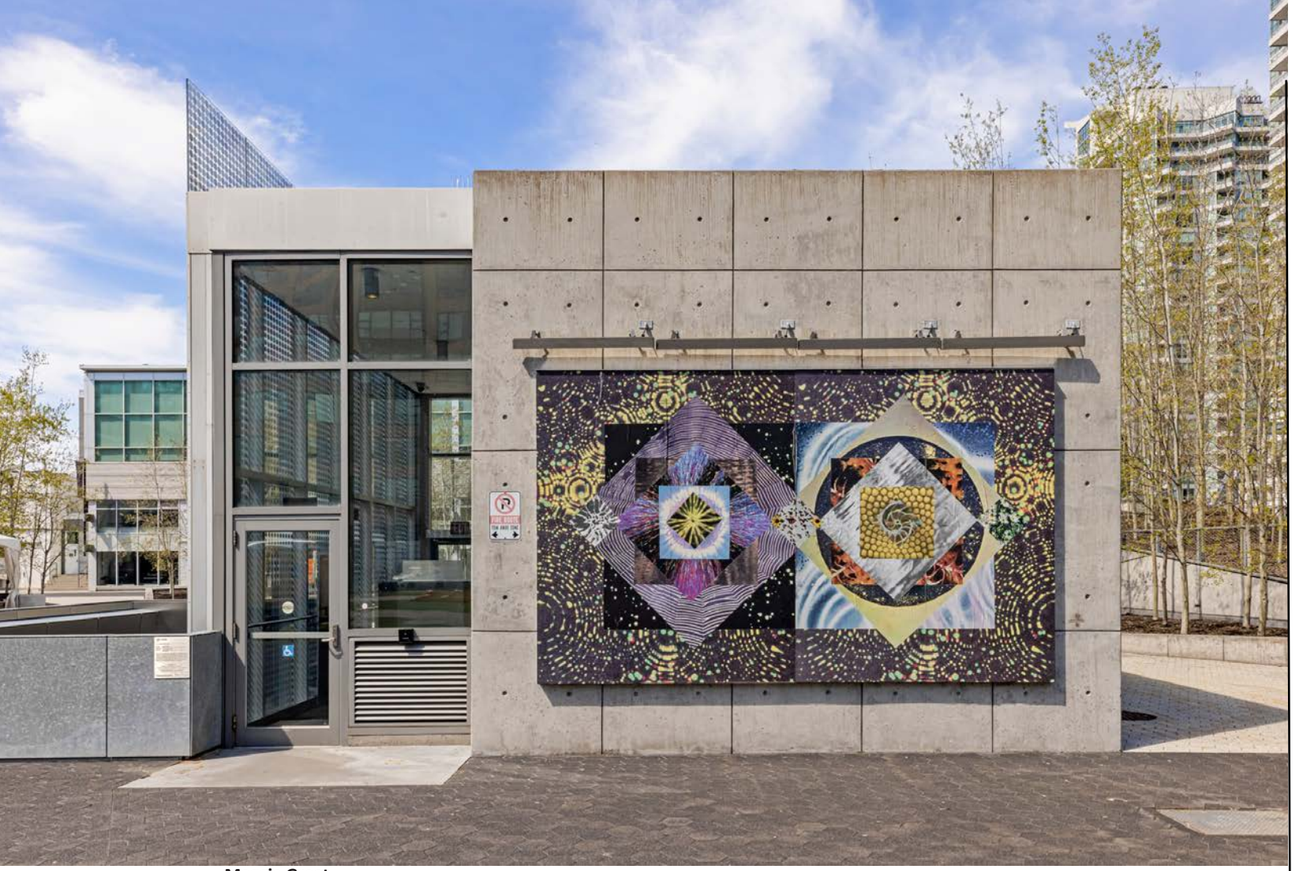
Specifically, within this context, I would like to discuss some of the collage works and assemblages that were included in your recent solo exhibition.[8] The work within the exhibition is perhaps ‘seen’ and ‘documented’, or activated, differently within a gallery space than within the anticipated lifecycle of the work within your residential backyard. For instance, I am thinking here of *Spiral Stone, Flower Clock,* and *Tool Box & Compost Bowl*.

MG: Life cycle is a really interesting concept to sit with in relation to the idea of a ‘work of art’. While it is so frequently referenced in discussions of natural worlds, synonymous really, the idea of a life cycle seems to contradict the expectations of the Western archival impulse, where much of art is still presumed or expected to exist and be maintained in its ‘final’ fixed state ‘forever’, carefully stored and conserved to ensure this; and this hinges on human-centred lifespans, rather than the frame of deep time. Your question has me now thinking about how this concept translates to the creative act; how do terms like: emergence, transformation, migration, maturation, procreation, dispersal, decay, or invisibility apply to the modes of objects and images? And are these cyclical methodologies guiding principles informing the way that I work?

I feel drawn to disrupting this lasting, sometimes, inherently felt expectation of the archival impulse, seeking to push up against the expectations to record, to keep, to preserve, and sometimes to my detriment, and others in a way that instigates a deep creativity and connection. I see this disruption happening through my modification or reallocation of the found, to take something out of one category where it might sit easily, and muddy it, or warp it, conflate it with something out of place, something more confused, or imagined. Other times this is through the temporary quality of my assemblage or collage work, that images and objects remain unfixed in their new configuration, and easily disassembled and reused, or remixed. The use of ephemeral materials, the things that decay and morph, or the non-archival, ready-to-hand materials, images from mass-media, items from the recycle bin, or the side of the road, is a constant in my practice. All of these strategies are applied in the work *Tool Box & Compost Bowl*, and this particular work is both speculative and actually made to be put to use outside of a gallery context. These are items I actively use; they can change, deteriorate or run their course in how they are useful and might be replaced or discarded.

At the onset of any work’s creation, I think about utility and storage; how I am implicated and responsible for whatever that thing might be, beyond the briefness of an exhibition frame, wondering where will it go after. Who might use it? What is it ‘for’? *Spiral Stone* was shown in a gallery context, but felt a bit alien there; it was shown leaning against the wall unfixed as if it was placed there temporarily. It was a work made to exist outside in proximity to the soil and the elements, made from leftover concrete mix and broken ceramic shards from a decade of my partner’s ceramic practice,[9] the spiral denoting the continuum, the endlessness of the cyclical in relation. *Flower Clock* was made to find a way to speak to the way time warps for me when being-with plants and in the worlds of other-than-humans. There is a kind of open-world puttering to-do or to-don’t list in cultivating and tending that shifts and collapses my perspective of time. It is also a nod to the sundial, and to Carl Linnaeus’ conceptual Flower Clock Gardens where time hypothetically could be told by the blooming of flowers that sensitively open or close at specific times each day.[10] It doesn’t work as a clock is expected to at all, but is rather a kind of marker of stillness, or imperceptible slowness. This work is now hanging in my home, serving a funny function, and born out of the question: what kinds of tools can I make that facilitate the kind of life that I want to live and beyond that, the kind of alternative worlds that might be possible?[11]

Maggie Groat
twins, webs, ripples, shifts, sounds, twins, *webs, ripples, shifts, sounds*, found paper, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
© Maggie Groat



Maggie Groat
twins, webs, ripples, shifts, sounds, twins, *webs, ripples, shifts, sounds*, installation view, wheat-pasted images at Harbourfront Centre parking pavilion, Toronto, Ontario, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and CONTACT Photography Festival. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid © Maggie Groat

Ground is frozen again; Frost finally taking red geraniums; Garden is covered in a blanket of snow; Light is slowly returning

EF: Fittingly, I was reading your recent response while thinking about the slow return of light as the shortest day of the year passed. I love your discussion of disruption and expectations as related to human-centered lifespans, concepts or measurements of time, as well as the fixed and the ephemeral. I also appreciate your exploration of responsibility and how you are entangled, involved, related, and implicated in the work you create.

This discussion has me thinking about the tensions and parallels existing between the archival impulse (and the art gallery context more broadly) and the garden, within the framework of cultivated spaces. In this moment, I am considering the act of cultivating in relation to tending and care, but also to the sometimes overdetermined spaces necessarily reliant on planning, developing, preparing, collecting, categorizing, recording, preserving, and conserving. Your work, often collapsing perspectives of time, I think also disrupts expectations and colonial legacies associated with Western collection and display practices, as well as approaches to the garden. The new configuration of the salvaged, such as with *Flower Clock* as a tool and gentle reminder of what is and what can be, plays with concepts of time, but it also challenges expectations of space, place, and 'object'. This feels true for much of your work, even with *Spiral Stone* leaning intentionally unfixed against the gallery wall, unsettling expectations of the installed or permanent 'work of art', while also subverting the usefulness of the stone, made in part, as a marker of time and to exist outside with/in the soil.

The context for our conversations, largely taking place during a seasonally transitional period of dormancy and decay, may also seem somewhat unexpected in its support for discussions around the garden, cultivation, and creation. I would like to spend more time with some of these layers, but perhaps shift toward a discussion of scale. I am taken by the beauty and intimacy of your smaller collage works, as well as the power of your more public-facing pieces, such as the billboards that were installed at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Ontario. With *Subterranean Spiral,* for instance, I find there is a softness or fragile quality of the collage being communicated through the palette and the fragments, which for me gestures toward ecologies, movement, slowness, life cycles, and reciprocal or unseen/under-acknowledged labour (the roots, the earthworm, the legume). Or, with *Double Pendulum,* an enlarged collage viewed as a billboard is aesthetically arresting—the mirrored or seemingly doubled imagery that blurs our focus and challenges our ability to "fix" an image. Would you mind sharing further insights into some of your methodologies as related to collage, as well as how you approach site-responsive work, whether that be from your residential garden studio or the public city streets?

MG: Regarding questions of scale, I think that I am often, whether intentionally or not, operating in an oscillation between macro-micro extremes; caught in a hyperfocused specificity one moment, and descending into the sprawling big-picture in the next. Collage is the methodology that anchors my entire practice and perhaps is the bridge that tries to mediate the tensions and collapse of zooming in and out.

With the works in *Double Pendulum*, I was seeking a way to 'document', or to record in some alternative way, psychedelic and deeply affectual encounters I was having with the natural world. In the case of the work, *twins, webs, ripples, shifts, and sounds,* it was a time-collapsing moment that happened while wading along the shoreline of Lake Ontario with my small children. I was interested in attempting to find a visual to render this encounter, and as you have observed, in a way that felt unfixed or coming in and out of focus, a visual spiral created by a figure-ground confusion, while at the same time also feeling cohesive. This particular work has been shown in a few different formats, distributed into the world in different shapes and sizes: as an artist's project insert in a publication,[11] as an editioned poster multiple in support of that publication, an image circulating online, as an original in a gallery context, and enlarged as a wheat-pasted as a PVC-free temporary public installation.[13] In its enlarged state, it was situated adjacent to the waterfront in Toronto, and at an immersive scale; you could also see the details of the printing patterns from the original source material, creating a different experience of seeing the pieces versus stepping back to see the whole. This work was accompanied by two others, *re > formations > re > encounters* and *portals*, that used similar strategies of mirroring, doubling, skewing, and making strange.

Starting with something found that I can manipulate and respond to, can be enacted in terms of a specific image or object, but also in terms of getting to know or respond to a particular site. I seek to situate works in terms of their contextual conditions; how does where the work is shown add to or alter its reading? This comes out of considering responsibilities to place, approaching site-specific art installation through the phenomenological, institutional, and discursive lenses that Miwon Kwon discusses in her book *One Place After Another,*[14] as well as from Hodinohso:ni teachings and perspectives around interrelation, kinship, reciprocity, relation, and responsibility.

The making of the smaller, handmade collages is an ongoing, active, and sprawling kind of study. *Subterranean Spiral* came out of me considering entirely underground worlds, in particular the soil network in the spaces I cultivate; I was thinking about roots, insects, mycelium, microorganisms, decomposers, and how to expand my awareness to the entirely underground beings living in the darkness

Maggie Groat
Subterranean Spiral, found paper, 11.5 x 15.25 in. Courtesy of the artist and Zalucky Contemporary
© Maggie Groat

of the earth, and to act with the subterranean in mind. The part of collage that continues to hold my interest is in uncovering images that are uncannily similar, or are like one thing, but actually another, or can mirror or stand in for something else; I see these methods operating in this image. *Subterranean Spiral* was included in *ROOT CELLAR*[15] the third chapter of a recent and ongoing shapeshifting project, *S LOWER F*, is an ongoing and active study into slowness and refusal, transformation and ritual, quiet moments and resistance. Other images in this study, *Petals and Seeds*, *Seasonal Template, Inventory Day 7,* or *Vegetable Worship*, orbit ideas around systems of storage, the scrap, slow food, the relationships between dormancy and animacy, wilting and rotting, the technicolor of the compost bowl, and virtual homesteading.

Stillness of the extreme cold; Snowy, bright, and cold
EF: Our returned attention to the relationships and entanglements between dormancy and animacy, as well as the unseen and unfixed, seem to be a nice

place to pause, and for now, to conclude our conversation. Yet, it also presents a final opportunity to return to the garden—to linger on our discussions of care and labour with/in the garden. Jamaica Kincaid discusses the garden as, in part, the borders we engage, cultivate, and occupy; going on to write, "memory is a gardener's real palette' memory as it summons up the past, memory as it shapes the present, memory as it dictates the future".[16] Kincaid's observations feel appropriate here, with our discussions and explorations of your work, alongside considerations of how the garden holds ecological relations and slower dimensions of time. I also wanted to revisit our speculative inquiry into how the garden may be an encounter with possible futures. I wonder if you might be willing to share current plans, hopes, or insights you may have for garden futures, whether that be within or beyond the borders you engaged and cultivated.

MG: I am continuing to think through how to better trouble the term 'garden' and further centre decolonial acts of care and reciprocation that sit outside of concepts of private property and ownership, or other colonial associations with the term. I find myself, for lack of a better word, continuing to refer to the spaces that I care for and cultivate too often as garden, but it rolls uneasily off of my tongue. I wonder how much historic association shadows the act, or on the other hand where actions shift the linguistic, or associated meanings, and where another language might be better suited for the nuances of this desired articulation.

My role at a local plant nursery for the past few growing seasons has given me firsthand insight into the myriad ways a garden can act like a mirror to ideologies, and the conceptual frameworks, spectrum of controls, and aesthetics that are applied to their creation. I've observed that many deeply set romantic associations with the pastoral and leisured haunt Western ideas of 'the garden', and care-at-any-cost, that too often stem from or hinge on imbalance.

