


The Gardener Digs in Another Time

curated by Samantha Manton
Starting Point Curatorial Fellowship

Whitworth Art Gallery
23 June - 9 October 2016


**contemporary
art society**

This essay accompanies the Collections Centre exhibition *The Gardener Digs in Another Time*, which brings together works from the Whitworth Art Gallery's rich collection of historic, modern and contemporary art to reflect upon the use of the garden in visual culture as a vehicle for utopian thought and emblem for an ideal society.

*The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.*¹

In his seminal text *Of Other Spaces*, 1967, Michel Foucault described the garden as universalizing in nature, identifying it as an age-old 'heterotopia' able to bring together a range of contradictory endeavors. It is a place that combines production with leisure, utility with beauty, labour with contemplation, and profit and pleasure. Within it, new foliage and flowers thrive in abundance, whilst others crumble and rot into the earth; things come into being, others cease to exist. Moreover, as exuberant new branches climb to the sky, so do parasitic outgrowths and troublesome weeds. By virtue of these compelling contradictions, the garden is rife with microcosmic potential and has thus offered up fertile imagery for many artists throughout history as a setting for launching moral criticism and imagining an alternative world.

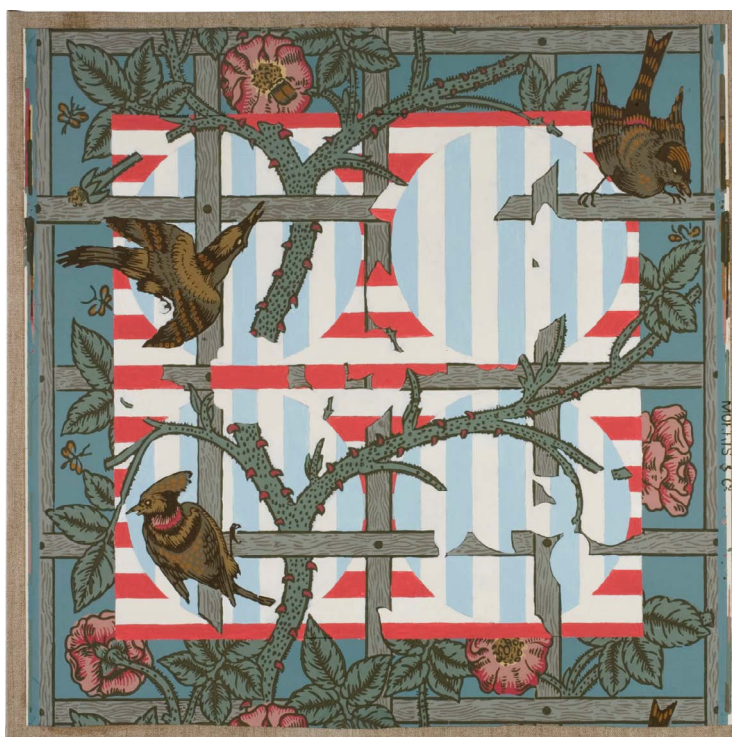
As a place where physical labour and aesthetic labour converge- and where pleasure and profit are sought in equal measure- the garden has held great symbolic weight within the rhetoric of socialism, particularly throughout the late nineteenth century around the time of the Whitworth's founding. In the visual and literary outputs of William Morris and Walter Crane- artists who feature prominently in the Gallery's collection- the garden was a recurrent theme. Offering up a framework for both figurative and abstracted plant motifs, the subject enabled the production of two distinct visual languages employed to support the two men's ardent socialist agendas.

In the years since the Industrial Revolution, Victorian Britain had seen an extreme imbalance in wealth distribution. The resultant 'brutalization' of the working classes- as described by Morris- gave rise to socialism in Britain, calling for equality for all. Founding the Socialist League in 1884, Morris began to envision a pre-industrial Edenic idyll, in which communities united by a shared purpose would be prioritised over class systems and corporate hierarchies. This utopian world was articulated through graphic, wallpaper and furnishing design, as well as various literary offerings. Morris's views on work-satisfaction, the environment, equality and gender roles permeated all aspects of his creativity, fuelling aspirations to democratize good design and the manufacturing processes serving to produce it.

