

*The Garden Path: Mediating Nature and Culture*

*Artists*

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Beth Galston  
Maren Hassinger  
John Ruppert  
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Mary E. Murray, *Curator*



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Stone Quarry Hill Art Park  
Cazenovia, New York

## ***The Garden Path: Mediating Nature and Culture***

### Curator's Statement

Throughout its history, the United States has had a perversely divided response to the land. From the Hudson River School painters to New England Transcendentalists, a multitude of romantic visionaries perceived the remarkable natural resources of this country as manifestations of divinity, while simultaneously the way west for European settlers was carved and paved by presumptions of manifest destiny. Since the end of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, notions of progress and rape have been held in uneasy balance.

Under the aegis of early environmentalists such as Theodore Roosevelt, protected parks were established to counteract the effects of industrialization's dominance of forests, waterways, farmland, and other resources. One hundred years later, the deliberation continues over the schism in thinking between the protected and the potentially profitable. Frederick Turner, University of Texas Professor of Arts and Humanities, provides a reasoned and thought-provoking perspective on these deliberations. He argues against a definition of "natural" as "not being interfered with" and calls, instead, for a "cooperative cultural matrix."<sup>1</sup> Turner advocates for "the cultivation of a new American garden – a fresh kind of ecological thinking that would bridge the deep and damaging gap in the American imagination between nature and humanity, the protected wilderness area and the exploited landscape."<sup>2</sup> Turner encourages Americans to accept our need to live in society, to consume that which the earth provides, but also to act creatively to husband these resources.

Redolent with edenic associations and the subsequent fall into paradise lost, the garden motif is an especially compelling one for American artists whose work is environmentally minded.<sup>3</sup> *The Garden Path: Mediating Nature and Culture* employs Turner's metaphor to investigate contemporary artists' observations on humankind's complex, conflicted responses to the natural world.<sup>4</sup> Stone Quarry Hill Art Park provides the paradigm for the exhibition's thesis. Just as a garden is a cultivated natural environment, Stone Quarry Hill Art Park is carefully shaped by

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden: Toward a Secular View of Nature," *Harper's Magazine* 271 (Aug. 1985): 47.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Turner, "A Field Guide to the Synthetic Landscape: Toward a New Environmental Ethic," *Harper's Magazine* 276 (April 1988): 50.

<sup>3</sup> Mel Chin is a notable example of a contemporary artist who has used the garden to pioneer new thinking and practical solutions to repair the damaging effects of careless industrial waste disposal, overbuilding, or lack of zoning. See also *After Eden: Garden Varieties in Contemporary Art* (Middlebury, VT: Middlebury College Museum of Art, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> In the past thirty years, contemporary artists have played an important role as agents to affect awareness and change for environmental issues; see the bibliography for a selected number of works on the subject, especially Matilsky and Sonfist.

hand. A stroll through its picturesque fields and forests with founder Dorothy Riester reveals her deep understanding of Central New York's seasonal rhythms and the concomitant need for attentive maintenance of the flora, of mowing and trimming lest re-seeding occur, lest trees overtake the meadows. As Michael Pollan, in *Second Nature*, observed: "The forest, I now understand, is 'normal;' everything else – the fields and meadows, the lawns and pavements and, most spectacularly, the gardens – is a disturbance, a kind of ecological vacuum which nature will not abide for long."<sup>5</sup>

*The Garden Path's* premise, moreover, is equally inspired by a second feature of the Park. The title evokes ambulatory motion through a refreshing and beautifully designed patch of nature. Such is the visitor's experience wandering in Stone Quarry Hill Art Park. It is through meandering along the Park's many winding trails that visitors are rewarded by its myriad pleasures of birdsong, hilltop vistas, and quiet forest retreats. The artists invited to participate in *The Garden Path* were selected because they have dedicated many years to exploring themes related to nature and humankind's interaction/-vention with it. Their work has paid both homage to the cycles of nature as well as testimony to arrogant dominance of the land (equally to the public sculpture practice of "plop" art, as to environmental issues). Recognizing that the garden path is not always rosy, that there may be blight hidden among the plantings, the artists' installations for *The Garden Path* are celebratory, reflective, or humorously political, and will assist the visitor's contemplation of our place within our environment.<sup>6</sup>

**Mary E. Murray**

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1991): 56.

<sup>6</sup> In our post-modern era, which has questioned every assumption about "truth," it is difficult to know what contemporary Americans seek and see in nature, what an unmediated experience in a natural landscape might be. William Wordsworth (among others), for example, set an early precedent as he walked the nineteenth-century tourist through the most picturesque views of England's Lake District; see "A Guide Through the District of the Lakes," in W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds., *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. II (Oxford, Eng.: The Clarendon Press, 1974), 167. In nineteenth-century America, tourists were similarly guided through the Catskills and Adirondacks. In the twentieth century, our understanding of the sublime landscape of the West, to cite but one example, is directly attributable to John Ford's films shot in Monument Valley or Ansel Adams's interpretations of Yosemite. At the close of the century, nostalgia for an unknown, edenic past is palpable. In a commentary on the paintings of Joan Nelson, Peggy Cyphers noted that one finds "a brooding sentimentality [that] embodies the sense of loss symptomatic of the post-modernist vision of 'real' nature." See "The Consumption of Paradise," *Art Journal* 51 (Summer 1992): 54.



**Beth Galston**

Somerville, Massachusetts

**Selected recent exhibitions and commissions**

1998 "Thunderbird Bridge," public art commission, Phoenix, AZ

"Form, Space, and Imagination," Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH

"Biennale Internationale de Tapisseries Contemporaines et de Sculptures," Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris, France

**Selected residencies and fellowships**

Fellow, MIT Center of Advanced Visual Studies, Cambridge, MA

Fellow, Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA

***Ring of Glories, 1998***

Morning glories, sunflowers, saplings, string, mulch

7' high x 50' diameter (estimated)

***Artist's statement***

I am working on a series of sculptures using natural materials to explore processes of loss, decay, and the passage of time. *Ring of Glories* is a departure, focusing on the beginning of the growth cycle rather than the end. The idea for the sculpture was inspired by the rolling landscape of the Stone Quarry Hill Art Park and the history of the land's use. I was interested to learn that the open meadows of the region we have come to view as natural are in fact man-made. Without careful pruning, these meadows would be forests. Following this thought, I decided to build a piece using natural materials to create a structure that was unnaturally formalized.

The sculpture is a gesture of color and shape in the landscape using plants themselves to form the structure of the piece. I've chosen two plant types, morning glories and sunflowers, for their contrasting qualities. The vertical sunflowers seem like sentinels with their thick stems and heads rotating towards the sun. The morning glories have a more rambling, chaotic form. As they grow over the teepee-like structures, covering them with heart-shaped leaves and bright blue flowers, they suggest a kind of organic architecture. The sculpture explores resonances between man-made and natural orders, creating a space for people to walk through and experience.