Currently, I am driven by the possibilities and impact of collaborating with bio-regional specific species and learning more about the hyper-specialized relationships between plants and insects, and how creation of habitat can contribute toward re-balancing ecosystems.[17] I see a collaboration with plants and soil, in a space that is ever moving, ever changing, not predictable, curious, constantly stimulating, sometimes banal, more often psychedelic, synonymous with creative practice. I wonder: where can felt encounters with plants shift into the spaces of ancestral remembering? What time of day best allows me to see that flower like a bee?[18]

Endnotes

[1] On a late morning in the fall of 2024, I had the privilege of visiting Maggie Groat's residential garden/garden studio. During that visit, I spent time exploring Groat's garden/garden studio guided by the sharing of her generous insights, we discussed early plans and possibilities for this publication over tea (brewed from plants grown in the garden).
[2] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 13.
[3] The performance was conceived for *The Witch Institute* and as part of Minor Hockey Curatorial's presentation *A Gesture, A Reading: Finding Touch in Occult Practices and Performance Art. The Witch Institute* was an online symposium that took place August 16-22, 2021, hosted by Queen's University, Katarokwi/Kingston, Canada; Minor Hockey Curatorial is a curatorial collective led by Robin Alex McDonald and Alexander Rondeau and based out of North Bay, Ontario, the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and within the Robinson-Huron Treaty land, aimed at presenting contemporary art in rural and/or Northern regions of Ontario, where a lack of funding and resources often leaves these areas underserved. Minor Hockey Curatorial's presentation *A Gesture, A Reading; Finding Touch in Occult Practices and Performance* Art sought to "put occultism and performance art into conversation with one another, drawing attention to the ways in which both rely on permutations of gestures, acts, orations, and incantations to enrapture and transform." See Robin Alex McDonald's and Alexander Rondeau's introduction to *A Gesture, A Reading* (2021).
[4] I was originally meant to attend this residency at La Datcha in July, 2020.
[5] Along with the work of the August artist in residence, Ella Dawn McGeough, our collaborative activities culminated in the exhibition *The Future is Dark... I Think,* which was part of the 2022 Project Space Festival in Berlin.
[6]This was a schrebergarten that had been previously occupied and cared for by one family for many years and La Datcha inherited a library of materials, for better and worse, after the lease transfer. There were many things here to be unearthed, often literally.
[7] Anna Tsing, "Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom," in *Mānoa,* vol. 22 no. 2 (winter 2010): 192.
[8] Zalucky Contemporary, *S LOWER F: Root Cellar* (May 11, 2024 - June 8, 2024).

Maggie Groat
Petals and Seeds, found paper, 18.75 x 15.5 in, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Zalucky Contemporary © Maggie Groat

[9] Artist Jimmy Limit also makes work under the name Onion Ceramics.
[10] See for example, *Linnaeus' Philosphia Botanic,* translated by Stephen Freer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 293-96. First published in Stockholm and Amsterdam in 1751.
[11] This line of thinking is inspired by the ethos and pedagogy of Black Mountain College.
[12] This work first appeared in *WADING*, The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Issue 13, September 2022, published by The Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto Mississauga, Toronto ON.
[13] *Double Pendulum* was a multipart project commissioned by Contact Photography Festival that included Temporary Public Installation at The Harbourfront Centre and at the corner of Dufferin & Dupont in Toronto, Ontario.
[14] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
[15] *S Lower F: Root Cellar* was exhibited at Zalucky Contemporary, Toronto ON in the spring of 2024.
[16] Jamaica Kincaid, "Introduction," in *My Favorite Plants: Writers and Gardeners on the Plants They Love* (New York: Picador, 2024) xii-xiii.
[17] There are many who are spreading philosophies of reciprocity and seeing beyond human-centered lenses. At the moment, I have been slowly moving through Robin Wall Kimmerer's most recent text *The Serviceberry*, and thinking through methodologies for recognizing and honouring abundance and reciprocity. I am also feeling influenced by Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life* and the concept of mycelial thinking. See: Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* (New York: Scribner, 2024); Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2020).
[18] The title draws inspiration from María Puig de la Bellacasa's reflections on care and temporality or 'the pace of ecological care'. Puig de la Bellacasa writes: "Care work becomes better when it is done *again,* creating the specificity of a relation through intensified involvement and knowledge. It requires attention and fine-tuning to the temporal rhythms of an 'other' and to the specific relations that are being woven together." See: María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 201.

Maggie Groat is an interdisciplinary artist working exclusively with found imagery and salvaged and sustainable materials whose work explores the utility of images and the transformative, ritual potential of reuse while living in times of climate emergency. Her recent and ongoing project S LOWER F, is a sprawling examination of attempts at slowness as a form of refusal and the radical potentials of small, quiet acts. Groat is based in the Niagara region of Ontario, Canada, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Chonnonton, and Anishnaa- beg and is an off-nation member of Six Nations of the Grandriver.

Elysia French, a white settler scholar, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at Brock University located on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Chonnonton, and Anishinaabe peoples. She is trained as an art historian and studies and teaches at the intersections of contemporary art and the environment. Her current research explores practices of care and resistance within sites of cultivation and extraction. She is a collaborator and co-editor of the Ecologies in Practice project, which launched in 2024.

Keepa Maskey
Autolysis, textile & photography, 2024
© Keepa Maskey

Baikuntha keba, found garden

"Baikuntha Keba, Found Garden", series – 2024, is a homage to my late father, Baikuntha who was an avid gardener, and to the others that departed at the time of COVID-19. The imagery illustrates a visual play of textile and experimental photography, leading towards a pondering on a radical new understanding of birth. It dwells on death, plants, and processes, while also speaking on the practice of Keba. Keba, in the Newa language, refers to a garden where one traditionally grows flowers and vegetables. Newa is the language spoken by the Newa people, an Indigenous community of Nepal, to which I belong.

text and images: **Keepa Maskey**

Baikuntha is a Sanskrit word, which translates into heaven. A place free of suffering and anxiety. *Baikuntha* is the name of my late father, who was an avid gardener. He passed away in the year 2020, due to the complications of Covid-19. *Found Garden, Series - 2021*, the past project was an attempt then, to address my understanding of a garden, reflecting on adversities, death and decay.

Today, *Baikuntha Keba, Found Garden – Series 2024*, pays homage to those who departed in the trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic which began globally in the year, 2020. The homage ensembles into an artist portfolio that exhibits ten different images. Care and empathy lead the inquiry through a play of textile and experimental photography.

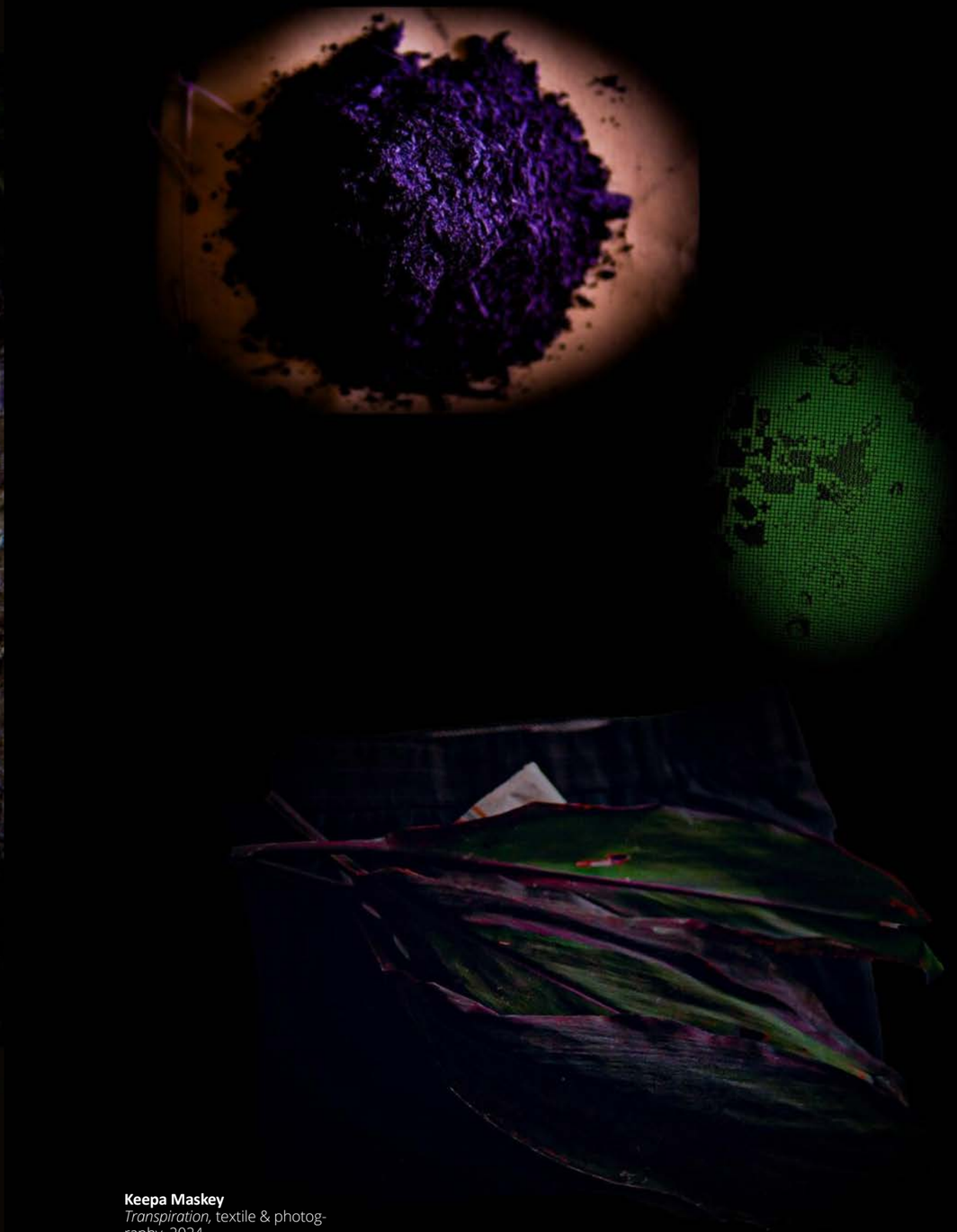
Keba, in the *Newa* language, refers to a garden where one traditionally grows flowers and vegetables. *Newa* is the language spoken by the *Newa* people, an indigenous community of Nepal, to which I belong. Kathmandu is the capital of Nepal where I live, which has been losing the practice of *Keba* rapidly, replaced by negligent city planning.

The present series of *Found Garden – Series 2024,* equally stems from a personal space, welcoming grief and loss to activate a composition. It is an act of sitting, not neglecting one's pain, and acknowledging the loss to facilitate a grounded understanding of death and processes and the needs of contemporary times. I believe it is critical in today's time of vulnerability and precarity, which may have derailed many of us into nervousness and doubts which has created challenges in reclaiming truth and rootedness.

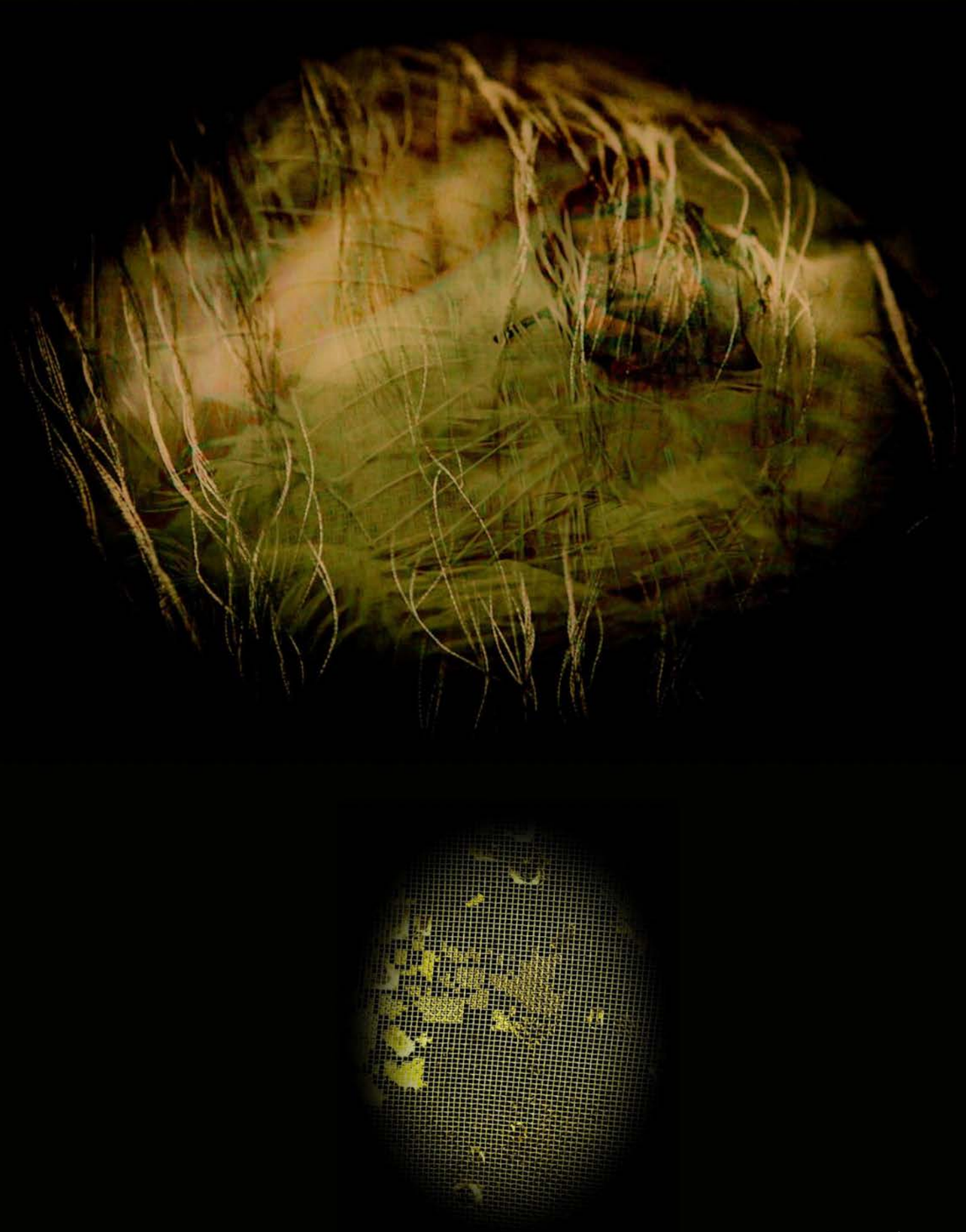
Baikuntha Keba, Found Garden - Series 2024, attempts to dwell on the need to think radically about Anthropocentric ideologues. While the study situates plants and connects terminologies within the context of processes and death, it also directs toward a question relating to birth. Radical Birth, the very last image stands as a suggestion to contemplate, to reflect, as to where and how we could be heading forward and what kind of birth is critical in this time of urgency. The study is the beginning of further research on the losing practice of *Keba* within the valley of Kathmandu. I reminisce about the abundance of spaces, our *Keba* that once thrived with greeneries. Perhaps, time may not allow us to sit in the same space and environment as it is intrinsic to nature, to evolve. Looking through such lenses, we may then be able to create alternatives in response to the developing urban structures of Kathmandu.

How can we imagine *Keba*, a notion of it, to rekindle the value of such holistic practice? How can plants within an imagined *Keba* facilitate beings and bodies into softer meanings? Can *Keba* be a collective, a representational form?