In the eyes of the Arts and Crafts founder, the ever-gratifying workings of nature were held counter to the supremacy of competitive commerce and the conflation of wealth with wasteful luxury. Engagement with the earth- 'useful toil'- was seen as a potential antidote to the alienation of workers from the 'fruits of their labour' as induced by vast industrialisation. Though often 'uphill work', the garden for William Morris was a place in which all people could generate natural plenty and pleasure.

Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. 2

Morris avoided naturalistic observation in the creation of his designs, instead commanding natural plant forms into stylized, repetitive and symmetrical patterns. His ambition was to celebrate the abundance and vitality of nature, whilst simultaneously endowing it with a sense of collective order. Contemporary artist David Mabb's appropriation of Morris's work dramatically highlights how highly schematized Morris's representations of nature were. In *Morris Trellis- Stepanova Optical*, Mabb overlaid and interwove Morris's Trellis with an exemplary work of the Soviet Constructivist aesthetic born of similarly utopian motivations in the early twentieth century. Interrupted by the abstract composition of Varvara Stepanova, the decorative guise of Morris's trellis is sobered to reveal the contrived nature of its composition.



David Mabb, *Morris Trellis - Stepanova Optical*, 2003

Easily recognizable yet never directly imitated, tendrils and flowers are intricately woven across the surfaces of Morris's wallpapers. Delicate stems reach harmoniously upwards in a shared pursuit to advance against the forces of gravity. Their cooperative, skyward thrust- described by Caroline Arscott as a 'fictional physics of specimens'³- advocates the unity of co-dependent living elements and their collective strength. Drawing parallels between humanity and the natural world, Morris uses the abundant garden as a metaphor for the integrity of men and women, of their relations to one another, and their plight for social order and transformation.

A long-time acquaintance and supporter of Morris, it was not long before Walter Crane formally announced his allegiance to socialism and joined the Socialist League. Crane also allowed his political ideologies to penetrate public life via designs for pamphlets, invitations, letterheads and magazine covers for a number of socialist groups, but also through illustrated children's books. Despite kindred aims to represent social solidarity and encourage improved quality of life, Crane's artistic employment of plant life was very different to that of Morris. Figurative and emblematic motifs- as drawn from a variety of historical and biblical sources- were favoured over the abstract and formalized. In *A Floral Fantasy in an Old English Garden* Crane depicts himself being led through an enclosed garden by a fairy wearing a 'cap of liberty' or 'bonnet rouge'. A widely known symbol of revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, the cap features prominently in Crane's work. Throughout the garden, Crane encounters a series of human characters dressed in elaborate costumes of petals, tendrils and leaves, each personifying a different plant or flower. These imaginary figures were devised to collectively epitomize the nobility of labour and demonstrate a just and happy society deeply connected to nature. The enchantment of the garden setting, and this 'flowering' of humankind, served to condemn the greed and unjust social order of the world beyond it. Furthermore, the inhabitants' jubilation over the arrival of springtime articulated a vision of hope and renewal.

This utopian vision of the garden is also seen in the more overtly political of Crane's works such as *The Worker's Maypole* and *A Garland for May Day*. In these cartoons of 1894 and 1895, Persephone- the goddess of spring- stands proud amongst the flowers and foliage, bearing banners emblazoned with socialist goals. Crane additionally drew upon the biblical motif of the Tree of Knowledge. In his design for the prospectus of the International School, founded in 1892 by the anarchist Commune Louise Michel, a woman wearing the cap of liberty chaperons a group of children reaching for fruits of the tree and sharing them amongst one another. Marx's motto 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs' accompanies the image. Reappearing in many of his works, for Crane the orange tree represented the thirst for knowledge and opportunity for self-betterment he felt all citizens should be afforded.



