

THE EVOCATIVE GARDEN

References and images of nature and gardens, of common and exotic species and flights of fancy, real and imaginary, abound in the visual arts. A most recurring and referential one in western art history may be the first, the Garden of Eden- the moment marked, a lush and fecund habitat turning from a place of pleasure and safety, to its inhabitants' acts of disobedience, the consequent fall from grace, pending expulsion and loss. Too numerous to count, visual scenarios built and flourished from that biblical reference. These inspirations and connections to the natural world, wild or adapted, physically or psychologically, echo the human need for place, sustainment and solace. And offer cinematic setting, dramatis personae and emotional narrative for thus inspired artists.

Real time moved forward- from largely migratory living to settlement and stationary farming, from nutritional to medicinal purposes- the uses of planted land spiraled. The designed garden- an imagined, planned, dedicated space set aside for farming, display and tactile pleasures- came to be. The cultivation and selection of plants for the enjoyment of their beauty and variety marked significant cultural milestones. For example, Tulipmania, a term coined for such a trend in its extreme, defined that combination of acquisitive passion for hybrid plant forms and frenetic commerce.

Floral imagery, garden and natural references are constant, abundant and of timeless interest, as decorative, symbolic and conceptual characteristics, as are participatory garden plots and window boxes, public parks and the National Park Service and now, the ever growing sensitivity to global fragility and preciousness of finite natural resources. Portland, the City of Roses, was named as such in 1889 when the Rose Society was founded and promoted by the planting of 20 miles of rose bushes in advance of the Lewis & Clark Centennial Exposition. The interest still flourishes; it seductively abounds in this city of lush public and private gardens and the climate to nurture them.

As stated in the call for entries, I "envisioned a garden allusion, as subject, context or setting according to each personal narrative and individual ceramic vocabulary. I anticipated a breadth of implied and articulated dramas staged as personally defined natural landscapes or more formal, cultivated gardens. In works of sculpture, installation, object and vessel format, each tactile work will reflect on responses to the breadth of choices. From objects-as-metaphors with sub-text, choreographed scenes with figuration or implicit figure/s in a verdant location, in vocabularies from nuanced realism to personal symbolism... Each having been made to explore and define, to introduce and suggest a scenario inviting the larger experience, to reference contrasting views of personally significant aspects and issues- nature's fragility and/or seasonal sustainability, the wild and the tame, life's sensual appetites and emotional dilemmas, the everlasting and the temporal- of the natural world and the all-to-heavy, ever encroaching human footprint... Artists remind us that nature and a chosen, articulated garden, as context, is a seductive, universal, ever present enticement, motivation and subject for interpretation."

Charged by NCECA with selecting and defining a theme and inviting five artists, I began with the core of the conversation. Megan Bogonovich, Jess Riva Cooper, Kim Dickey, Linda Sormin and Dirk Staschke, all of whose signature work, long watched in my view, examines an area I sought to highlight- art history as abundant references and precedents, the inspired setting as introduction and part of a dramatic

narrative, selected symbols as figurative metaphors for memory and emotional context, the sensual freedom of the wild environment and personalized styles of articulated, formal design. Each category has an evident presence in this eclectic, evocative garden exhibition as setting, subject and science.

Megan Bogonovich invents quirky alfresco settings for vulnerable, staged characters whose implied narratives and dilemmas address aspects of the human condition.

Jess Riva Cooper sculpts sensual torsos, often presented in pairs and trios, as portraits festooned with botanical fragments to denote unseen, emotional states of mind and heart.

Kim Dickey fashions elegant sculptural forms which reference formal, period garden styles, exploring historic design antecedents entwined with her own inventive vocabulary.

Linda Sormin creates dramatic elements of rampant excess, highly charged segments of fecund nature in its uncultivated, primordial or post-apocalyptic state.

Dirk Staschke reinterprets the depiction of temporal floral motifs as metaphors in free standing, sculptural paintings, to be experienced, unexpectedly, in the round.