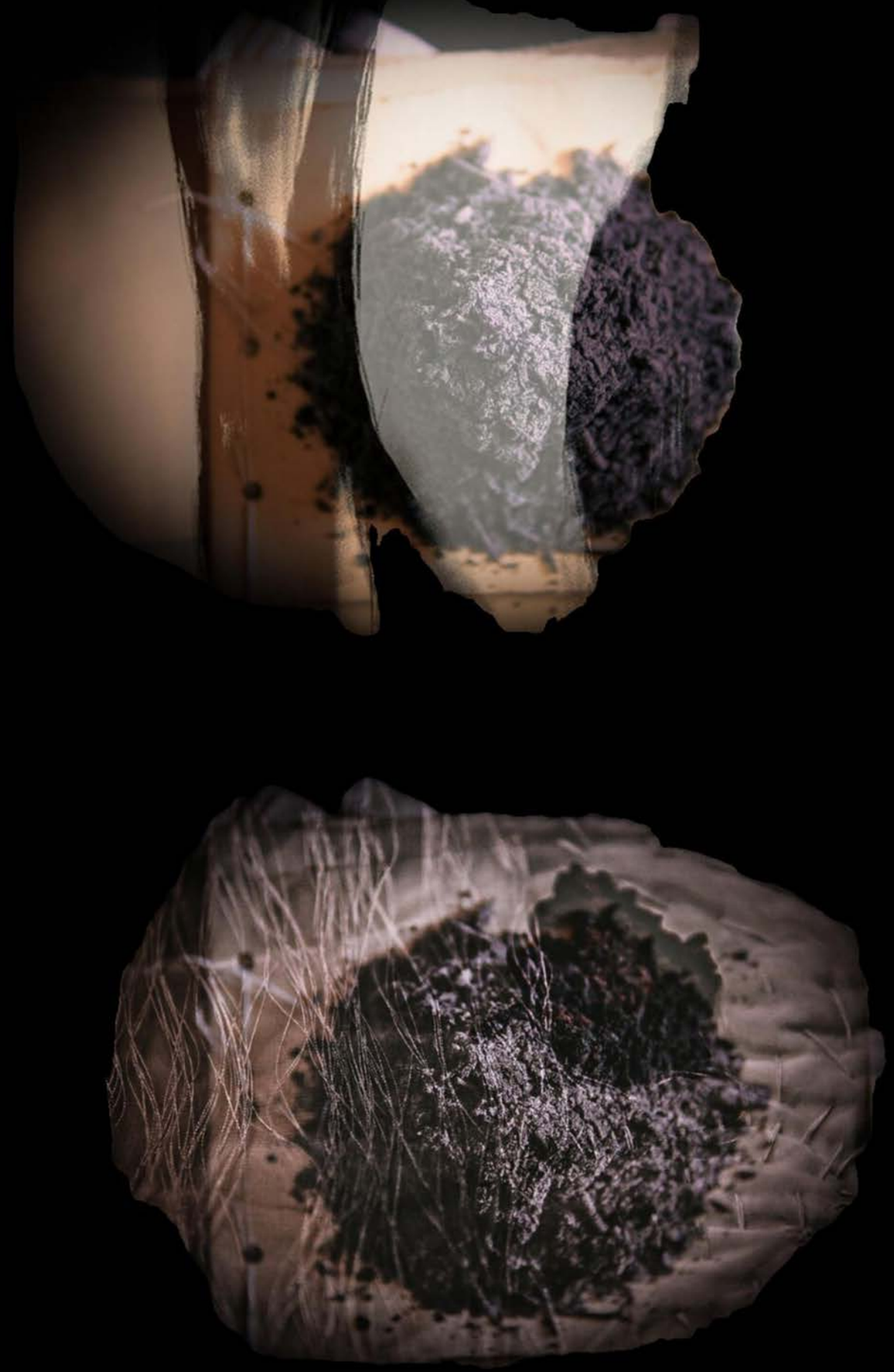
Keepa Maskey
Departed, textile & photography, 2024
© Keepa Maskey



Keepa Maskey
Transpiration, textile & photography, 2024
© Keepa Maskey



Keepa Maskey
Fragile Mimicry, textile & photography, 2024
© Keepa Maskey



Keepa Maskey
Gathered Plant Ash,
textile & photography, 2024
© Keepa Maskey

Keepa Maskey
Altered State, textile & photography,
2024. Next page: *Radical Birth*
© Keepa Maskey

Keepa Maskey, based in Nepal, explores a sense of belongingness within the process of learning. Keepa confronts implications around body and identity. She recognises the cruciality of exploring layers of neurodivergent complexities, which positions and nurtures distinctiveness, interweaving practices, and knowledge of Newa, an Indigenous community of Nepal. Keepa's practice has allowed her to break the cultural structures, experimenting with diverse perspectives. Keepa pursues interdisciplinary research; on soil and composting while also reaching out to her community; a surfacing need for something authentic and holistic. Keepa imagines and participates in cultivating beyond Anthropocene ideology, fostering meaningful and vital emergences.

To surrender: gardener and gardened

Balancing the practice of cultivating gardens with the choice to surrender to natural ecosystems and rhythms invites complex questions. Chaos, neglect, overgrowth, and the methodically manicured all intersect within this tension. Personal encounters—emergence of cicadas, unruly tomato plants, domineering eastern walnut trees, and resilient native species—serve as entry points. When is the decision made to relinquish control? How does attention to natural rhythms shift the gardener's role? At the heart of this inquiry are the symbiotic relationships between gardeners and the gardened. Embracing ecological surrender expands the scope of how garden relationships shape life far beyond the confines of our backyards.

in conversation: **Elisabeth Dzuricsko, Tyler Kirkholm, Jessica Mueller, Kris Schaedig**

Surrender

Kris Schaedig: I think surrender is a choice, and is often wise. There's something greater at play beyond our perspective and desires. In surrendering, we let go of control and trust that this larger force knows more than we do about the situation.

Jessica Mueller: *Warrior* is a label thrown around politically right now. What does it mean to be a warrior? In certain Native American tribes, to be a warrior doesn't necessarily imply fighting a battle or employing aggression to conquer, but doing the hard work on the ground of caring for people, the young and elderly, meeting needs... that's a truer definition.[1] Surrendering to what you can't control but still fighting with and for others, doing the work.

KS: We think of surrender as giving up when maybe it's not really giving up. It's seeing things from a different, more expansive point of view. When I think of "warrior", I think of someone who's in charge, in control, and getting things done. Where surrender is the opposite.

JM: The warrior shows resilience and thoughtfulness.

Tyler Kirkholm: Warrior has connotations of directionality, a forward momentum... Surrender is the inverse. It's giving up; not in the realm of compromise. A firmer definition of separation between compromising, gaining, and losing. Surrender feels to that side of the losing dichotomy. We want to bring it into the middle zone where it's more fluid.

Elisabeth Dzuricsko: For religious retreats at the school where I teach, participants are told to let go and let God. Yet, participation is required. You are part of this, even with things beyond your control.

Jessica Mueller
Good Enough, backyard garden, avocado tree in mop bucket, surrender, digital photos, 8″x 11″, 2025
© Jessica Mueller

(Mid)Western Mindset

JM: Western thinking and consumerism in service to capitalism must be untangled from how we define success. What determines if you've been a good

houseplant keeper or gardener or housewife—a TradWife (traditional wife)– pristinely manicured, without flaws? Are they perfect? Versus true surrender in connection to something bigger, something potentially messy... Stores sell cute, desirable potted plants, pumped full of chemicals creating false appeal. If imperfect they will be discarded. Consumers are unaware that immediately upon arriving home, withdrawal begins. Without its chemical fix, this system presents us with the beautiful which upon purchase quickly turns ugly. Inevitably, signs of suffering appear, revealing us as failures, and causing shame. We failed and now it's trash. Logically, go back to the store and buy another plant; unconscious behavior is manipulated by systems to set up the consumers as repeat buyers.

TK: It creates a culture of people who say, “I can't keep anything alive. I kill all my plants”. They have this assumption that nothing will survive in their home.

ED: TradWife would have kept them alive.

KS: Western thought, particularly in relation to consumerism and capitalism, presents a stark dichotomy. In the West, it's about control: we shape the world around us, dictate how things should be, and push for constant consumption. In contrast, Eastern thought offers a different approach. It's slower, and more attuned to the needs of the individual, the body, and the environment. Instead of forcing one's will upon a situation, Eastern philosophies emphasize listening, and then considering. It's more about surrendering to what is needed, rather than trying to control or impose what we want. The focus is on giving and being in harmony with what is, rather than manipulating it to fit our desires.

JM: That's acceptance, listening, being present, and honoring. What's missing are inevitable variables in domestic space. No book or person can prescribe the perfect approach. Variations in lighting, placement, air, and soil quality, all factor in. It's complex. We don't all have to have the same end result.

TK: Capitalism encourages standardization of your achievements in your garden, and it’s a competition. If you’re not growing enough zucchinis to bring into the office to share, you’re doing something wrong. There’s this social dynamic and expectations.

JM: Is it post-worthy? My garden produced one eggplant which returned from last year.

TK: A rogue volunteer.

JM: Surrendered to the rats, the eggplant did not make it inside the house. As much as I wanted to be in my garden, I couldn’t get out there enough– staring at it, aware of my neglect, yet still enamored. The avocado tree and cherry tomatoes magically returned, as did lemon balm and amaranth, growing on their own terms. Our rat friends here in Chicago did their thing, making my garden theirs at night.

ED: Temporary paradise. Beauty before decay. Zucchini then rats. Surrendering to the inevitable.

Walnut Tree, Poisoning, Native vs Invasive

KS: We moved into our present home a few years ago, and there’s an ancient, huge Eastern Black Walnut tree in our small yard. Besides being a messy tree and dropping baseball-sized walnuts that stain, we learned walnut trees release a toxin called juglone, which prevents many plants from surviving. Since we still

Kris Schaedig
Sleeping Giant: the offending tree, murderer of tomatoes, ink source. Digital photograph,11”x 8”, 2024 © Kris Schaedig

wanted to grow vegetables, we followed the rules to bypass the tree's toxicity, creating raised beds and adding good soil to plant vegetables. It worked for the first couple of years, and we had a beautiful little garden with a bountiful harvest—tomatoes, peas, peppers, onions, beets...

This past spring we neglected to amend the soil. I think we had a false sense of security since we had no issues in the previous years. A few weeks into the growing season, our tomatoes began wilting, peas shriveled up, and nothing could be done except to pull out the dying plants. At the same time, the walnut tree became infested with tent caterpillars, stripping some of the branches of foliage. As if the tree was being punished somehow for killing all of my vegetables. Karma for trees. Recently I was reading a book, *The Healing Code of Nature,* that discusses the symbiotic relationship between plants and people.[2] Maybe I need walnuts in my life? By the end of the summer, I yielded to the tree, and wondered if I should just honor the tree, let it put out its toxic substance, and we can put our tomatoes in pots on the patio instead. The tree is doing what a walnut tree does.

ED: Usually it is an industrial plant (funny using that word here) that poisons everything. My class has been discussing Mel Chin's Revival Garden. In Minnesota, Mel Chin revitalized a hazardous area with special plants that leached out toxic waste present in the soil.[3]

KS: Doesn't it make you wonder, if left to nature, would native plants naturally start growing that will purify the soil?

JM: What is a native versus invasive species? Could it be that "invaders" are in fact native plants? How far back do you go to determine what is native? When does native become invasive and invasive become native? Is this natural evolution? What qualifies a weed? Are we invaders?

In the midwest the dandelion is public enemy number one; they spread so quickly. Later in life, I learned medicinal and healing properties make this joyful weed quite valuable. So abundant, yet we kill it utilizing chemicals that undermine our health and future.

KS: If you just leave it, after a while, the ecosystem will find balance. It takes care of itself. But we only see our little slice of lifetime.

JM: Chemical intervention causes more damage than having an imperfect yard.

TK: Neighbors shout about dandelions in front yards, but whisper about weeds in backyards. Fences don't stop weeds from spreading underneath. I have a high degree of wildness moving into mine. Mulberries encroaching on the south side, wild strawberries on the east. Creeping charlie, clover, and violets from all borders. We joked about making a yard pie, from the tiny strawberries and mulberries. Take advantage of what's creeping in. We'd need more than those two things but don't really want to invite more in.

JM: We'll see what your neighbors let creep in and gift you.

Polli-Date

ED: I'd like a dating app for plants. Something to choose plants that will not die so quickly in my care. Recently I bought a pretty plant at the hardware store because it was purple and cheap. Like choosing a partner, you don't just choose somebody because they're available and pretty. Well, sometimes.

KS: Yes! What could this plant really give you? What's realistic? Are you looking

Jessica Mueller
Marginata Mediation, daughter contested houseplant, proofing press, ink, silk thread, handmade paper, 19.25" x 10.25", 2025
© Jessica Mueller

for a long-term relationship or a one-night stand?

ED: Ideally long term yes but a short time with my purple plant is better than none. Yet, my love belongs to the dying jade plant but I can't throw it out. Perhaps I'll move it to where I can't see it languish.

TK: I have a corn plant that was on its way out. Two stalks fully died off and I was down to the shortest one. I moved it outside and squirrels buried a bunch of sunflower seeds in it. And they all grew. So many came out of the pot where this corn plant was dying. The surprising thing is after all those sunflowers died off and I've given it no real attention, the remaining corn plant stalk is starting to grow new leaves.

ED: Help from squirrel gardeners.

TK: I need to bring it back in. It was serving another purpose as it was rotting away. Squirrels did their thing, but now it's starting to regrow. Even with extreme levels of neglect.

ED: Squirrel gardeners knew.

TK: I tried growing mammoth sunflowers this year, a couple of different varieties, but the amount of volunteers from the black oil sunflower seeds planted by squirrels did significantly better. All I'm going to do is plant those next year. Beautiful bundles of yellow the squirrels had planted right next to mine. How do I tend this wildness? How do I surrender to squirrels? How do I help them along? It was a surprise, my efforts didn't need to be so much if I had just let things take their course.

Good Enough

JM: A Good Enough Mother, good-enough-plant-parent, giving room to surrender, and trust, allowing thinking and growth.[4] I see it as a parallel metaphor between human parenting and plant parenting.

KS: It's very similar, isn't it? You can't be a "helicopter" parent, you also can't be neglectful but must land somewhere in the middle.

JM: Tori Dunlap's podcast: *The Financial Feminist*, explores tangential topics like how not to kill your houseplants. Her number one tip was "leave it the fuck alone".[5] Don't hover. Most are dying from overwatering, root rot, and people doing too much. The key is to back off. Another point was to honor the form your plants take. It makes the plant unique and tells its story. My cactus came with severe gashes, which is why it was discarded. It's flourishing here, although it is dusty. The arm had a big gash, explaining why it was leaning on the window frame for support. Once a little nub, it's now grown at least three feet.

TK: There's a degree of reciprocity the plant is now expecting. You gave it better attention and care than it had, and it's decided to grow a significant extension. Now you need to help it out, now you rely on each other. It's growing something it probably wouldn't have been able to support on its own after that trauma.

JM: We're emotionally tied, co-dependant.

KS: A relationship. Your "main squeeze", right?

JM: Yes, and she's almost grown to the height of the ceiling. I need guidance, next moves are consequential. Do I risk cutting into it in hopes of propagation and rejuvenation or pack up my apartment and move to a place with higher ceilings? I need to become a surgeon. I had surgery once, so I know what to do. I will follow YouTube instructions and hope it works out.

TK: I have a blueberry plant I was trying to avoid intentional violence with for years. It's moved with me to a few different houses, in the same pot with no real attempt at pruning. I figured I would finally settle the plant in the ground this year, and as soon as I did, all that care went by the wayside. Squirrels knocked half the branches off, I knocked some off, and now it's just little nubs sticking out of the ground. All that time and attention appears gone, but I'm trying to surrender to the chance that maybe this was the pruning I should have been doing the whole time. Come spring next year, maybe I'll be surprised at what it's going to be. I'm letting it go from my mind.

JM: Letting go... simultaneously, you have this deep hope.

TK: Absolutely. bell hook's *Belonging, A Culture of Place* describes connections to land and ideas of Home, but when considering our connection to nature, "maintaining intimacy gives us a concrete place of hope. It is nature that reminds us time and time again that "this too will pass"... To watch plants rise from the earth with no special tending reawakens our sense of awe and wonder". [6] That's surrender, you have to just let it be and hope.

KS: If it's not meant to be...

Cicadas

ED: This past summer millions of cicadas emerged from the ground vertically clinging to blades of grass in my lawn. A cicada garden. I cannot stop thinking about Watteau's Embarkation (Pilgrimage) to Cythera.[7] In the painting French partiers descend on Cythera for love en masse only to return home after pairings have occurred. All these figures, looking for mates. In a designated botanical place. My village of Lisle was one of the cicada party places.

The party lasts briefly and the players must leave. But delight happens because of this place. Maybe to return? Hopefully, the garden is cyclical.