• A GARLAND FOR MAY DAY 1895 •
• DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS BY WALTER CRANE •

Walter Crane, *A Garland for May Day*, 1895

*The Fairy Queen of the Fairy Garden*⁴

In his classic novel *News from Nowhere*, 1980, William Morris presents an ideal vision of future Britain as 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt', where citizens share resources and live happily in the absence of monetary and class systems. Just as Crane is led through the fictive garden of *A Floral Fantasy* by an enchanting fairy, Morris's protagonist William Guest journeys through the Arcadian landscape of 'Nowhere' as lured by the beguiling Ellen, a character who is frequently referred to as 'the fairy queen of the fairy garden.' Regularly drawn to fairy tales in his creative pursuits, Crane believed such creatures were able to embody universal truth and eternal goodness. In *News From Nowhere*, Morris uses the notional presence of the 'fairy queen' as a literary device, allowing him to more explicitly portray the enhanced relationship between humanity and nature found within his utopian idyll.

Almost a century later the garden fairy began to appear in the work of British pop artist Peter Blake. In a mission to emulate the craft guild of Morris and seek solace and inspiration from unspoilt time and place, Blake moved out of London to the countryside in 1975 and founded British art group the Brotherhood of Ruralists. The group focused on evocating mystical responses to their rural surroundings through art, in opposition to the commercial imagery they believed had devoured urban life. During this time, Blake began to paint imaginary portraits of otherworldly 'flower fairies' including the characters Titania and Oberon (King and Queen of the Fairies). The figures were not painted as mythical or nostalgic visions, but as disquieting beings poised to question morality and to affirm humanity's affinity with nature. Blake declared his genuine belief in the existence of fairies as a conscious shift in his psyche and general approach to the world. Even on his return to city life, the artist facetiously reaffirmed his belief with his painting 'I may not be a Ruralist anymore, but this morning I saw a Fairy in my garden in Chiswick.'

What is your gardening news? ⁵

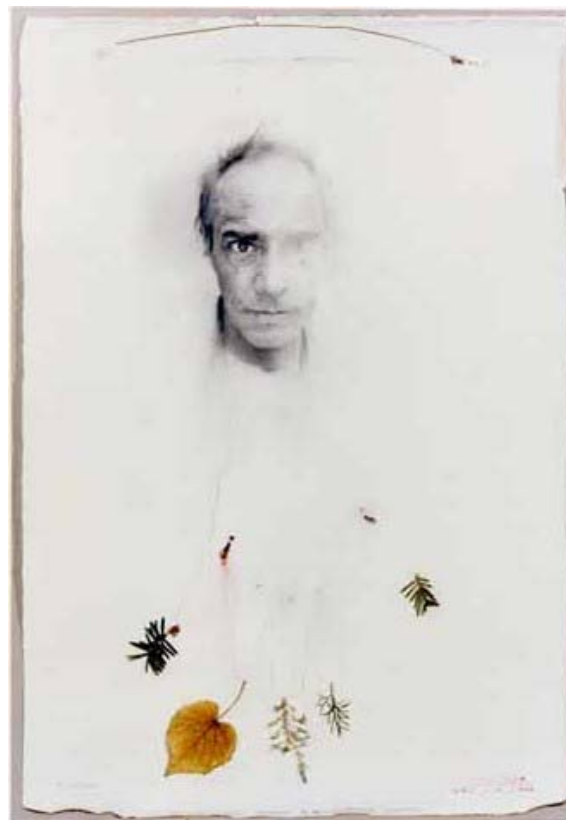
Crane likened the role of the artist to that of the gardener, moving minerals from one place to another- one with a shovel, the other with a brush. Throughout the early twentieth century a group of British artists came to develop great botanical expertise and gardening knowledge alongside their artistic endeavors, their gardens becoming principle sources of inspiration. Throughout the depression-wrought inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930s a well-cultivated garden plot indicated a positive and progressive work ethic and frugal living in a time of economic hardship; they had become a signifiers of dignity, self-reliance and integrity.

