

GARDENING

MELBOURNE NOW

Quite contrarily,
an artwork grows

BY MEGAN BACKHOUSE

They get no fresh air and little natural light and, as if that weren't enough, must contend with air-conditioning, dust and confined root spaces. The third level of the National Gallery of Victoria was never going to be the most hospitable place to grow plants – no indoor spot is – but Lauren Berkowitz has nonetheless managed to cultivate quite a garden there.

On an angular, asymmetrical stainless steel bench (a cast-off from the gallery cafe) she is tending about 100 healthy specimens, some of which are so vigorous she has to keep cutting them back. None of them are typical indoor fare (not an *Aspidistra* or *Spathiphyllum* in sight) and each is either edible or medicinal.

It's what Berkowitz calls a hybrid garden composed of "plants brought to Australia by different nationalities from every continent". Her choices are neither unusual nor hard to grow. Walk down any suburban street and you will see them: tomatoes, cumquats, lavender, aloes, jade, thistles,

Dianella. It is a workaday mix of hardy succulents, weeds, Australian natives and kitchen-garden staples.

Furthermore, they are growing (with the aid of some heavy-duty lighting) in an assortment of unremarkable plastic pots – the flimsy kind that house plants at nurseries. The pots are nestled into water repositories fashioned from

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plastic soft-drink bottles with their tops sliced off and takeaway containers that she, her friends and family have been collecting.

Berkowitz has named her installation *Physic* garden after the walled one in London that she and her clinical-pharmacologist husband visited last year and found "beautiful and moving". But while the Chelsea *Physic* Garden,

founded in 1673 for the study of the medicinal qualities of plants, is large and exacting, Berkowitz's piece has something more spontaneous and less self-conscious about it. In this, she says, she was inspired by gardens in Prahran, where she used to regularly walk, that were cultivated by Greek and Italian migrants with a decidedly DIY aesthetic. These are the sort of yards where no aluminium can or plastic bottle can't be accommodated, and where seeds and cuttings are shared among friends and family, and where even weeds are harvested.

When it came to amassing her collection of plants for the NGV, Berkowitz too relied largely on cuttings but she also dug up whole thistles and potted them at home. Other plants (the cherry tomatoes, say) she bought as small seedlings and nurtured for a couple of months before installing at the gallery.

There's a host of other plants – particularly indigenous ones – that she is still tending until they are sturdy enough to feature on the table.



Not-so-still life: Lauren Berkowitz with her garden installation at the National Gallery of Victoria, part of the Melbourne Now exhibition. PHOTO: PAUL JEFFERS

Given the work is to be up for four months (it is part of the NGV's massive *Melbourne Now* exhibition) and that many plants are out of their comfort zone, specimens will come and go. This week she has removed some of the more "mangy-looking" mint and brought in chocolate lilies. Like any garden, *Physic* is a work in progress and Berkowitz has "holding bays" – at home and in the NGV grounds – full of plants that cannot yet be accommodated. Every Monday she is at the installation doing maintenance and every day gallery staffers water as required.

"I see this as a bit of a still-life painting that ties into 17th century Dutch painting where flowers were

used as a metaphor for the fragility and transience of life," she says of the installation.

Berkowitz, who has frequently used plants (dried and living) in her work, says *Physic* garden reflects the layered history of the Australian landscape. "The way the landscape has changed is quite complex. I don't want to be judgmental and I am not saying it is good or bad but that this is the legacy of colonisation."

Just as the environment has been a constant theme in Berkowitz's work, *Physic* garden is also an exploration of renewal and sustainability. By selecting plants that provide healing and sustenance and then growing them in recycled pots, Berkowitz addresses how "the whole idea of regeneration and repair ties into ideas of sustainability". Moreover, she wants visitors to see that they can attempt this at home.

"Climate change is such a daunting prospect that people can't deal with it but everyone can make a garden, even if it is just herbs on a windowsill. I like the simplicity and accessibility of that. Anyone can make this small gesture to make a difference."

But Berkowitz has spent a lot of time ensuring her "gesture" hits the right balance between formal and naturalistic. She has arranged her specimens according to their tone and form, and also the colour of the pot in which they grow. Like any garden designer she has worked on the understory, the middle canopy and the upper canopy (aeoniums and cherry tomatoes) to build up a landscape that, in this instance, seems to float in mid-air.

In a bid to eliminate pests (this being a gallery after all) she has followed some of the principles of companion planting. She also sprays every plant with pyrethrum before bringing it up to her allocated spot at the top of the stairs. In the hour-and-a-half that I am there, almost every person stops to examine this table-top garden that sits alongside a window overlooking rail lines. Some pull out their phone and photograph it. As accustomed as we have become to installations fashioned from modest materials, it seems we still don't expect them to be composed from saltbush, pigface and rainbow chard.

"People from all walks of life engage with it," Berkowitz says. "There's something about plants that gets people's interest."

■ *Physic* garden is at NGV Australia, Federation Square, until March 23.