Letting life happen as it will, sometimes with a little nurture. Plants and cicadas (hopefully) emerge and multiply. There is delight in this fest of intimate connection between creatures, plants, and life. It's a fleeting joyous thing.

KS: Easily overlooked because it is so fleeting...

ED: I love thinking of cicadas making their 13 or 17-year trip to their isle of Cythera, in the guise of Lisle Illinois. What was it like to be underground all those years and then arrive blinking into the sunlight (do cicadas have eyelids)? And to arrive with millions of others in the same condition?

Imagine emerging after so many years underground. High school senior-aged. With millions of others. What a party. Emerging out of the earth where they were planted. Cicada hatchlings fall to earth to plant themselves underground to not return to the light until they are the same age as high school seniors.

JM: When you said that about emerging after years, I thought, "Holy shit, I'm a cicada too". That's how I feel right now, in this empty-nester transition—on the brink of it. It's a new beginning shaped by a lifetime of experiences. It took a lot to get to this point, a rebirth. I really appreciate that connection to the human experience.

Elisabeth Dzuricsko
Cicadas Pilgrimage to Cythera. Duralar, acrylic, ink, black paper photoshop, 8" x 22", 2024
© Elisabeth Dzuricsko

Not today. Maybe next week. I'm proud of you. Turn that off. Leave your sister alone. Tie your shoes. Hurry up. I know they love you. I know it's hard. Maybe next week. Everything is going to be okay. Te amo. Brush your teeth. Yo no se porque. Do your homework. I love you. We are going to be fine. Go to bed. Tenemos todo. I was wrong. Cuida tu hermano. Be responsible. It's too expensive. We're really lucky. We have everything we need. How do you feel about that? It will make more sense when you're older. Con cuidado. Wash your hands. I'm not sure why. It takes time. Be honest. It's okay to cry. You can tell me anything. When you are older. You have their smile.

ED: I was wistful at the end of cicada season. Most were gone, but some were still calling out for love and I felt...sad for them. Like, why you, cicadas? Why couldn't you find anyone, there were so many of you! So much abundance and then nothing.

JM: We had very few here, but just an hour south it was like End of Times. Thousands, flew at me, hitting me in the head, a noise so strong I felt the vibration in my body. My daughter is like you, Elisabeth. She has this kinship with cicadas, enjoying their presence. Is this a beautiful thing to be embraced? Surrender.

Topiaries

JM: "Purity" embedded in the (TradWife) movement, exists under the guise of patriarchy. A "good" TradWife adheres to ideals that yield their power. TradWife culture is on the rise as TikTok markets this oppressive lifestyle, lifting up this false and harmful idealism. Although I wasn't involved in religious fundamentalism, growing up with "traditional" values led me to make major life decisions based on society's expectations rather than my desires. Unrealistic expectations silenced my discontent. It wasn't until the weight of this facade became unbearable that I broke free from this lie. Just as the perfect traditional wife does not reflect real life, neither does the chemically treated garden. It's false health, a form of isolation, fostering silence and shame in the name of privacy and reputation.

Scars help me see the struggle as evidence of resilience.

KS: Manicured gardens...Topiaries.

ED: You could torture them into an unnatural form. And you could convince this plant that this is appropriate for it. That they can survive in their mutilated state seems sort of... TradWifey.

TK: A lot of topiary creates boundaries and living fences. People tend to grow things that they shape as a natural-looking structure to separate. Privacy. Property lines.

JM: The invisible fences are getting me, they can't exist without complicity. Women, we have invisible fences... until we don't.

ED: There is something seductive in having somebody else make all decisions. Giving up rights, and personhood. Topiaries seem like TradWives cultivated into a thing sacrificing real selves.

KS: Trying to thwart her true nature.

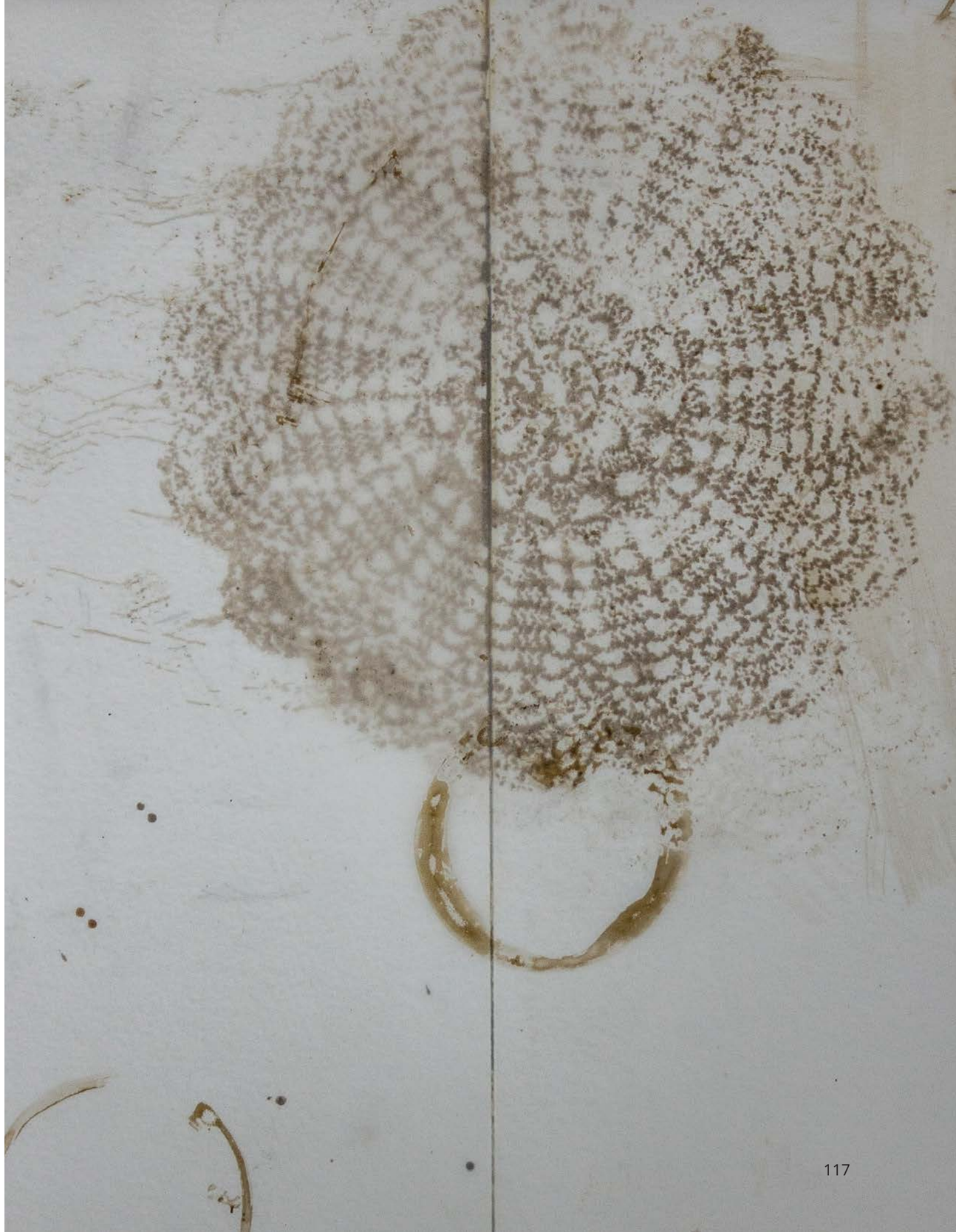
JM: Critical thinking is squashed in TradWife culture. That framework's recipe is determined for you. In history when a majority of women were stay-at-home moms, this role became equated with the American Dream. Zooming out to see broader societal impact, you see how it functions. While there is undeniable value in the connections that come from a stay-at-home life, a larger mechanism is at play. To individual families, it is about nurturing; however, in service to capitalism, it's more about unpaid domestic labor and creating more workers/consumers, shaping how society functions.[8]

The question becomes: How do you fit yourself into the topiary created for you? Or do you break free like those plants growing in the cracks of the concrete? It blows my mind when a small plant is strong enough to break concrete. TK: I feel like I'm just trying to balance my yard and my garden. Composting what I can and returning nutrients. Mulching leaves, piling intentionally to fill spots in my yard, creating ground cover for my garden.

page 118:
Elisabeth Dzuricsko
Cicada Emergence (detail). ceramics 6″ x 6″, 2024
© Elisabeth Dzuricsko

page 119:
Jessica Mueller
Con Cuidado, silk screen, stains, Ikea dish/work towel, 12″ x 18″, 2018
© Jessica Mueller

page 121:
Kris Schaedig
Stained. Walnut ink, stained handmade heirloom doily monoprint, watercolor paper, vellum. 12″ x 6″, 2025
© Kris Schaedig



KS: We do that too. But we can't use walnut leaves because they'll kill everything.

TK: You talked about harvesting walnuts which I oddly never thought of as an option. Nobody ever talked of those green orbs as valuable, the only thing they would say was, "Leave them alone. They stain".

KS: They do. I am making ink out of husks.

TK: That was the barrier. Nobody ever acknowledged that there was food in the center of it, the staining was the overwhelming problem.

KS: Most grocery stores sell California walnuts. But I've heard that black walnuts are much richer in flavor. Many people compare it to a cup of really good, sumptuous coffee. That's the black walnut. As opposed to a cup of instant decaffeinated coffee which is weak, watery, and somewhat tasteless, which would be the California walnut.

JM: High maintenance. Most don't want to deal with it, but if you're willing, the reward is high.

KS: Next year we're going to harvest walnuts. They're all piled against the fence, for squirrels. This year it's too late to do anything with them, except make ink.

JM: You're going to become known as the black walnut lady on your block, all because you tried to grow tomatoes near the walnut tree.

Violence, Hornworms, Consumption

TK: You can't only look at a garden as a place of life. You put it away for the season, things will die, and you have to decide what to let go. When Baudelaire approached the island, "Oh, Venus on your isle, what did I see but my own image on the gallows tree? Oh, God, give me the strength to contemplate my own heart, my own body. Without hate". [9]

ED: A Voyage to Cythera from Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* is full of despair and regret for the carnal celebration. All that is left on the isle after all have left, is death. The painting is a balm to that despair. A fond remembrance of a past fertile time.

TK: What am I keeping or letting go? It's all cyclical. I stumbled on this jarring hornworm on my tomato plants. They turn into hummingbird moths, and pollinators, but they will devour your plants if you don't intervene. I watched it consume multiple leaves in a short amount of time, but my tomatoes had already started leaping out of the garden and I figured there was plenty to be had. Many people advocate for growing a separate tomato bush specifically for hornworms. A sacrificial tomato plant.

ED: Gentle violence.

KS: Who gets to be sacrificed? How do you decide?

TK: If you give them a lesser plant to eat, will they even take to it?

KS: Should we even cultivate gardens at all? Maybe we should just forage.

ED: Total surrender.

Tyler Kirkholm
Survival Over Surrender. Blankets, sheets, table clothes, desperation, digital photos. 3.5" x 11", 2024
© Tyler Kirkholm

TK: Nature will take what it needs and creatures will find their way. I need to check myself and surrender to my expectations of my yields.

KS: Either buy a salad or take on the fight with hornworms to have our own tomatoes.

TK: It all points to your relationship to the things you consume. Does it reset your boundaries and expectations with natural processes? While it's easy to buy something, and sometimes cheaper, can you keep the sensitivity of your relationship with it? The struggle is worth it.

JM: There's a balance. We've talked about the gray areas and extremes always present. From novice to pro, it depends on your skills—some are intuitive, but much of it requires learning and effort. Then there's the question of resources and time. Life situations can create tension. Sometimes you garden because you lack resources, and sometimes you can because you have resources.

I've always wanted to call myself a gardener, but it's expensive—especially when you're new to it. Starting a garden might help with stress, so I bought raised beds, soil, and plants. It was stressful prioritizing the garden over bills and savings. A handful of cherry tomatoes for three hundred dollars and hours of my time. It did not feed my family. At all. Although daily watering and witnessing the transformation was therapeutic, monetarily it was not a smart move.

KS: Why do we do it? The conclusion I've come up with is we're creatures who live on earth and there's something really satisfying physically, emotionally, and mentally to do this. It's a primordial connection, it's what we are.

Relationships

TK: Gardening has made me realize the depth at which I'm strengthening my relationship with my backyard, home, and land. I have to look at that relationship as its own entity and something that I have strengthened. I've done small things that have created some shifts. I just harvested my first batch of compost that's been working for over a year. I mixed it into my garden, covered with leaves, and patted it down for winter. It has fortified my relationship with my backyard, and with Home. It's made me more sensitive to things my backyard is requesting from me.

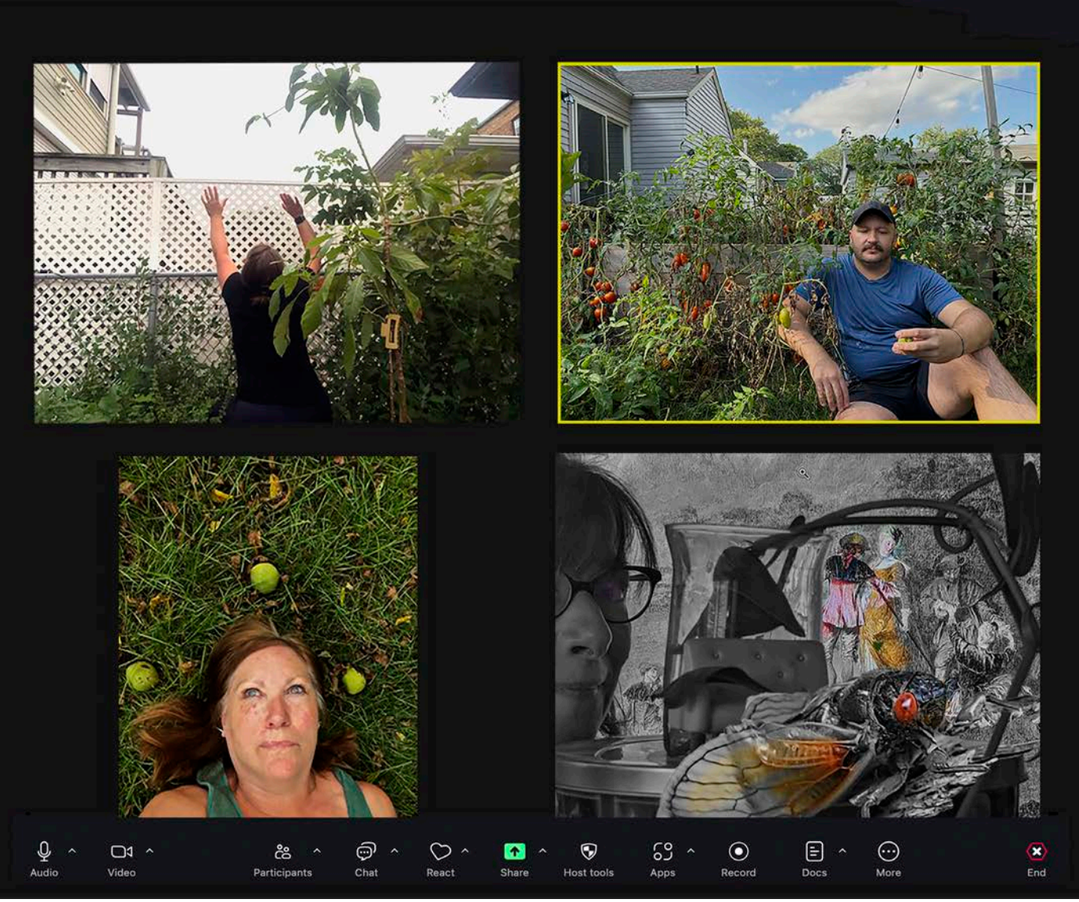
KS: It makes us slow down. We want everything to be immediate, economical efficient, and on our own terms, and in reality, it's not like that. Plants will grow and die at their own pace. We are forced to see in a more real, interconnected way.

