

***The Willful Plot* Curator's Tour with Melanie O'Brian and Opening Readings**

January 12, 2023

Curator's Tour Transcript

Melanie O'Brian: The thinking is to consider the plot as not only a plot of land that has been cultivated in the form of a garden, but any land that is cultivated by humans. So that can include a forest, it can include managed parks, it includes city parks, public and private spaces. My thinking also extends to the way that forests have been cultivated to be producers of food in kind of energy dense clusters. Along the West Coast, Indigenous communities have always made forest gardens, bringing together crab apples, hazelnuts, and other berries, rich foods and medicines to produce a kind of biodiversity that has been very, very long standing. The artists included in the exhibition look at different manifestations of the way that land is cultivated, thinking through temporality, thinking through questions of wildness, thinking through questions of colonization, and thinking through life cycles mostly.

In a way, the exhibition was born from this pandemic, post-pandemic moment in which we reengaged with the world outside our doors. We reengaged with our gardens, specifically, in making note of the cycles of the seasons in a much more acute way, socializing in those outdoor spaces when we couldn't gather indoors, and also connected to a kind of renewal of interest in food security and food cultivation. And just to think about our relationship to the land, and lack of respect, in some ways for the land, being a cause of the pandemic. And, sort of, the encroachment on wild spaces, increasing the risk of viruses, etc. And so thinking about the intertwining of the pandemic, the climate crisis, and our use of these domestic spaces, these domestic cultivated spaces.

The exhibition brings together nine artists that think across time, think across cultures, and dig into, in a variety of ways, these stories that are told through the gardens. And the title of *The Willful Plot*, obviously is a double entendre thinking about the plot of land that is the garden or the managed forests, but also the plot being a kind of narrative structure. And that gardens are a way that we tell stories, and the willfulness to collectively or individually move a certain kind of narrative forward. I would also say that there is something through all of this work where plants operate as teachers. Whether it's through slow looking or whether it's through medicinal and nourishing aspects, plants operate on a different lifecycle than humans. And many of the projects, the works that are shown, think about the life cycles beyond the human lifecycle, and connect us beyond our own mortality to these larger lifecycles, whether it's olive trees that live for 1000s of years, or gardens that persist beyond a single lifecycle and are carried forward by future generations. There is a way of thinking through a kind of resistance to a certain kind of narrative and a perpetuation of, of something beyond where we see ourselves at this particular moment in time.

Opening Readings Transcript

Melanie O'Brian: Socially I'm thinking about us as a garden, as a kind of constellation in relationship to one another. And, especially because it's so horrible outside and a dormant period of the season, I was really trying to think of something to reaffirm our sociality.

We're going to take a few minutes to read a selection of texts as a group. Some of us will come to the microphone in a kind of mixtape that will include Derek Jarman's writing, [Glenn Lewis], Anna Tsing and Rebecca Solnit. I'll begin with a very short quote from Derek Jarman, whose film *The Garden* is playing in the last gallery, shot in and around his Dungeness garden on a pebble beach, in the shadow of a nuclear power station. The film is a meditation on mortality and the AIDS crisis. He writes:

"Paradise haunts gardens, and it haunts mine."

- Derek Jarman

I'm going to pass the microphone to Glenn Lewis, with another Jarman quote.

Glenn Lewis: Hi, it's nice to be here with you tonight. I'm going to read a quote from Derek Jarman, from *The Garden*, page 40:

"The word paradise is derived from the ancient Persian - 'a green place.' Paradise haunts gardens, and some gardens are paradises. Mine is one of them. Others are like bad children - spoilt by their parents, over-watered and covered with noxious chemicals."

- from Derek Jarman's publication, *The Garden* (1995), p. 40.

Ellinee Nelson: And I will be reading the words of Glenn Lewis.

"Why do people create little ornamental gardens in front of their houses? Why do they clip the bushes into strange shapes along the front walks? ... Was there a connection between these little gardens and paradise? ... It is imperative to realize how important these origins are - how the myth of paradise is so much a part of all of us. ... The garden reveals itself as a kind of language to assist man's comprehension of his origins, his life and death, through the ancient mythology of paradise."

- from Glenn Lewis's publication (in the exhibition), *Journey Through An Earthly Paradise* (1978), preface.

Karen Zalamea: I'll be reading from Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's Roses*.

"To garden is to make whole again what has been shattered: the relationships in which you are both producer and consumer, in which you reap the bounty of the earth directly, in which you understand fully how something came into being."

-from Rebecca Solnit's publication *Orwell's Roses* (2021), p. 73.

Jay Pahre: I'll be reading from Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

"There are other ways of making worlds. Anthropologists have become interested, for example, in how subsistence hunters recognize other living beings as "persons," that is, protagonists of stories... We trample over them for our advancement; we forget that collaborative survival requires cross-species coordinations. To enlarge what is possible, we need other kinds of stories—including adventures of landscapes."

-Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, (p. 155)

Bahar Mohazabnia: I will also be reading from Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's Roses*.

"Gardens are also places in which the inseparability of life and death is apparent in innumerable ways. 'Death is never an ending in nature.' And because a garden is always a place of becoming, to make and tend one is a gesture of hope..."

-Rebecca Solnit, *Orwell's Roses* (2021), p. 46.