Edward Bawden and Charles Mahoney- who regularly exchanged plants, seeds and gardening news with one another- were attracted, like Morris, to the transformative energy of nature, and considered the garden a prime source of optimism and regeneration. Mahoney's approach to harnessing this was distinctly democratic, his own garden plot having been described as an 'Eden' in which weeds, cabbages and sunflowers were treated with equal love and respect. Plants dismissed by most gardeners were prized as 'lilies of the field' by the artist, who strove to promote the beauty found in the most commonplace of settings, not least the ordinary suburban back-garden. Such spaces were also a great source of inspiration for Spencer Gore, who painted a number of back-yards, favouring the vertiginous vantage point of the house's first floor window. For him, this was a place to witness key scenes of modern life and appreciate nature's almost merciless ability to prosper despite the dense and polluted environment of Edwardian London.

John Nash became a leading figure in this new generation of artist-gardeners, having formed close friendships with noted horticulturalists of the time. Through concurrent drawing and gardening activities he too strove to celebrate the robust nature of plants, focusing on the more sinister of garden inhabitants and taking pride and pleasure in the viscous capabilities of poisonous species he acquired such as foxglove and herb paris. He and Gore, who were both affiliated with the post-impressionist Camden Town Group, relished on the darker, more ominous aspects of the garden enclosure, subverting the romantic visions of nature championed by the Arts and Crafts movement and its harbinger John Ruskin. Their depictions responded to and reflected a time of austerity and endurance by exposing the potential for strength even in the most oppressive of environments.

The Gardener Digs in Another Time... 6

Located on a bank of shingle in Dungeness, Kent, the garden of filmmaker and artist Derek Jarman- who is presented as *The Gardener* by Michael Clark in the Portraits Gallery at the Whitworth- was pioneering in its desolate beauty and response to oppression. Jarman's deep desire to cultivate a piece of overlooked and inhospitable land grew out of an immense period of personal strife in which he



Michael Clark, *The Gardener*, 1993

battled with AIDS and boldly campaigned for gay rights and social justice. The garden- developed through adversity between 1987 and his death seven years later- also provided the artist with an ideal setting for his film *The Last of England*, which dealt with the social and sexual inequalities he felt were generated under Thatcher's government. In his book *Modern Nature*, Jarman described the suspension of time he felt amongst his ravaged garden, proposing 'the gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end'. For him, it was a temporal, liberating place- a sanctuary free of capitalist constructs of time and space, where alternate realities could be imagined.

In 2002, following four major installations made as commentary to consumerism, contemporary society and the commodification of art, Michael Landy made a series of intricate etchings of common weeds. The meticulous draftsmanship used recalls that of botanical illustrations and celebrates each specimen's individuality and delicacy. The humble status of overlooked and unwanted vegetation is elevated, calling to attention the resilience and proliferation of such plants within harsh and hostile urban landscapes. A century prior to this, William Morris called for a 'burning up of the gathered weeds, so that the field may bear more abundantly'⁷ in his work, whilst in Walter Crane's *Floral Fantasy* villainous weeds threaten the established order of the garden and so are eliminated by the character of 'Time'. This act of destruction was considered a necessary part of humankind's 'useful work' in progressing towards a better life. In Landy's series *Nourishment*, the lowly weed is appropriated rather differently, as a sign of neglect and as a metaphor for those living at the margins of economic life. Like the ravaged plants of Jarman's garden, the plants stand in for the urban underclasses, marginalized yet striving to survive and prosper in spite of inhospitable conditions and a society programmed to ignore, alienate and denounce the disadvantaged.

Many other artists have approached the garden and its role obliquely, capturing the incidental manifestations of nature to present a bleak and disillusioned view of contemporary British life. Concerning himself with the mass-produced and mass-mediated modern world, Patrick Caulfield is known for his rigorous simplification of everyday objects into pictorial emblems of suburban domesticity. Occasionally the outside world of the garden interrupts his uninhabited interiors via a window, but in *Ruins* and *Garden with Pines*, the flattened compositions venture fully beyond the exterior walls. The first shows vividly coloured blades of grass lurking amongst dull grey masonry rubble, whilst the latter depicts copious tangled pine branches as spied from behind an imposing man-made barrier. Though human presence is absent it is certainly palpable, along with the ominous tension it sustains with the natural environment. Lynn Setterington also draws upon the everyday to highlight such tensions, exploring the disconnection between people and the utilitarian potential of the land. Reflecting on her interest in allotment gardening and 'grow-your-own' culture, *Sowing Seed* presents a visual inventory of gardening paraphernalia, including seed packets, a hose,