JM: Cultivating at home during COVID, we slowed down and truly listened. I'm finding time again for patience and thoughtfulness. These are cycles we go through—sometimes it's a lifelong journey, and other times it's a point in life where this kind of cultivation becomes possible.

KS: We surrender, stop fighting. I let the walnut tree be and put the tomatoes in pots. Time. Joy. Soil. Seeds. Wait.

ED: "We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden" [10]

Tyler Kirkholm
Such Abundance. Backyard garden, overgrown tomatoes, sacrificial plant, surrender, digital photos. 8" x 22", 2024



Elisabeth Dzuricsko
Garden Zoom, photoshop 11″ x 8″, 2024 © Elisabeth Dzuricsko

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El*isa*beth Dzuricsko is a transdisciplinary artist, educator, and gallery director in the Chicago suburbs. Materials, imagery, and media are the experimental vocabulary used for a continuing narrative(s) proposing more hopeful outcomes. She holds an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a member of MotherArt: Revisited exhibiting locally and internationally in exhibitions and publications.

Tyler Kirkholm is an artist and educator based in Des Moines, IA. His artistic practice is informed by his curiosity of Place-based identities, especially those influenced by rural/urban dichotomies. Taking inspiration from nature and ideas of Nature, he deconstructs, reconstitutes and reconstructs new surfaces and abstractions as a way of queering landscapes. He has exhibited locally and nationally in galleries, art centers, and most recently the Cedar Rapids Art Museum.

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Joseph A. Horne
Washington, D.C. A Victory garden in the Southwest section, Nitrate negatives, June 1943, public domain. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Victory gardens: where did they go?

During World War II, "Victory Gardens" became a widespread movement in the United States, with nearly 20 million gardens producing 40% of the nation's fresh vegetables. Building on the World War I garden movement, these gardens symbolized patriotism, unity, and resilience, as citizens responded to rationing and food shortages. The term "victory garden," revived with optimism, encouraging families, schools, and neighborhoods to participate. Public campaigns framed gardening as a civic duty, supported by seed exchanges and educational resources. Victory Gardens embodied a form of mutual aid, emphasizing collective well-being over individual profit. But where did they go?

text: **Julian Lucas**

In the 1940s, American patriotism got their hands dirty. During World War II, "Victory Gardens" sprouted in backyards, empty lots, schoolyards, and public spaces (although originally called war gardens during World War I starting from 1917). At their peak, nearly 20 million gardens produced an estimated 40% of the fresh vegetables consumed in the United States. The phrase "victory garden" was first used by the head of the National War Garden Commission, Charles Lathrop Pack during the end of World War I. The name became so popular that it was used again during World War II, when victory gardeners returned to duty. It was more optimistic than "war garden". These gardens were a response to wartime rationing and strained supply chains, but the gardens were also a powerful symbol of solidarity and resilience. Families, schools, and entire neighborhoods participated, showing that patriotism was a communal effort rooted in a palpable action.

Victory Gardens were a source of food, but more over they were a cultural movement. Public campaigns encouraged Americans to see gardening as a civic duty, with posters urging citizens to "Dig for Victory". Magazines published gardening tips, and communities came together to share seeds and tools. These efforts embodied elements of socialism prioritizing the collective good over individual profit. This means, the Silent Generation, parents of the Baby Boomers, was focused on mutual aid and ensuring that everyone had access to the resources and knowledge they needed to contribute. This sense of shared purpose was a stark contrast to the hyper individualism that dominates present American culture.

Furthermore, the Black community also participated by growing food in their backyards as they were accustomed to gardening. Their resilience persevered during the time of Victory Gardens because Jim Crow Laws, segregation, and lynchings were still common. Segregation made it more difficult for Blacks because of the limited access to high quality seeds.

Additionally, Japanese Americans were also encouraged to grow gardens on camp property during the war, despite being forced to relocate to internment camps because of discrimination as well.

In the modern day, collaborative attitudes have waned. Instead of repurposing public and private land for food production, modern America has embraced privatization and industrialization driven by consumerism and concealed by performative patriotism.

Big trucks with American flags as large as king-size bed sheets flapping in the wind, along with social media posts proclaiming allegiance to the nation: the symbols of patriotism are everywhere, flags hanging from houses or planted in green suburban lawns, campaign signs with slogans draped over freeways, and president-branded t-shirts and caps becoming a fashionable trend. However, the substance, acts of service, community building, and self-reliance, is increasingly absent.

Meanwhile, growing your own food, once seen as a patriotic duty has also become associated to poverty as it was a necessity for people who couldn't afford to purchase food from the grocery stores on a regular basis, more so in rural areas. Today, the concepts of growing your own food and farm-to-table dining are often viewed by some as leftist, socialist, or liberal niche interests and are not always taken seriously.

However, those who truly understand the value of these practices, particularly people from densely populated and diverse cities, view them as a more health conscious and environmentally responsible alternative to industrialized food, which is commonly served at chain restaurants. Many local restaurants have embraced the farm to table concept. At such places, the commitment to sourcing fresh, local ingredients is evident from the moment you sit down, with servers often highlighting that their food comes directly from local farms.

The rise of neoliberal policies, championed by politicians on both sides of the aisle, has prioritized privatization over public welfare. Food production has been monopolized by massive corporations focused on profits. Urban food deserts have been flooded with unhealthy processed options, while fresh, affordable produce

Governament Printing Office
Victory garden poster, World War II, Agriculture Department. War Food Administration. Printer: U.S. 1945. Public Domain. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Joseph A. Horne
Washington, D.C. A resident of the Southwest section and her Victory garden, Farm Security Administration: Office of War Information photograph collection, June 1943, public domain.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Edward Meyer
New York, New York. Children's school victory gardens on First Avenue between Thirty-fifth and Thirty-sixth Streets, June 1944 public domain. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Herbert Bayer
Grow it yourself Plan a farm garden now, NYC : NYC WPA War Services, between 1941 and 1943.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC

remains scarce. Land once accessible for community or agricultural use has been parceled out for private development, turning potential gardens into parking lots, strip malls, and luxury housing, all done in the name of the almighty dollar.

Public spaces like parks and sidewalks, which were integral to the Victory Garden movement, are now largely overlooked as resources for combating food insecurity. During World War II, parks and other communal spaces were repurposed for food production, serving as hubs for community gardening. Today, these same spaces are either privatized, with the use of a BID (Business Improvement District) heavily policed by the BID with the use of private security, or restricted in ways that make them inaccessible for urban agriculture. For example, beautification ordinances or privatization deals often prioritize aesthetics and corporate interests over utility and community needs. Sidewalks, which could host planter boxes or small-scale gardens in dense urban areas, are treated as commercial spaces or are heavily regulated to limit community use.

The Victory Garden movement wasn't just about food, it was about empowerment and resilience. It showed that, in times of crisis, communities could take action to address their own needs. It provided a sense of control and pride at a time when global events felt overwhelming. Imagine how this ethos could transform neighborhoods in food deserts today, where access to healthy food is limited by systemic neglect and corporate-driven policies.

In neighborhoods like Pomona and Claremont, and other surrounding cities vacant lots and neglected public spaces could be transformed into thriving urban farms. Instead of being seen as an eyesore or impractical, these spaces could become the heart of a modern "Victory Garden" movement, one that combats food deserts, fosters community, and challenges the dominance of profit-driven food systems.

Additionally, Victory Gardens can go as far as to broaden its reach by collaborating with restaurants, bringing the farm to table culinary experience to life. This would mean that instead of coming from heavily fertilized and poisoned land, your salad would come directly from a local Victory Garden.

If patriotism is about having pride and loving your country, it must also mean caring for all its people, not just protecting corporate profits or only a certain group of people. A modern "patriotic gardening" movement could reclaim urban spaces, empowering all disinvested communities throughout America to combat food insecurity. By reinvesting in public spaces and rejecting neoliberal policies that prioritize profit over people, we could bring the spirit of Victory Gardens back to life.

Real patriotism isn't performative. It's all about action, getting your hands dirty to build something sustainable. Today, planting a garden could be one of the most radical acts of modern patriotism, opposing privatization and empowering communities. The seeds of a more equitable America are waiting to be sown, it's time we planted them.

This article oringally titled "Victory gardens: where did they go?Has Patriotism Traded Roots for Asphalt and Symbols" was originally published on January 6th 2025 in ***The Pomonan*** (www.thepomonan.com) and is here reprinted with the permission of the author.

Julian Lucas is a Los Angeles-based photographer whose aim is to challenge social norms through his photographs that range from fine art to photojournalism, always true to analogue techniques. In 2015, he founded Mirrored Society – a photo bookstore cherishing a worldwide collection of finest photobooks. In 2018, he launched Print Pomona Art Book Fair to host independent photobook publishers and sellers, later leading to the creation of The Pomonan – a digital platform for independent and censorship-free journalism. Currently, he is in the process of setting up Mirrored Society Center for Photography which will function as an extension of Mirrored Society Books and will operate as a gallery.

Common ground

Set within a women's refuge, this diaristic reflection considers whether community gardening might offer a form of embryonic re-commoning—not only through the sharing of land, labour, and food, but also as a means of softening the psychological enclosures imposed by neoliberal conditions. The writer's pregnant body becomes a site from which to observe acts of earthly collaboration and seasonal change, weaving together questions of care, interdependence, and resistance through the rhythms of the garden.

text and images: **Rosie Carr**

Gardening Club

Those who toil should own the soil [1]

—*The Landworkers' Alliance*

On my first visit to the women only safe house, I take multiple wrong turns on my way to the meeting room, sweating in waterproofs while flapping my security documents, frenzied by the uniformity of the blue linoleum corridors. It's the type of lino that spreads up the wall, municipal and neat. The garden here is a different story. To step outside of these orderly corridors is to step into an overgrown wilderness. I am here once a week in my capacity as a gardener, to support women who live here to grow a garden.

The Medaille Trust's aims are straightforward: to combat modern slavery by providing safe housing and holistic support for survivors while raising awareness and promoting efforts to end human trafficking.[2] At the first Gardening Club in Spring, the women who come are Albanian, Nigerian and Vietnamese. The proportions of each nationality ebb and flow over time, someone is always arriving and someone else moving on. The occupants of the safe house are free to come and go, but visitors are not allowed. The location of the safe house must not be shared. Sometimes personalities clash in the daily living of close communal life, which although safe, clean, and warm, is often cramped and boring. Arguments start over all the issues communal living inspires. Cupboard space. Cooking times. Washing up.

Most of the residents are processing deep emotional trauma, and single-handedly raising children, whilst also attempting the long process of seeking asylum. Sometimes the process takes so long that babies are in school by the time asylum status is reached or denied. Nearly everyone here is living on the standard £49.18 a week asylum support. For many, the opportunity to grow food to cook with is first and foremost a way to alleviate financial stress.

Often, it is not until we get outside and feel the soil between our fingers that a sense of enjoyment takes over. That is when the conversations around what to cultivate—and how to grow food that evokes a sense of 'home' can begin.

The Roots of Community Gardening in the UK

The land, and the landscape, no longer looked the same; its boundaries and borders restricted movements and hence altered the experience of the landscape, and these juridical and economic derelictions hastened the end of a certain sort of moral economy, of a particular sort of sociability, of a sense of community.[3]

—Michael J Watts, *Enclosure: A Modern Spatiality of Nature*

In the UK, all green spaces, whether public or privately owned, are interconnected through rhizomatic routes of entangled history. The transition from commonly held, farmed and grazed land to private land, from the 13th to the 19th Centuries, intertwined both public and private gardens with one of the most radical political shifts in British history—the Enclosure Acts.[4] The Allotment, as first named in law in 1845,[5] is often seen as the modern-day survivor of the Enclosures. However, as Lesley Acton points out in her study on 20th Century allotment holding in Britain,[6] from its origin, 'Allotmenteering' has not been taken up for purely economic purposes, or for the alleviation of hunger in wartime, but, "it is the social element of the hobby that primarily motivates most plot holders".[7] In recent years it has been well documented by the Royal Horticultural Society that gardening in all forms and access to green spaces reduces stress, and benefits wellbeing.[8]

As a community gardener, I often think about people's motivations for land use. I have to, so I can write funding applications. Access to nature for well-being is usually at the top of the list. Anecdotally, the more I work with people and the soil, the more I feel a sense of pride, community, and stewardship over the land that we work, together. It is largely due to the long history of prolonged and aggressive enclosure and privatisation of green spaces in the UK, that this sense of shared pride, stewardship, and mutual well-being is not enjoyed by all. Rather it is only enjoyed by a few, in small pockets. Author and conservationist Simon Fairlie estimates that "nearly half the country is owned by 40,000 millionaires, or 0.06 percent of the population".[9]

As well as enclosing physical space, it can be argued that these historic laws have enacted a psychological enclosure, restricting how people are able to understand and develop their relationship to land and to nature without common access. This disproportionately impacts people from lower economic backgrounds and people in marginalised and disabled communities.[10] In her book, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* Sylvia Federici reasons that Marx's *primitive accumulation*[11] was not a purely historical event but a continuous process. Land grabs, privatisation of public services, and the less tangible but no less 'real' commodification of knowledge and nature, are part of an ongoing strategy of accumulation by dispossession.[12] But what is the contemporary, humanly felt legacy of this disruption? Could allotments, and their contemporary cousins - community gardens, provide us with a type of embryonic *re-commoning*?[13] Even if that *re-commoning* is just a mental strategy to deal with the harsh sense of a psychological enclosure felt by many under the conditions of neoliberalism?

Spring

The Capacity to read the elements, to discover the medical properties of plants and flowers, to gain sustenance from the earth [...] was and remains a source of 'autonomy' that had to be destroyed. The development of capitalist industrial technology has been built on that loss and has amplified it.[14]

—Sylvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*

Five women sign up and we meet in the Chapel, where I have laid out felt tip pens and paper ready to design our dream gardens. Straight away we start talking about plants. Faith produces a smooth, rosy little fruit from her pocket.

"What is it, and what are its medicinal properties?" She asks. I tell her it's a Crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*) from a tree grown ornamentally for its Autumn colour, and for its blossom in Spring. As for its medicinal properties, I don't know. (I am embarrassed not to know). I get my phone out to check. "Used to treat stomach and bowel disorders"[15] says Google. After this, we start Googling the medicinal

Rosie Carr
Greenhouse, risograph scanned print printed by Park Press, 2025 © Rosie Carr

properties of the herbs in the supermarket, one by one, to see if anything is useful. I test myself on the Latin as we go. I start to realise that knowing plant names in Latin is of very little use when you want to know what something is *for*.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)—Anti-inflammatory, anti-microbial, antioxidant.
Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)—Reducing inflammation, boosting the immune system, promoting digestion.
Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)—Heart Health, Eye Health, Bone Health, Detoxification.
Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)—Prevention and treatment of diseases and disorders of the gastrointestinal tract, kidney and urinary tract; spasms and sleep disorders.

Most of the women who come to Gardening Club have a cultural understanding of plants that's different from my own. Adaeze and Ema explain how growing up in Nigeria, they were taught about plants in terms of cooking and medicine—information passed down through generations of women. My introduction to plants was different – working in ornamental horticulture in English Country Gardens. To me, this positioning of 'use' over 'aesthetics' in the garden, and questioning the medicinal properties, the taste, and the function of what we grow, feels new and daunting. But it also stirs up something that feels *instinctive*. It's a richer, deeper way to explore plants—a practice intrinsically entwined in culture and place.

