

ARTIST GARDENS FRAGILE EARTH AT FLOGRIS IDA O'KEEFFE PUPPETS SPEAK OUT

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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ARTISTS AND THEIR GARDENS

CYNTHIA CLOSE

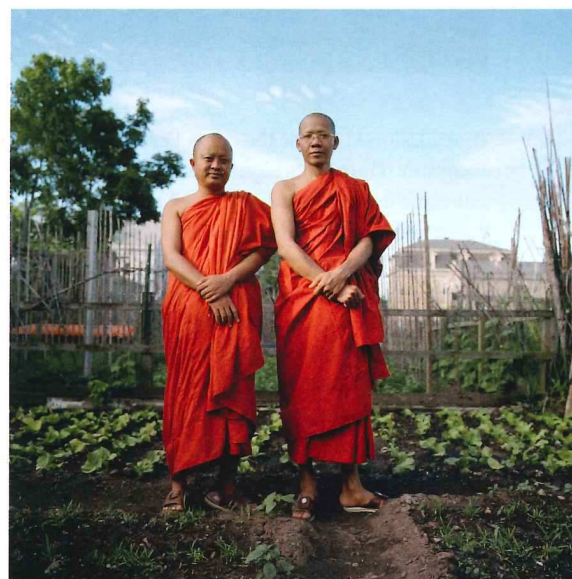
Three days before the opening of *Avant Gardens* at the Newport Art Museum, senior curator Francine Weiss was still patiently adjusting the lighting on the installation *Luminous Garden (Wave)* (2016) with Beth Galston, one of ten artists included in the exhibition. The dancing LEDs mimicking nodding flower heads in Galston's high-tech garden imply an exotic night blooming world. Setup required a delicate balance between illuminating the gallery so museumgoers can experience the piece and still find their way through the space. Weiss included Galston's installation work as, "part of an overall plan to engage viewers in more visceral, enveloping conversations with art."

Gardens are not a newfound subject matter for artists. The garden theme, with its implied interpretation of beauty in nature, reached an apex in the late 19th century with Impressionism. Monet was an avant-garde a

gardener as he was a painter—designing his Giverny garden in order to paint it.

Playing with the definition of avant-garde, *Avant Gardens* recognizes the historical popularity of the garden as a subject in art, yet presents it here in a 21st-century way. Galston's aim of using computers and technology to simulate nature's power to lure us into a meditative state usually associated with the writing of Thoreau seems cleverly subversive. Photographer Thea Dodds directly connects her work to nature and our ever-escalating environmental concerns. Her deeply empathic exploration of bee colony collapse highlights the potential extinction of the garden as we now know it. Her series *Listening to the Bee* is an homage to the death of her own beehive. Utilizing the method of albumen printing, a 19th-century process using egg whites to bind photo chemicals to paper, Dodds made 2-x-2-inch photo portraits of each of her 130 bees, combining them into one 20-x-26-inch piece. She also folded some of the albumen prints into delicate flower forms that cling precariously to the wall, somewhere between life and death, perhaps a metaphor for the bee colonies of the world and the future of life on the planet.

Lucas Foglia's photographs documenting the social and cultural dynamics of one community garden were made in 2004/2005 at the beginning of his career. The color prints, while well composed, only hint at



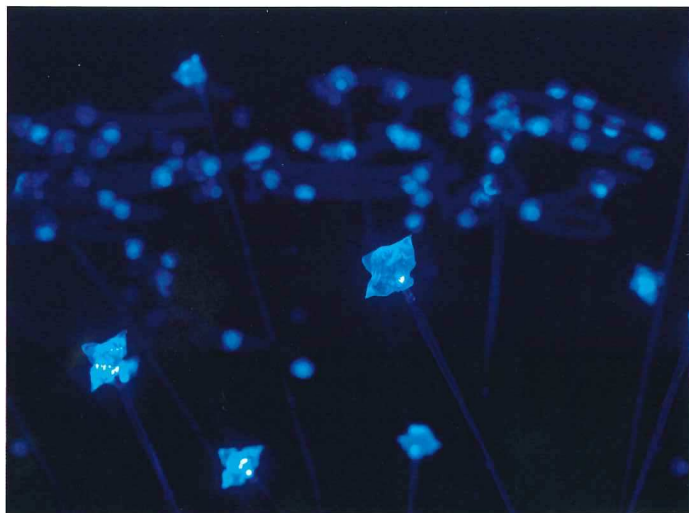
Above: Lucas Foglia, *Two Monks*, 2004, from *The Garden Portfolio* series, C-print. Gift of the Dr. Joseph A. and Mrs. Helene Chazan Collection 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

