A growing medium

Julia Jones, Sydney

The garden in art and design

New South Wales, which embodies a large-scale garden – a walking path of trees. This track is designed to connect different zones at the Bundanon site: bushland, farmland, the homestead garden and a newly regenerated zone. It draws attention to contemporary practices of environmental renewal and healing, including Landcare activities at the site. The trees tell a story about the landscape: some accompanied by stones inscribed with text, featuring poems and prose written about or at Bundanon.

In another project, Laurence highlighted the vulnerable nature of plants. Waiting – A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants (2010), exhibited at the 17th Biennale of Sydney, took the form of a plant hospital. Located in Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens, it was housed in a transparent mesh structure suggestive of a botanical glasshouse and museum environment, as well as an emergency tent hospital. The delicate plants were connected by scientific glass vessels, their fragility heightened by their contrast with the robust foliage of the gardens outside, visible through the walls. Commenting at the time, Felicity Fenner wrote that ‘Waiting cannot be viewed passively. You have to enter an intimate world of plant life and death, recuperation and regeneration.’ The work solicited our empathy for the plants, which operated as a metaphor for the environment overall, and in doing so activated our conscience, a post-pastoral feature. While Waiting focused on plants being revived, Laurence’s upcoming project for the international garden festival ‘IGA Berlin 2017’ will draw attention to the healing properties of plants in a sculptural architectural space based on a plant structure. This interior space will present a wunderkammer of objects ranging from botanical matter to films, and a participatory component in which visitors will sample edible and medicinal plant juices. Human culture is drawn closer to the plant world.

Sydney artist Diego Bonetto also creates projects designed to bring our attention to the edible and medicinal properties of plants. Bonetto is a performer, and his Sydney weed foraging tours are a form of meandering and lively storytelling. At a time when the appreciation of foraged ingredients is gaining popularity in contemporary gardening and culinary practices, participants learn from Bonetto to view the landscape through different eyes. We develop keen observation skills and discover how to integrate these plants into our everyday lives. Bonetto shares his knowledge about foraging with enthusiasm, also collaborating with chefs and mixologists who use foraged ingredients.

The garden operates as a powerful growing medium within contemporary culture. In this essay I investigate the Australian field of interdisciplinary practice within art and design in which contemporary garden practices and concepts play a pivotal and integrated role. When these art and design projects engage closely with the medium of the garden, they provide inspirational and tangible models and sites for reflection in an era of environmental change and fragility. My investigation features a diverse range of contemporary projects, including those of Lauren Berkowitz, Diego Bonetto, Emily Floyd, Simryn Gill, Janet Laurence and Amanda Levete. These projects intersect with the innovative, experimental approaches found in gardening practices today, ranging from environmental regeneration and sustainability to the creation of sites for healing, sanctuaries and cultural symbolism.

The projects examined here can be considered in relation to a concept from ecological cultural theory; the post-pastoral, defined by Terry Gifford in 1999. ‘Originating from the field of literature, the post-pastoral concept explores an integrated vision of the relationship between humans and the natural world – an approach shared by the garden. The post-pastoral eschews the divisive binary between an idealised, relatively unmodified ‘nature’ and an artificial ‘culture’ which is found in the pastoral convention.

Gifford has defined six post-pastoral qualities, which he suggests could be expanded or reduced, and which he envisages could exist in various combinations throughout post-pastoral forms. These qualities can be summarised as: awe in attention to the natural world; the recognition of a creative-destructive universe; recognition of the interdependence between inner and external nature; an awareness of the interchangeability of nature and culture; a link between consciousness and conscience; and the linking of social and environmental exploitation. In my examination of the projects in this essay, I consider how they relate to various qualities of the post-pastoral, to demonstrate their link to its integrated vision.

Sydney artist Janet Laurence’s art projects epitomise the blending of nature and culture inherent to the post-pastoral, including her 2014–16 project Treelines Track at Bundanon, which embodies a large-scale garden – a walking path of trees. This track is designed to connect different zones at the Bundanon site: bushland, farmland, the homestead garden and a newly regenerated zone. It draws attention to contemporary practices of environmental renewal and healing, including Landcare activities at the site. The trees tell a story about the landscape: some accompanied by stones inscribed with text, featuring poems and prose written about or at Bundanon.