We talk about how knowing the uses of this plant that, is a way of recouping a collective cultural memory—a way to travel home perhaps, or create a new home—real or imaginary, where you are. In this space, the plants become storytellers. We talk about how seeds are like time travellers. Gardening is a form of time travel and seeds are spaceships, carrying the DNA of epochs. Time doesn't move in a straight line in the garden, it throbs between decay and regeneration, composing, composting.

Political Gardening

In the Garden, one performs the act of possessing[16]
—Jamaica Kincaid, *The Disturbances of the Garden*

The plants that we grow in our gardens and allotments, especially cultivated varieties, have complex family histories embedded in colonialism. Often these plants are native to lands stolen from Indigenous communities and have been *collected* over centuries and taken on great journeys, renamed and repackaged, bred, and monetised on the global market. All British gardens are receptacles for this movement and trade—so in turn, they operate as spaces that grow and nurture multiple *disturbances* within. As a gardener, I find this relationship difficult. Whilst acknowledging their colonial entwinement, part of the draw of working with plants is the potential for them to exist outside of market forces. They do their own thing—seeds get scattered by the wind and weeds grow in cracks.

Communal gardening projects have a particular ability to be shape-shifting, hybrid sites of learning and change. They do not escape the legacy of colonialism. But, their accessibility, and their potential to be shaped by multiple ideas,

Rosie Carr
Søntolina, risograph scanned print, printed by Park Press, 2025
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sets of knowledge, and different communities; plant and human, makes them intrinsically political. Their openness, as opposed to the closedness of private gardens, is hospitable to the production of new ideas—the holding of many ideas at once. Gardening is a practice of transformation, where a tiny seed is nurtured to sprout and grow into something huge. This practice amazes us and gets us hooked.

American Geographer Jennifer Barron writes: "The increasingly nuanced discourse around political gardening reflects a desire to get beyond assertations that community gardens are either inherently resistant to, or reproductive of, neoliberalism".[17] Political Gardening is a term used by Barron to describe community gardening projects, and specifically how the processes of neoliberalism (privatisation, devolution, deregulation) and a simultaneous radical countermovement might be found in tandem, at the very same site. It is useful to distinguish between *gardening* in a traditional sense, and *political gardening* which construes a more active movement towards social justice, food justice, land rights, and rights for people with disabilities and people in marginalised groups—as it opens up the idea that gardening need not just be applied to the art of looking after plants. Carers, parents, social workers, artists—is what they do a form of gardening too? Ask anyone who has spent time working the soil alongside other people—'therapeutic' doesn't come close. Gardening is a kind of truth serum. I've shared some of my deepest hopes, fears, and dreams with fellow gardeners. Community Gardening provides a physical and metaphorical place for people from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds to come together. The garden's inherently problematic, and 'disturbing' cultural history forms part of its identity, but it is not its defining characteristic. Olivia Laing proposes: "The garden could be a refuge [...] a place of change, but it can and has also embodied the power structures and mindsets that have driven this devastation".[18] Whilst Catriona Sandilands writes: "As privileged nodes in global movements of plants and people, gardens are not only worlds but also *in* and *of* the world".[19] It is a conundrum to be gardening in a literal refuge—a safe house. It is isolated, but at the same time inextricably linked to the world of capital outside. The trauma that women at this safe house have endured binds them to those threads of imperialism—they are themselves 'in and of the world' in a way that most of us will never have to experience.

Summer

It's July and I'm four months pregnant. The muck spreading has started on the farmers' fields, and the stench is thick in the air, curdling my nauseous stomach, as we inspect the old herb beds in the nooks and crannies of the enormous garden. Ema is also pregnant. We talk about how pregnancy makes us both feel weird, vulnerable, and sick, but also creative. Assertive. Connected. You could describe gardening like that too, I say. Both pregnancy and gardening are acts of collaboration—between bodies, ecosystems, and time. In both, I find the anticipation of something new, shaped by effort, but also by forces beyond my control: the weather, the soil, and the environment. My nervous system, my gag reflex, my biology. We talk about how it's these earthly, bodily contradictions that make the act of gardening so captivating. Bodies out of control.

Everywhere we look, Mint *(Mentha arvensis)* has spread its roots through the old brickwork and down paths, bursting through gravel, resisting our attempts to weed it out, suffocating an old shrub rose that has seen better days. Clumps of parsley *(Petroselinum crispum)* and thyme *(Thymus vulgaris)* are hanging on, whilst lavender *(Lavandula angustifolia)* and cotton-lavender *(Santolina chamaecyparissus)* thrive in their dried-up beds. A gnarled bay tree *(Laurus nobilis)* is leaning perilously close to a greenhouse with broken windows. Happy weeds fill in the gaps; *hens foot, fleabane, sow thistle, dock*. This garden is full of potential. The safe house has large, rambling grounds. The worn edges of the old Victorian property are unravelling to farmers' fields on all sides into thick, soft land. The peeling architecture reflects another time. There are traces of where once topiarised English Yew *(Taxus baccata)* circled a pond, and a Box hedge *(Buxus sempervirens)*, now dead and decimated by Box Caterpillar surrounded Roses. I imagine this space as it once was, a formal English garden – its former life rotted and composted now and made afresh into our garden, a shared space.

Intangible space

The life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge gives commons [19]

—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

For Fred Moten and Stefano Harney *The Undercommons* represents an intangible space, drawing on theory and practice within the Black radical tradition. *The Undercommons* is a space against politics—a figurative call to arms to rise up and surround[20] conventional politics as a form of radical self-defence. *It* is a space that exists in opposition to, but also within, institutions—and, to some extent within capitalism. It is *this* proximity to capitalist institutions that creates its powerful tension and its antagonistic energy, propelling its members to seek connections with one another, to imagine and to improvise ways to "take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that right now limits our ability to find each other".[21]

The Undercommons exist outside of the reach of state and market forces, making it a space of constant subversion and potential. Its ethereality makes it more powerful – it cannot be tainted with the potential for failure or "tragedy"[22] and it cannot be physically enclosed. Its existence is defined by an ongoing resistance to the structures that seek to contain it. It thrives on the energy generated by this resistance.

The Undercommons eschews notions of productivity tethered to economic gain. Plants also have the ethereal ability to cyclically sustain themselves outside of the world of *Capital*. But, just like *The Undercommons*; gardens are not isolated, random, sanctuaries, and they are not just made of plants, they are made of people too. For Sylvia Federici, the *commons* must be a place where there is a reciprocal relationship with nature, representing both material and im-

Rosie Carr
Cold frame, risograph scanned print,
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material spaces, where collective ownership and mutual care replace capitalist models of individualism and competition. So in these terms, the *commons* are not only physical spaces but also social relationships and forms of knowledge that resist capitalist individualism.

Gardens exist because of and in spite of their entanglement with the forces of capital. At the safe house, I am a witness to how empowering the act of gardening together, and channelling this cyclical, seasonal ethereality can be. I believe that it is in these pockets of "sanctuary" or "refuge", that the intangible *Undercommons* are quietly starting to build a more sustainable world. As Harney and Moten suggest, life stolen by systems of power is reclaimed through collective action. Once this chain reaction starts, it keeps moving, from refuge to commons to refuge. A community gardening project may only show this on a small scale, but it provides a clear example of the self-generating process: the commons both shelters and produces a broader sense of shared life and solidarity—the commons itself generates *more commons*.

Autumn

Thus tired earthly commons, the gift of billions of years of labourless transformation, meet tired human bodies.[23]
—Sylvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*

At Gardening Club, we are all "tired human bodies"—Women's bodies, vulnerable bodies, pregnant bodies. When I first came here, the garden was tired and neglected but full of potential. The cyclical, slow process of seasonal clearing, planting, and composting has set off a chain reaction; an intuitive, corporeal response to cultivate, to reclaim, to grow.

We talk about what to grow again in the spring:

Moringa (*Moringa oleifera)* **-** *Faith says Moringa is an antioxidant, used to decrease inflammation. It is used to regulate blood sugar for diabetics. It's good for breastfeeding. For Asthma.*
Bitter Leaf *(Vernonia amygdalina)* **-** *Ema describes the traditional Nigerian dishes she would prepare if she had this ingredient, how the texture of the Bitter Leaf is too slimy for the palette of her English boyfriend. "It has an iron flavour."*
Locust Bean/Carob (*Ceratonia siliqua)* **-** *Adaeze discusses the delicious sweetness of the Locust Bean. "Hard to find here, but maybe my sister can send some from Nigeria".*
Ewedu / Jute (*Corchorus olitorius) – Chi says this is "a good all rounder" and you can eat every part of the plant, the dried leaves in tea, the seeds in a salad, and the fibres to make rope.*

Worldbuilding from the Margins

The Common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure [25]
—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

When Donna Haraway says that "It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories"[26] this speaks to the power of creating new narratives, to find innovative ways to deal with the ecological trouble we are in, on a planetary scale. But it also speaks to the agency of the storyteller and the worldbuilder. *Who gets to tell the stories that shape reality, and who gets to build the worlds that we inhabit?*

Moten and Harney suggest that the communities who are displaced, marginalised, and pushed to the edges of society must be central to 'worlding new worlds'. *The Undercommons* are the people and spaces that exist "beyond and beneath"[27] and are excluded by larger systems of power. These are the communities (Haraway would involve non-human communities in this too) who are enacting new modes of being—often through collective, "fugitive"[28] practices that are not centred around gaining recognition or working with existing power structures. These are the communities who have learned to "stay with the trouble" because they have had no choice. In doing so, there is potential to develop forms of resistance, creativity, and collective care that can build new worlds - worlds that don't erase the "trouble" of reality but instead embrace it. The Safe House Garden is precisely this kind of imperfect, interconnected, self-generating space.

Winter

With the baby on my knee, I write down the common plant names. Later I'll do my research. I'll look up whether these plants are annual or perennial, whether they are tender, whether it is 'like' something else I know. How to grow it, with the risk of frost, in English weather, by the sea? Under glass? How to find the seeds? Our list of potential plants grows. There is so much potential in this garden. It's freezing so we've come inside to make mint tea. We sit down to draw more dream gardens—we do this activity when it rains, it generates ideas. Chi draws her new garden as a circle—where we can sit in the middle and be surrounded by the plants.

The names of the participants and the particulars of the safe-house have been changed for this article to protect the anonymity of those involved. The images are risograph prints made from composite and altered images of the artists' video diary.

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Memory is a strange palette

Urban gardens provide spaces for building relationships across boundaries of age and experience. This essay focuses on an intergenerational queer friendship formed in a garden at a Supportive Housing building located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. The work of gardening ties these friends to a vast lineage of queer artists and gardeners who have used gardening to give form to memory, to grieve, and to cultivate resilience in the face of destruction. Stories within the piece highlight themes of community caretaking, queer mentorship, and the conversation of two related practices: gardening and art-making.

text and images: **Patrick Costello**

Three years ago this July, I quit my job. But the work with Scott continued anyway. Still, we gardened in his backyard in Washington Heights. We drank homemade sweet tea in the shade. We argued with the building super, begging for the hose key every time we needed to water. Sometimes he just wouldn't give it to us. Occasionally, he did. And so, the garden lived on.

That August, I visited Scott in the hospital. I trekked through the heat clutching a grease-stained Burger King bag. I was grateful to have something to bring to him, even if fast food felt kind of inappropriate given the situation. He had been rushed to the hospital after nearly a week of chest pain, coughing, and a high fever. I'd been out of town since I last saw him, but I knew something was wrong because days went by and he didn't text. I returned to the city, and finally, he replied to my messages.

I almost died, but it's not cancer!
I'm at New York Presbyterian.
Come visit!
Bring Burger King?
The food here sucks!

Scott's wizardy alive eyes zoned in on the bag as I entered his hospital room. He shrieked with delight when I put it on the bedside table next to an untouched tray of hospital food.

'Are you sure it's ok for you to be eating Burger King right now'? I asked. He glanced at me and laughed, groaning a little in pain as he grabbed the bag.

'Don't make me laugh, it hurts to laugh', he said.

The adjustable bed held his body like the open jaw of a predator, threatening to swallow him whole, ass first. An assortment of IVs tethered him to the room. Somehow, his thick white hair still looked like a shampoo commercial, shiny and swooshing above his blue eyes, even as everything else about him looked wrong. Too small, too fragile. I wasn't prepared for this. My head swam with questions. Would he be ok? Was it related to his HIV? His chain smoking? What could I do to help?

Patrick Costello
Scott in the Hanging Garden, 2021 © Patrick Costello

He began to eat. I handed him a paper napkin as I looked around his bed, trying to understand what was happening. My eyes traced the paths of the tubes, as if they might lead to a solution.

'What's in this one'? I asked, pointing to a tube filled with a liquid resembling caramel sauce.

'Oh, that one's stabbed into my lung', he said, as he leaned forward, gesturing toward the irritated entry point on his back. 'They told me I have sepsis in the pleura of my lungs, and that tube is draining all the fluid out. It collects in that thing over there'. I looked over where he gestured, at a translucent plastic receptacle with measurement lines printed across the front. 'Three liters and counting'! he said, laughing again, groaning again.

'Looks like caramel sauce', I said. 'We should boil it down, make it into candy and give it to our enemies for Christmas'. Scott laughed harder, whimpering from pain.

'Ugh! You're disgusting'!

Patrick Costello
Scott in the hospital, 2021
© Patrick Costello

Patrick Costello
Scott in the Backyard Garden, 2021 © Patrick Costello

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Most things about caretaking are gross. When it's person to person, we navigate flesh and emotions, we provide moments of comfort while fluids circulate and seep. That day in the hospital, I couldn't do much to help Scott. I delivered Burger King, I gave him a napkin, I made a stupid joke. I felt the warmth of connection that comes with taking part in someone else's experience, and the sharp discomfort of being little more than a witness.

All I could do, really, was show up.

For a little over three years before that trip to the hospital, I'd been visiting Scott's apartment building every week during the growing season. I worked for a nonprofit, assisting community gardeners who lived in Supportive Housing, providing them with seeds, topsoil, plants, and my labor. We dried herbs, made Groundcherry jam, and arranged bouquets of fresh flowers.

Though Scott was a charming and gregarious character out in the world, he wasn't interested in making friends with the other residents—'they're all crazy,' he'd say—and therefore, he rarely participated in the group projects. He did however, take advantage of the garden support and my labor. He'd been the main caretaker of the backyard for almost 20 years before I arrived, and I was glad that my body could be of use. Our friendship took hold between and around the official tasks of my job.

Gardening is a uniting force, especially in the city. There is a medley of enemies to rally against. You have the usual antagonists: weeds, squirrels, weather, too many tomatoes. Then there are more specific ones: developers, elected officials, the building super, the homophobic neighbor who uses cardboard boxes and moldy comforters to build dwellings for feral cats in the flower beds. Also, rats. Always rats.

Even through the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Scott and I grew food and flowers in the backyard of his building, occasionally accompanied by a handful of other residents. Prior to moving into Supportive Housing, Scott and his neighbors had been homeless. All of them were 20 to 30 years older than me, most of them were queer and HIV+. All of them watched their loved ones and neighbors die as AIDS carved holes in the city, destroying entire ecosystems. Each of them had taken care of others during a pandemic preceding the one that shaped our last five years.

***

My desire to know queer elders pushed me toward gardening, especially once I moved to New York City. If you want to meet people here, go outside. If you're outdoors, the inhabitants of a neighborhood will find you, and they will tell you their stories, whether you want to hear them or not.