Below: Beth Galston, *Luminous Garden (Wave)*, 2016, from the *Luminous Gardens* series, cast resin, LEDs, wires, electronics, wood. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Thea Dodds, *130 Bees*, 2015, From the series *Listening to the Bees*, albumen prints. Courtesy of the artist.

the latent talent that blooms in his subsequent work, placing *Homo sapiens* in sharp contrast to natural environments (not included here). To Bob Dilworth, a garden is a sanctuary, yet in his large-scale mixed-media work *Margaret* (2015), it is unclear whether the floral patterns enveloping the central figure of the artist's mother represent protection or suffocation.

Cantabrigians may be familiar with Randal Thurston's *Yerxa Road Underpass* public artwork





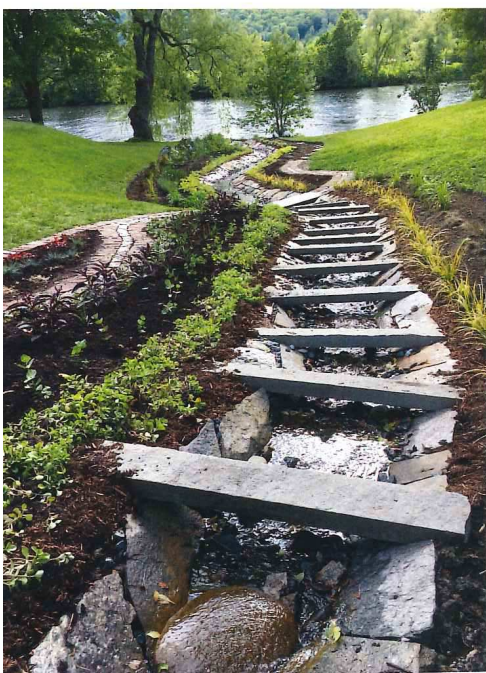
commissioned under the city's Percent-for-Art Program. Thurston's signature black-paper cut-out silhouettes call to mind Kara Walker's room-sized installations, yet Thurston's works are decorative, a far cry from Walker's highly charged racial and sexual imagery. Thurston's cut-paper site-specific installation *Great Piece of Turf* (2014–2019) originally appeared in the *Still Life Lives!* exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum. "Thurston adapted this piece to fit the space in Newport. His process is like jazz: He knows generally what he wants, but no two

installations are exactly alike. He even cut some paper additions to this piece while installing it in the gallery," says Weiss.

It is hard to suppress a smile when viewing Roberley Bell's quirky sculptures in her *Flower Blob* series (2006/2009). Nature is implied but hard to find amid the brightly colored plastic flowers and flocked fiberglass. Bell's work shares a playfulness also found in performance artist Caleb Cole's evocative collages that combine found objects with an emphasis on 1940s paraphernalia. Flowers and vegetables

Above, clockwise from top left: JoAnne Carson's gardens, *Daphne's Victory*, 2018, 110 x 96", thermoplastic, epoxy sculpt, and metal leaf, and *Wishful Thinking*, 2019, 39 x 48", acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Below, from left: Stina Köhnke's water garden construction, 2019. Courtesy of the artist, and *Bade*, 2018, mixed media, 79 x 38 x 19". Photo: Greg Bruce Hubbard.



depicted in various stages of early budding, full bloom and final decay are the subjects in the ballpoint pen drawings of Joo Lee Kang, and color photographs by Mary Kocol and Steven J. Duede round out the opportunity to explore these ten artists exploration of "garden."

Avant Gardens is a timely exhibition as artists throughout New England think about their changing environment and turn to their gardens for inspiration, understanding and even solace. "My garden is a vehicle for interpreting the world. Love of beauty, anxiety, fear, climate change and overpopulation—all those things combined are driving the garden and find their way into my work," says Vermont artist JoAnne Carson. Like Monet, Carson thinks of her garden in painterly terms. Her garden is an extension of the work she does in the studio and is intimately connected to how she perceives the natural world.