The next step was outreach to the ceramic community to engage those for whom the topic resonates and to offer possible exhibition to the work of those less previously visible in NCECA opportunities to-date. Responses to the call elicited abundant works of diverse nature, narrative and interest. The large applicant pool as the expansive context presented the known and unexpected, the familiar and the new, the anticipated and the freshness of the next spring, the literal and the referential- all nature of layered interpretations of my expectations. The random options of the applicants' work encompassed varied and generous scale for the wall, unexpectedly arresting, large installations for the floor, domestic forms with antecedents in utility presenting pertinent narratives, and other eclectic visual conversation pieces with references to more enticing ideas and unexpected forms.

The lavish scale of the venue comfortably embraced the 'possibilities.' I had a feast of choices to juxtapose into this composite story of observation, commentary, celebration and care for nature's state. I sought authenticity of interest and individuality of vocabularies- from the elegant to garden variety, the domestic to the suggested global environment, from bright/flashy to subtle/dainty, the beautiful, arresting, memorable forms and stories and the subtle or boldly authentic appeals for care and nurture for the vulnerable planet- each made their particular case in the works- some common, some rare, some botanically correct, others stylized, patterned and personally cultivated, some echoing reality, others wildly inventive and studiously embellished.

In a topic often chastised as potentially trite or banal, there were few works offered deserving that stigma. There was much proposed that was exhibition worthy, well beyond the suggested number of pieces I was directed to select in total. The theme is potentially vast. The final grouping represents selections to remind us of our own experience and perspective: the gardener's garden/ the ceramist's garden- a menu of contrasts and delights. All share real or promised tactility, sensuality and a suggested place. Decisions were sought which offered works of authenticity, individuality, passionate resolution,

attentive craftsmanship and a collective exhibition of those forms and ideas within a well juxtaposed, introductory and possibly memorable visual 'conversation.'

In aid of individual observation and appreciation for the whole, the works do cluster in meaningful categories: *Stylized and Patterned*: Karen Gunderman's natural espalier- a seductive, entwined design; Christopher Adams' wall tapestry of full frontal, tactile blossoms; Audry Deal-McEver's single stem presentation of multi-species; Dawn Holder's arresting plot of uniquely patterned, cut grass.

Mementoes to History: Shannon Donovan's delicate roundel of porcelain, bone fragments and floral decals; Andrea Marquis' sculpted, lacey memorial remembrance; Lindsay Montgomery's dramatic, narrative on an oval charger; Jessica Putnam-Phillips' composite floral plaques honoring female soldiers; Colleen Toledano's framed view of domestic architecture with ground plantings; JoAnn Axford's classically serene, relief carving of an endangered species.

The Power of Nature: Caroline Earley's petite vignette of an isolated, turbulent landscape; Nancy Lovendahl's mapping of water tables presented as consecutive tiles; Jenni Ward's lushly abundant, powerful swarm of bees; Stan Welsh's mixed media tableau of a lone figure juxtaposed with a climatic disturbance; Jennifer DePaolo's unexpected cup and saucer form marking weather systems.

Fantasy: Lisa Marie Barber's unanticipated, urban landscape of moveable, individual parts; Carol Gouthro's whimsical, undulating single flower; CJ Jilek's pair of astonishing, outsized gourds; Hirotsume Tashima's visual riff on the consumer's dilemma of buying organic.

Animal Images: Chris Berti's appealingly hand size, carved brick animals; Chuck Johnson's unlikely, juxtaposed structure of interdependent animals with cultivated edibles.

Compilations: Annie Lee's rhythmic, leafy vertical form; Tsehai Johnson's celebratory collection of miscellaneous weeds; Grace Nickel's dramatic glade- a come-hither tree trunk installation; Claudia Tarantino's staged, trompe l'oeil scenario in an open dish; Dori Schechtel-Zanger's intimate vignette of an attentive, young viewer and the object of his attention.

Focused Narratives: Anne Drew Potter's complex, figurative, psychological drama; Deirdre Daw's multi-view sculpture- a sequential story; Heather Kaplan's inviting-the-hand, multi-object, moveable still life and Paul Kotula's thoughtfully subtle place: a place setting/as landscape.

All these works, invited and juried, individually and amongst the others, tell a part of the story, suggest memorable places and representative experiences of and larger than themselves and, offer earthy and earthly ceramic delights from the bountiful Evocative Garden.

Gail M. Brown