Gardeners, like artists, can be a prickly bunch when they're not working on their project. But if you find a way to work alongside them, you'll have a chance to befriend them. I help Scott in the garden. We dig and talk and teach each other about plants. He tells me stories of this city before my time here. Of the queens and the parties and the ghosts. So many ghosts. When Scott introduces me to friends, he calls me his protege. When a nurse came into the hospital room that day in August, I was his caretaker. Depending on the audience, I could also be his husband, cousin, or nephew. Gardening does that, it makes weird kin, especially when you're both gay wingnuts and incurable saps.

It can feel like sharing a secret language, one other gardeners also know. I don't mean Botanical Latin, though that would be kind of funny, seeking one another out only to converse in nomenclature. No, it isn't one you speak or write. I guess what I'm describing is a language that defines a subculture; an ethos. The community gardeners I've worked with in New York City are driven to create something out of, or in the rubble of, failure—they make use of abandoned lots, and the places the paving machines forgot. They band together with other people who have too much time on their hands, who dream of being somewhere less crowded, who want to pick flowers, who choose to put their labor into growing their own food, instead of buying it from a grocery store.

This might provide a more accurate explanation for why Scott wasn't looking for friendship with his non-gardener neighbors. It's not that they're crazy, they just don't share the language. Whenever I present art I've made, I experience something similar. Always, I know that the most reliable audience for the work will be other artists. I can count on them to invest in it as much as I do, because of the simple fact that they make it too.

Patrick Costello
Scott Overtaken, 2021 © Patrick Costello

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What makes growing a garden so satisfying? Jamaica Kincaid writes that 'memory is a gardener's real palette; memory as it shapes the present, memory as it dictates the future'.[1] Through this lens, gardens aren't built out of seeds and plants. They become nostalgic undertakings, sites of habitual yearning. It's a poetic sentiment, this idea that gardening's spectrum, its range of hues, is defined by memory. In my experience, it rings true. Every time I'm commuting on the crosstown bus, carrying a flat of vegetable starts, or walking down the sidewalk, pushing a granny cart loaded with plants, people want to talk to me. 'My auntie always grew parsley! I love parsley', they say, pointing to a small basil plant. The plants merely lend form to their memories.

Whenever Scott talks about his garden, the story always goes back to his childhood in Lexington, North Carolina. To his grandmother's garden, where he insists he was raised amongst her Four O'clocks and Cornflowers and Zinnias. When he and I appreciate each other's horticultural work, we're not simply admiring a pretty flower, although a pretty flower is certainly a delight. We're recognizing a shared sense of ourselves in relation to the world around us. In some ways, it's more compelling than the fact that we are both gay, or that we're both New York City transplants originally from the South. Gardening provides us a medium through which we might bridge our vastly different experiences of queerness and queer community. Scott is one of only a few people I've ever visited in the hospital, but when he was my age, those visits defined his life.

Of course, most gardening is a physical project. You're digging holes. You're building a trellis out of whatever is available—an old broom handle, some caution tape you found on the sidewalk. You're harvesting cherry tomatoes, but you don't have a bag or a basket, so you use your shirt as if it was one, holding up the bottom edge to form a pouch, filling it with tomatoes until they spill out the sides. Mostly, you're weeding in the sun, feeling pain creeping up from your knees and into your back with each tedious, sweaty, repetitive movement.

And there's always a moment where memory returns. Your throat starts feeling tight as you find yourself ruminating. You're pulling Mugwort out of the beds and you remember what another gardener told you about the rhizomes, about how no matter what you do, these plants will come back. You remember several artist friends who told you that being a weed is subjective, that Mugwort isn't a weed in many places, that it can be used medicinally, ceremonially. Soon, you resent the whole idea of Mugwort, of weeds. And you resent yourself, too. For attempting to eliminate this maddening, remarkable being.

Memory is a strange palette.

***

In November 2019, Scott and I spent a few hours preparing the backyard garden for winter. The final workday marked the completion of our first season gardening together. Frost had already decimated all the warm season crops, so he pulled those out of one bed while I discreetly removed a substantial number of cat turds from another. I didn't want him to see what I was doing because a) it was disgusting, and b) I knew it would only inflame an already tense situation between him and the guy who built the cat houses. I hated the cats and their

Patrick Costello
The Ladder, 2021 © Patrick Costello

poops, but not as much as I hated the fights with Cat Guy. They usually ended in Cat Guy calling us faggots and threatening to kill Scott. I tossed the turds in a trash bag and joined him at the other bed. We planted garlic to overwinter. After we finished, I packed my tool bag slowly, lingering. I wasn't scheduled to return to this garden until spring, when the weekly contract with my nonprofit resumed.

Scott had other plans.

'Ok, see you in the next few weeks sometime', he said. 'We'll need to go up to my Hanging Garden and harvest the sunchokes before the ground is too hard, but I don't want to do it today. You'll just have to come back'.

And so, I returned before spring. He texted me with updates nearly every afternoon.

Too cold
Perfect but raining :-(
Too windy

Patrick Costello
The Hanging Garden, 2021 © Patrick Costello

Then, one temperate Saturday in December, he deemed the weather good enough for us to get to work. I took the crosstown bus and transferred to the uptown C train to get to Scott's apartment. Once there, I met him in the lobby and security buzzed us out to the backyard. I held the side rail of the ladder with one hand and two round-point shovels with the other as Scott quickly climbed up above my head, avoiding the questionable rungs. No one knew exactly how old the ladder was, but it was wooden and dry rotted and definitely a liability. Scott plucked it from the street years ago, a ripe fruit atop a pile of trash bags. Everyone said the ladder shouldn't be allowed, that someone should get rid of it, but here it was. He said the ladder had character, and that's reason enough to skip a couple rungs.

I looked up at Scott, as he stood there looking down at me, his second-hand coat, his baggy sweatpants cinched up with a white drawstring dangling. Don't linger on the ladder'!, he said, laughing as I scrambled up to meet him. We unearthed Scott's sunchokes from a long, narrow ribbon of soil on top of a stone retaining wall at the back edge of the property. He called this spot the Hanging Garden, and it overlooked the community beds where we had planted the garlic. Scott was probably the only resident interested in scaling the wall, and definitely the only one willing to risk the ladder, so this strip of dirt between a chain link fence and a precipice, was basically his sliver of paradise.

***

Scott's Hanging Garden exists in stark contrast to its Babylonian namesake. Immediately after you get up the ladder, you have to contend with sprawling tendrils of Euonymus, growing through the fence from a neighboring lot. They nearly block access to a path, made of discarded wood boards and old bricks, snaking through the garden. And anyway, come high summer, the rest of the plants overtake the path so that the only way through is to keep to the edge, balancing on top of the retaining wall.

Asparagus grows in an old tire stuffed with potting soil. Next to that, Rosemary and Sage mingle with the flowers from his grandmother's garden. Clusters of Castor Beans and Sunchokes tower and sway. Further down, a Virginia Creeper vine winds its way up a brush pile made of the branches Scott cleared when he began making this forgotten area into a garden.

Trillium, Bloodroot, Goldenrod, Asters, Rose of Sharon, Milkweed, Wineberries. Scott planted some of these plants, others just showed up.

Hand-painted signs and assemblages appear throughout: a plaque that reads 'Gardening: the slowest of the performing arts', a small disco ball, sculptures made of rocks, wire, sea glass, and feathers, a giraffe figurine. Treasures tossed out and reclaimed, combined to make decorations and memorials for Scott's loved ones who have passed. The garden holds space for loss, even as it overflows with life.

***

In August of 2021, Scott made a new memorial in the perennial shrub bed in front of his building. A neighbor had jumped from the roof and another gardener we worked with found her lifeless body there, twisted behind a large Yew. Scott marked the area with a chunk of pink marble. He planted pink Lily of the Valley around it.

Nearby, another memorial slowly faded. A rainbow of rocks that Scott had painted and arranged in tribute to queer people who had died of AIDS. COVID-19 wreaked havoc for all of us, but the residents of this building felt its impacts acutely. This pandemic reverberated with echoes of the plague these neighbors had already survived.

***

Gardens ask us to contend with death, even as, in the words of Derek Jarman, 'paradise haunts gardens'.[2] His own internationally beloved garden at Prospect Cottage, located on a shingle beach in Dungeness, against the backdrop of a nuclear power station, serves as a poignant illustration of these words. It's an unlikely paradise where he toiled toward aliveness even as the unforgiving site made gardening difficult, and his own body deteriorated as a result of HIV.

Before his death in 1994, Jarman wrote profusely about the virtues of 'shaggy', ecologically based gardens like his, denigrating manicured and chemically maintained gardens, comparing them to spoiled children. The writing tells us about his aesthetic preferences, but it also illustrates an ethos, a process. An evolving practice motivated by big questions: How do we make and remake paradise in a bleak landscape of death and destruction? Who are we gardening for? How are we going about it? What does it look like to grieve, again and again, as we do this work?

Scott's garden feels like a New York City-specific version of Prospect Cottage, without the public notoriety, fundraising campaigns, and organizational stewardship. The garden in Washington Heights helps us ask these questions, even if we're not sure how to answer them. It will exist as long as we're there to tend it. And that's good enough. We're here now, so we do this work. It's work that ties us to a vast lineage of queer people—artists and gardeners who took the labor of caretaking seriously, in all of its grossness and pleasure. Who put their hands in the dirt and used the shaping force of memory to conjure an alternate time and place.

***

In the days after my Burger King delivery, Scott's health improved. No one made candies with the liquid that had drained from his lungs.

Scott requested that I go to his apartment and clean it before he returned from the hospital—it would be impossible for him to do it in his weakened state. Scott explained that his place was a 'disaster zone'. That in the days before he was rushed to the emergency room, he had been terribly feverish, he'd sweat and shit through his clothes and the sheets on his bed. He'd lost control of his body, wracked with pain. He hadn't been able to eat the food he left out on the counter, or prepare for his time in the hospital. 'I'm so sorry', he said. 'I'm so embarrassed'.

'Oh, come on, Scott. You were sick! Everyone gets sick sometimes, and I'm happy to help', I said.

He shook his head and continued, 'Just put everything in trash bags. Wear gloves and a mask. Detonate one of those roach bombs before you leave'. He paused. 'And could you water whatever's left of the garden'?

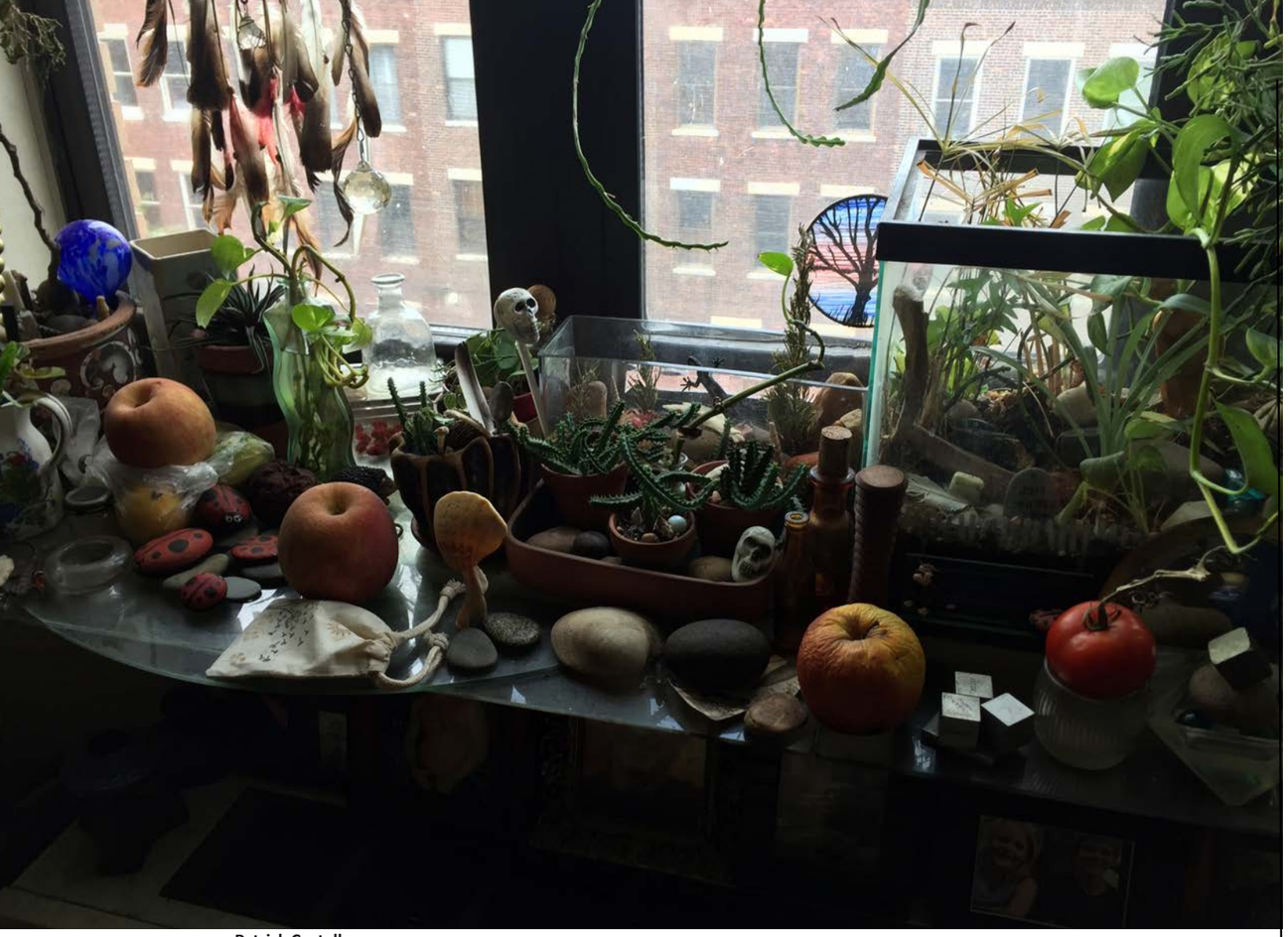
I brought my gardening tool bag with me. It already contained a roll of 55-gallon contractor bags, a pair of gloves, and a mask. I stopped at the bodega on the corner and picked up a roach bomb. Security buzzed me into the building, the super and I took the elevator to the sixth floor, and he unlocked Scott's door. He pushed it open and made sure I caught it before it closed again. Then, without me even asking for it, he handed me the key to turn on the hose in the backyard. It took three and a half years of arguments and Scott's hospitalization for him to cede control, but finally, we'd won.

I had been a visitor in Scott's apartment many times before. Usually, it was charming in its disheveled clutter, a home filled with artwork and the sundry detritus of living. In Scott's absence, nature had reclaimed the room. It pulsated with aliveness. Mice darted about, moving through piles of clothes on the floor. Roaches congregated on a half-eaten pumpkin pie. They animated a plastic pitcher of sweet tea, left out on the counter. The place reeked of skunky weed, rotting food, mouse piss, human poop. The lilting pothos vines framing his south-facing window glowed acid green in the sun.

It was so hot. Scott's air conditioner stopped working the year before, and he couldn't get anyone to do anything about it, so the apartment was an oven, particularly then, in the middle of a heatwave.

I tended to the needs of this ecosystem, six-stories above the one I typically cared for in the backyard. This is what we do for people we love. The smell of my sweat added to the fugue. I threw things away and scrubbed and organized, stripped the bed. I left a note on the glass coffee table—a drawing of a long squiggly penis, with the words 'he's cum a long way' scrawled on the shaft.

Patrick Costello
Garden Signs, 2020
© Patrick Costello



Patrick Costello
Scott's windowsill, 2022 © Patrick Costello

I set the roach bomb and left the apartment. Downstairs, security buzzed me out to the backyard. The cats had reclaimed our shaggy paradise. They annexed the wooden raised beds with their turds, garnishes for the overripe vegetables nearby. They pranced atop Scott's Hanging Garden, its withered foliage melting down the side of the wall.