When Carson and her husband first moved to Shoreham, VT, in 2011 (she splits her time between New York City and Shoreham) she had no plans for making a garden. "I was like a zombie walking around. It was a huge adventure. I bought 40 books on gardening. I got a wheelbarrow and a shovel. I had no idea that soil weighed so much. The first thing I planted was a topiary." Carson has confined her garden to a steep slope that she can visually "frame" by looking out her window, making something that is both pictorial and physical. Following difficult periods in her life, Carson admits, "My garden has led me back to sculpture and painting. They share a language that helps me answer the question, 'What makes something feel alive?'" Carson's current work teeters on the edge between picturesque and grotesque. Paintings such as *Wishful Thinking* (2019) and the 2018 thermoplastic and epoxy sculpture *Daphne's Victory* represent a Disneyesque horror that in our technosaturated world feels somehow very much "alive."

Carson's powerful early work of oil-painted objects precariously held to their foundation within rectangles on the wall seem as though they were created in the vortex of a cyclone. Now the cyclone has passed, and as in Chernobyl, the earth, along with Carson's art, is being reborn in new and unexpectedly preposterous ways. *The Tree of Desire*, a mixed-media piece of fiberglass, objects and oil paint from 1993, is a pivotal work symbolic of fecundity and rebirth, an interpretation of nature as a beautifully constructed hoax.

California native Stina Köhnke lives and works in her home studio on the Connecticut River in Lyme, NH. The dramatic Bauhaus-inspired structure was ten years in the planning phase. "Like a giant puzzle," Köhnke says, "it was all about engaging with nature, relating the I-beams to angles on the river, conceived as a sculpture from the inside out. The garden was a necessity. Without the garden, the building was raw." The airiness of her studio and minimalist clarity of her recent sculptures belie her lifelong interest in scavenging as the source for creating



her own "tableaux of fantasy and dread." She collects discarded objects for her sculpture, but some, like the recently acquired group of old carriage wheels, go back and forth between the studio and the garden until Köhnke feels they have found their rightful place. Currently, they are casually arranged, awaiting a more permanent placement in the garden or as part of a sculpture. The repetitive and lyrical qualities of classical music are also a big influence, seen most readily in the patterning found in Köhnke's garden. She is drawn to objects that seem "charged." "They have an energy, like a magnetic force. There is a musical element. I can almost 'hear' my work filling the negative space that is either my studio or the garden."

New Hampshire artist Donald Dreifuss is the subject in *The Collector*, a documentary film made by Maria T. Alvarado. Born in New Zealand, Dreifuss came to the U.S. when his dad was offered a teaching position at the University of Virginia. He was an eccentric kid with a passion for gardening, collecting flowers and all sorts of plants and animals, along with a penchant for art-making. When he got kicked out of his all boys' boarding school, drawing became the center of his life. He wound up in Boston attending the Museum School where he fell in love with outsider art and various folk-inspired idioms. Dreifuss was a rising art star early on in his career showing childlike large-scale wood and brightly painted enamel on tin plant and animal forms with Boston gallerists Bess Cutler, Barbara Krakow and Portia Marcus, and Meredyth Moses. Although his early desire was to "make it" in the art world à la Jean-Michel Basquiat, at heart Dreifuss admits, "I was actually a little garden guy." Following a successful show at the Clark Gallery, he took his earnings and bought a little farm in Unity, NH, where he

became a world-class goat farmer, bringing the same passion to his farm, garden and Nubian goats that he applied to art. After 20 years raising goats, family pressures forced a reevaluation of priorities; Dreifuss sold his herd and became smitten with greenhouses. He started raising tropicals and topiaries, developing a following as a horticultural consultant who looked at gardens with the eyes of an artist. Now, one of three



Above and left: Donald Dreifuss's gardens. Photo: María Teresa Alvarado. *Brugmansia Charles Grimaldi, Pestered by Tomato Worm*, 2018, watercolor acrylic and crayon on paper, 86 x 24". Courtesy of the artist.

greenhouses attached to his home also functions as a studio shared with the singing finches, turtledoves and other exotic birds that he breeds. Dreifuss has created, "a personal paradise, a lesson of survival in this dark time...The only thing that matters is to pursue what is beautiful."

Historically, gardens have been created as both objects of art and subjects for artists. Monet's garden served him as a beautiful studio en plein air. *Avant Gardens* reminds us that the garden remains as intriguing a subject as it ever was, even while nature as we know it hangs in the balance. ■

Cynthia Close is a contributing editor at *Documentary Magazine* and writes frequently about art and culture for *Art New England* and several other publications.

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