gloves, tools and a watering can, embroidered onto the surface of a cotton quilt. In the production of quilts, Settingington alludes to human needs and desires, and the significance (or lack thereof) of the pictured items within contemporary life. Community focused, socially-engaged projects- including some in partnership with local garden centres- have provided Settingington with a platform for posing questions about consumerism and prevailing materialistic culture, not least society's reliance on supermarkets and the power the capitalist system has in deciding whether nature's offerings are marketable or not. Like Mahoney, Nash and Landy, the allegory of the garden offers a way in which to champion the underdog.

Settingington's chosen medium of the embroidered quilt refers more specifically to the concerns and lives of women within society- something that William Morris had concerned himself at the end of the nineteenth century. On the issue of women's oppression at the end of the nineteenth century Morris wrote in the Socialist League manifesto that he 'did not consider a man a socialist at all who is not prepared to admit the equality of women.' With the same values as Morris with regards to women's empowerment, as well as the democratization of good design, designer Joyce Clissold set up the textile printing workshop 'Footprints' in 1925. This successful business venture encouraged a collaborative way of working and employed a predominantly female workforce. It was the total involvement in designing and making processes- as well as its aims to provide secure training and employment opportunities for young women, which set Footprints apart from the mass-manufacturing businesses which Morris had so often condemned. Clissold's woodblock-printed commemorative scarf *Festival of Women*, 1957- produced for the event which encouraged woman to take up careers in industry, engineering and science- shows the Greek Goddess Athena, patron of wisdom, skills, arts and industry, bordered by images of togetherness and celebration within a garden setting.

The creative pursuits of pioneering female textile designer Lucienne Day were also inspired by Morris' visionary socialism and were hugely influenced by notions of public service and the affordability of good design for ordinary working people. Her breakthrough design *Calyx* was created for the Labour government's post-war regenerative project the Festival of Britain in 1951. The implied message of regrowth and optimism for a country recovering from war was the result of her innovative use of plant motifs, which she took both from botany and the terrace-garden she cultivated at home. Combining the Arts and Crafts tradition of using plant forms to decorative effect with the abstract concerns of international contemporary art at the time, Day pioneered in pattern design and gained visibility in the hugely male-dominated profession of textile production. As in Morris's designs, Day's natural forms are abstracted and stylized, grouped and repeated across the surfaces of fabric. There is, however, something almost anthropomorphic about these depictions of stems and flower heads, as if combining Morris's formulated abstraction with the character-based aesthetic of Crane.

Customary associations of gardens, whether real or imagined through art, are decidedly apolitical and escapist. However, to adopt such connotations downplays the role that they have played- and continue to play- in offering vantage points for launching criticism on contemporary life and pervasive capitalist culture. From the nineteenth-century pursuits of Crane and Morris- in which the garden became instrumental in imagining and representing an idealised, socialist society- to the modern and contemporary artists who have since been drawn to the subject, humankind's desire to cultivate a plot of land is exposed here to be more than about retiring from a corrupt world. An arena for aesthetic and moral virtue, the garden has provided artists with conceptual means to express their political ideologies, reveal alternative realities, and articulate hope; it provides a space- and indeed- 'another time' in which to envision a utopian world.

Samantha Manton, 2016

¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, Vol. 16 (Spring 1986), 22–27.

² William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil." *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1990, 06/08/15 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm>>.

³ Caroline Arscott, "Four Walls: Morris and Ornament," in *William Morris*, ed. David Mabb (Norwich: Bertrams 2004).

⁴ William Morris, "News From Nowhere" in *News From Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin Classics, 1993).

⁵ Stephen Deuchar, "Forward," *Art of the Garden, The Garden in British Art, 1800 to the Present Day*, ed. Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Daniels and Martin Postle (London: Tate Publishing 2004).

⁶ Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (London: Vintage Classics 1992).

⁷ William Morris, "Hopes and Fears for Art, 1882." *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1990, 06/08/2015 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/hopes.htm>>.