Gardening is a practice of surrender.

I did the only thing I could do. I uncoiled the hose, turned on the water and show-ered the lifeless garden. The spray emanated and evaporated in the bright heat. A rainbow appeared in the mist. It faded. I looked at the soil. At first, the hard-ened earth couldn't receive wetness. The water beaded up on its surface, flowing in little rivulets toward lower ground. As they rushed downward, gathering sedi-ment and dirt, they reminded me of tubes filled with caramel sauce. Then, after a few charged seconds, they merged with the darkening earth.

Endnotes

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Patrick Costello is a multidisciplinary artist working primarily in time-based mediums including installation and performance. His practice explores the impacts of history on present ecologies – giving specific attention to gardens and the contentious relationships of care and control that define them. In 2024, Patrick received a MacDowell Fellowship and served as the Artist-in-Residence at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. He has exhibited work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens, NY; and Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, NY. He has performed in venues including Ars Nova, New York, NY; The Philadelphia Museum of Art; and The Public Theater, New York, NY.

Lynn Turner
Ends of the Garden, photograph, 2025 © Lynn Turner

Saying ceanothus: the indefinite garden

This experimental text mediates the work of mourning and the practice of gardening as a space of play. Both 'work' and 'play' are transplanted across various contexts, theoretical and geographical. It draws upon the vegetal tongue of deconstruction as the common language at the verdurous heart of the lives on which it reflects – the author's and her green-fingered parents – cultivating the indefinite garden growing on.

text and images: **Lynn Turner**

> Gardening is an act that is absolutely strange, in relation to life and death. And if I only listen to myself gardening, I have a very light sense of suffering in saying to myself: why garden when I know it will die? That, for me, is the other. Between us, death. Together we look at the garden.
> – H. Cixous, *Rootprints*

'How is the garden?' I said, and he said, and she said. Amongst conversations direct and indirect filtering generic news or difficult requests or dull familial updates or impossible to answer questions about my work or what I was really doing, that soft turn regularly arrived to graft our knowledge our traffic in plants our fingerprints between places into the call. Yes: you know, you understand, you do it there, and there, and there. 'Rootprints' supplant their footprints. You can plant again. And I will, in fact I should do so soon. No, it's not the time for planting really but who knows how this season will play out? It will be sunny at the weekend and maybe the ground will have thawed: I need the air and that feel of stamping Sussex into my unusually quiet London garden, doing what they would do, and knowing how to do it. That olive tree deserves a new pot and fresh compost. It is *that* one, the first one my dad bought when they were still a novel idea for England's erstwhile climate. Perhaps it was the disgusting taste of the uncured olive that meant it was relatively neglected in the scheme of things, or simply that he hadn't found the right place for it - 'yet.' I brought the olive home—this home here—with a forest of other plants last summer, hiring a large van with a friend and fellow gardener before the house went on the market. They were all a bit unkempt, having only just survived the diminished attention of both of my parents as dementia separately claimed them alongside erratic rainfall and newly desiccating summers. But they were alive and waiting: a Magnolia Grandiflora, the evergreen form that had fascinated my father even as it hadn't taken to the local soil conditions, magicked up three gateau-sized flowers the minute it was dressed with fresh ericaceous compost in London; an Arbutus Unedo—one of the rare plants he had been unable to strike from a surreptitious snap and towards which gift he was consequently slightly miffed – that I had resurrected from its burnt skeleton scalded to the very image of death in the summer of 2022 when London reached the unheard of 40 degrees centigrade, now growing gleaming viridian and sitting sturdily in a huge pot, its ruddy peeling stems like a fat bonsai; an unwieldy and actually quite ugly form of Viburnum, the species of which I unfathomably cannot recall, bought for my mother for its astoundingly strong and gorgeous spring scent; another stunted cherry that I had promised to donate to a local community garden having previously salvaged another from a similar stasis, but now, this one might stay. They will all remain potted as I contemplate upping sticks again, in Larkin's refrain: 'Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh'.[1]

'When you are gardening,' a young geographer once asked me back in 2012 during an interview on 'guerilla gardening,' 'is it work or play?' That insightful question still sticks, blindsiding a definitive answer. Of course, the question form lobbies for a decision on one side or the other as well as supposing that the two choices can be absolutely held apart. Replaying memories, I can discern the dawn til dusk activity of my pre-dementia dad and the relative tendency of that place then towards a kitchen garden, but something always outgrew the edible ends of labour. A palpable curiosity emanated from the greenhouses regarding what could be grown and of growing produce beyond what anyone actually ate or liked to eat: of growing plants 'just to see'.[2] I see myself in the subsequent care-taking years unable to sit still, spending relentless hours with secateurs all over the huge plot at once, and still cursing the obvious things that anyone could see needed a trim and how on earth could an aunt who claimed to like plants not notice those brambles. When my mother and I incrementally took over the garden neither of us could manage the huge vegetable beds—only the basic

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Greenhouses, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

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Weathervane, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

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Orchard, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

crops remained albeit with an increased ludic aspect to the shape of the varieties of squash. All the fruit trees had to take their chances with internet advice for pruning, while so many of them were over-crowded with the parasitical demands of mistletoe: one of the last botanical things my dad remembered was how to squeeze a seed into a crevice in the bark of an apple or pear, forgetting the relative levels of toleration on the part of the host. For mum and her increasing environmental awareness—prompted partly by the irrefutable observation of a patio occupied by industrial horticulture's near-plastic begonias versus one delighting in the pollinator paradise of dahlias—I supplanted the rotation of vegetables with voluminous flower beds. Looking and smelling utterly joyous, it also indexed how her external world too was tunnelling entirely into this one.

Rather than simply reverse the binary of work and play through setting off the productivity of a kitchen garden with the revalued frivolity of a playfulness, easily ascribed to exuberant but (mostly, for humans) inedible floral forms, two other senses, both of which are expansive and rough around the edges, press for attention.

'Gardening is a conversation with my father' I claimed during his eulogy, that compact piece of prose for which my entire career in academia had unknowingly prepared me - given the habits garnered by practice in public speaking. Eulogies in England are very short (unless wealth buys extra time there is always a queue of hearses and people holding on to an order of things to move them along). I spoke as if my life depended on it, plotting out what I'll call the verduration of his days without a whiff of God (not quite believing that the celebrant, technically a Vicar, wouldn't manage to reinstall Him). The clock, along with the strangely familiar touchstone of modernist architecture in Horam's new crematorium, with its new formal garden and newly planted tree-lined paths, orchestrated by the strict choreography of that early phase in the distancing rules for the 'Alpha wave' of Covid-19, rooted the reading in structure and in necessity. More than anything else it is the work of mourning that has forced my hand, obliging the navigation of these experiences in writing. That work carries the same and related assumption in psychoanalytic practice: mourning is something we are supposed to *work through*, to get to the other side, to introject our loss (as distinct from the melancholic whose grief is stuck in disavowal, buried in a secret silent incessant crypt).[3] Asking 'are we *capable* of [mourning], do we have the *power* to do it?' Jacques Derrida detects the repetition of the misplaced faith of humans in mourning as one more capability joining all their other imagined powers from recognising the dead to naming them.[4] That doesn't mean we do not mourn, or that we do not try to work through it, but the time and the task of it is restless and resistant to any program: *it* doesn't want to work.

The timing is off. Deciding to finally contract an agent and sell what I still call 'my parents' house' last summer, I had started taking photographs of the garden (not the shell of a house from which I always wanted to take leave and undomesticate myself – '*shall we go outside, dad*?'). I had thought it would all be done by now – January 2025 – and I would have had the time to take The Last Photograph before it all changes hands, but still it goes on. Let's say they are all the 'next to last,' a putting-off, like Björk's preference for the next-to-last song in a musical in *Dancer in the Dark*.[5]

Each organisational frame is not the still that convention imagines but the eddying switch point between my lives – as an artist, as a scholar, a writer, as someone who chose to live outside of heteronormative familial structures, who left that place but as it turns out has not quite left. The photographs are off shoots of the land, they are cuttings, they make a cut into and out of that place. Too late I realised that every image of luxuriance, of the garden at any of its bests, dazzlingly vast in colour and novelty of species, was not shot in a high enough resolution for reproduction. Thus, the images selected here were necessarily taken in some of the lowest moments of the dereliction. Yet that dereliction is not solely a descent but a flickering evocation of what was when my grandparents lived there

Lynn Turner
Wisteria, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

and did 'nothing' with it. Derelict then, derelict again. Consequently, there is a kind of resumption of the uneven, ankle-snapping hazards of rabbit holes in feral long grasses with obscured ponds and ditches of uncertain depth spread with lurid duckweed both fascinating and frightening for a child growing up in the decade when, like a current meme now kids us, quicksand was really a problem. In those days 'the Lane' was still a country lane and all the surrounding fields were full of 'livestock' rather than dismally organised housing developments. Even the recent notification of subsidence in the house is a reminder that the Pevensey Levels are marshland, that clay soil liable to waterlogging will always incur movement.

The thing with play, in Derrida's sense, is that it is non-oppositional, without limit, and not what you think. Soliciting gardening as a scene of 'play' won't exempt me from the work of mourning and the work of mourning cannot exclude - or predict - play. Writing on 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' Derrida was specifically addressing the anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss as he reimagined 'nature' and 'culture,' but his remarks are generalisable: play is 'first of all' in 'tension' with history, it is time-trouble, it is 'the disruption of presence'.[6] Origins, ends, and centres all attempt to drop anchor in order to mitigate this time-trouble: such mitigation is not in the power of such concepts. 'The novel is a space of play' said Nicholas Royle in his own accompanying afterword to *Quilt*, his novel mourning paternal death.[7] This writing, these photographs are a space of play. They do not reproduce, they supplement. It's common in academic doxa today to gloss Derrida's thinking of the supplement as that which implies a lack, but it is much better phrased in an affirmative mode as that which enables the thinking of the 'noncenter otherwise than as a loss of the center'.[8]

This is even true of the eulogy—*eulogies* since there have been two of them now—the scripts that felt so definite, for one time only, for one person, one purpose only in their thousand words, now insinuate into other contexts. That short sentence with its definitive articulation of gardening as a conversation with my father arrived then, in the order of service, and had the air of completion. I said too that my then-living mother and I had learned how to continue the conversation, but that was not quite right. Conversations are never the same, even those asking after the garden.

It wasn't that gardening was unfamiliar to my mum. I still have a tarnished cup, a prize in a village fête, with my maternal grandad's name inscribed on it (this would either have been for gladioli, their successive spires evened out with the aid of cotton wool she told me, or, equally likely, for impressively big onions). In the most banal ways, an utterly elementary gendered division of labour had meant my mum had limited access to gardening in her own garden while my dad was alive and well. If memory serves, it was just a few feet of flowers in front of the rows of crops. She did eventually get a greenhouse of her own and progressively expanded into my paternal grandad's one, one chili bush at a time before Storm Eunice served notice on the latter. Observing the evidence trail, I figured that dad must have been judiciously urinating all around the garden to dissuade badgers from tearing up the lawns in search of insects, for as his abandoned greenhouse developed an increasingly fetid air so too did the lawns start getting raked over.

It wasn't just digesting how to garden and learning how to garden what we gardened. My mother herself was now grafted into the outside. In one of those early texts, instructively full of vegetal figures now ripe for the picking, Derrida wrote that '[e]ach grafted text continues to radiate back toward the site of its removal, transforming that, too, as it affects the new territory'.[9] This was as much about acclimatising to my mother's newfound pleasure in undomestication – even as she also raged and grieved and could never quite understand how my dad had gotten so 'lazy,' and who was that man alive yet so inert. Caring far less about housework, she too just wanted to get outside, to be outside, and that now meant gardening with her and for her especially after the accident that impacted her independence. It meant learning to cultivate the wildness we now enjoyed as

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Purple, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

Lynn Turner
Artichokes, Fennel, Pine, photograph, 2024 © Lynn Turner

ours. Why bother with thankless labour, when she could be sitting outside watching the bees bathing in pollen or potting on a hundred seedlings in what she drily referred to as the 'free nursery.' In her last weeks, the wisteria crowding the front windows as vegetal metonymy held the next to last of the world that she wanted.

While many of the plants that came to proliferate in the new flower beds were 'mine'—a few steps ahead of her in textbook pollinator-friendly planting—they soon became 'hers', developing her signature as they self-seeded with alacrity – and were allowed to do so ('*do not touch the Purple*'). *Verbena Bonariensis*, that, from a single spindly plant was a hard sell, became the 'Purple' in huge clusters, soft clouds at a distance, lacerating when pushing past them to trim the lavenders at their feet; *Alchemilla Mollis* became the 'Dewdrop'; *Acanthus Mollis* was 'the Giant.' *Foeniculum Vulgare* and *Nicotiana Silvestris* became stowaways in every pot of every other seedling. It wasn't that my dad hadn't reproduced plants endlessly, at one point the polytunnel was virtually impassable with ginger lilies and bananas only one of which was to suddenly flower (but not fruit) like an alien yellow artichoke as arresting as the purple inflorescence suddenly sprouting on the *Cynara Cardunculus* I later persuaded mum to raise from seed. Dad usually (compulsively) propagated by division, layering or cuttings. Mum came to her subsequent *laissez faire* sense of outdoor space by virtue of letting the plants spread themselves around.

What is its article? A garden, The Garden? The definite article ushers the misplaced Edenic scenography of innocence then sin then Fall then expulsion. That place harbours knowledge and it isn't forbidden. While university fast-tracked my apparently rather irritating assimilation of Latin before common garden names, it turned out that language learning - better expressed as textuality in its expanded Derridean sense: the sounds of syllables, of long words, of unfamiliar words, of the pleasure in saying them, in sowing them, above and beyond any Linnaen authority or accuracy of identification - was already alive. Say '*Ceanothus*.' Numerous varieties of varying scales and seasons shoot blue into every garden I have had will have.

I choose the indefinite for this primal scene, primal green, green screen of my life.[10] Writing this now, when the echo of places between this one (in South London) and that one (in rural Sussex) is under an extra intensity of transplantation commemorates the time before that place is bought by someone else. Writing now cultivates the indefinite garden growing on.

Endnotes

[1] Philip Larkin, *The Trees*, 1967. Available online: https://poetryarchive.org/poem/trees/
Accessed 10/01/25
[2] I have in mind Derrida and his cat both looking at each other, mirroring each other, 'just to see,' which is to say, outside of the perceived programming of predation or the avoidance of it. See *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 3-4.
[3] Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok 'Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation' [1972] in *The Shell and The Kernel* trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994) 125-138.
[4] Jacques Derrida, 'Mnemosyne' trans. Cecile Lindsay in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 31. Derrida inventories the traits assumed to be the 'proper' of man showing how these traits are mistakenly held to be abilities or capacities in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 5.
[5] Selma, Björk's character, goes so far as to sing a song made up of numbers out of sequence even as she is marched from her cell to the place of execution, the path whose 107 steps was well known in the prison. See, Lynn Turner 'Outlaws: Towards a Posthumanist Feminine in *Dancer in the Dark'* in *Poetics of Deconstruction: On the Threshold of Differences* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) 131.
[6] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 290.
[7] Nicholas Royle, *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010) 152. Without having opened myself to the subject of dementia in writing through addressing the uncanny foreshadowing of experience I found in Royle, this article would not have been thinkable. See Lynn Turner, 'Ray of Light' in *Textual Practice*, 39.4. 2025.
[8] Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play' 292.
[9] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981) 355.
[10] I am more than aware of a certain over-emphasis on green as if there are not other 'prismatic ecologies.' See the excellent collection edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014).

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