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Bonetto designs art projects that draw us into the gallery, and then out again to encounter plants. One example is his project *5 terrariums, 5 tours and a world of Facebook friends* (2010), which was exhibited as part of 'In the Balance: Art for a Changing World' at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2010. Bonetto placed five terrariums, each containing soil from one of five Sydney parks, into the museum. These flourished into tiny weed gardens. Like small green portals to the outside world, the weed seedlings beckoned viewers out towards weed foraging tours led by the artist in each of the five parks. Bonetto also created a tongue-in-cheek 'Weed-book' page in which various weeds could be befriended. As Rachel Kent observed, the project was a 'playful meditation on the concept of social networking and the equally rhizomatic nature of spontaneous flora'.

This rhizomatic quality is a design feature found throughout Bonetto's projects, resonating with a post-pastoral interchangeability between nature and culture. Another example is 'Wild Food Map', a collaborative project in which the artist is a key player. The map uses interactive online design to record the locations of wild edible and medicinal plants around Sydney, from the tall bunya nut pine to the petite dandelion. Foragers can search for their location on the map, see what's nearby and add new plants and information.

Melbourne artist Lauren Berkowitz has brought living gardens into the gallery in installations such as *Manna* (2009), *Sustenance* (2010) and *Physic Garden* (2013–14), to draw attention to the revived movement towards growing edible and medicinal plants at home. This follows the earlier popularity of domestic 'victory' gardens during the Second World War, and relates to contemporary gardening practices today, in which kitchen gardens are emerging widely, including on verges and in community parks. Berkowitz's indoor kitchen gardens are presented in recycled plastic pots, bottles and containers, reflecting contemporary approaches to sustainability. These gardens suggest new possibilities for the viewer. *Manna*, for example, featured a diversity of plants inside Melbourne’s La Trobe University Museum of Art which offered 'the viewer a course of action', as Alana O'Brien observed at the time. From tomatoes to ruby saltbush, Berkowitz mingled introduced species with indigenous plants in an installation that suggests post-pastoral qualities through its fusion of nature and culture, and its element of environmental conscience.

Berkowitz’s indoor gardens also focus attention on the contemporary gardening practice of cultivating bush tucker plants. This focus on indigenous plants relates to a permanent outdoor installation of Berkowitz: *Karakarook’s Garden* (2005–06) at the Heide Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne, which features edible plants used in traditional Indigenous culture. Its design resonates with the type of geometric grids that Berkowitz has used in many of her indoor floor installations, such as *Colour Field* (2002), featuring salt and dried weeds, or her recent work *Energy Fields* (2015), exhibited at the Latrobe Regional Gallery in Morwell, Victoria, which juxtaposed suspended eucalypt leaves with a floor installation of coal and quartz, evoking alternative energy sources and the local environment.

*Karakarook’s Garden* resembles a modernist grid that has sprung to life outdoors, reflecting how plants and natural elements can shape art installations into new and unpredictable forms.

Outdoor natural elements have also informed the development of London architect Amanda Levete’s design for the 2015 MPavilion, installed in Melbourne’s Queen Victoria Gardens. The pavilion features a sculptural forest-canopy roof that responds to the changeable weather, moving with the wind, providing shelter from the rain and creating shade in summer. Its openness to the garden environment makes the experience of the pavilion an inherently post-pastoral one, a mingling of culture and nature. It creates an imaginative space that could ideally be used for storytelling, as Levete has suggested. Performative spaces such as MPavilion, where stories can be told, and conversations held in an outdoor sanctuary, encourage us to both consider and enact closer connections to the garden environment.

Gardens are becoming increasingly active rather than...
Another work which engages with the garden to symbolise and facilitate public engagement with social issues has been Floyd’s 2015 Venice Biennale installation, *Labour Garden* (2015). The work takes viewers out into the walled Giardino delle Vergini, a pocket of lawn and trees located at the end of the Arsenale site. Installed in the garden, its large, colourful forms double as seats and bookshelves, containing booklets created by Floyd that are designed to raise awareness of the use of free labour in many working contexts. Through the work, Floyd has provided a forum for critical thinking about social issues in a public outdoor realm, which connects the garden to the sense of conscience inherent to the post-pastoral concept. The garden becomes integrated with, rather than separate to, human activities.

As these examples help demonstrate, when art and design projects engage closely with the garden, there is the potential to create powerful statements regarding our relationship with the natural environment. These projects share in common their integration of human culture within the natural world in keeping with the post-pastoral concept, and yet they demonstrate this idea in multifarious ways. They use the medium of the garden for a variety of purposes, including: environmental regeneration; illuminating plants’ edible and medicinal uses; presenting models of garden-making and sustainability; creating an aesthetic sanctuary for cultural activities; illuminating a continuum between nature and culture; and as a metaphorical framework for the discussion of social, cultural and environmental issues.

Within the abundant forms of the garden, we find a rich and varied growing medium for catalysing new ideas.

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2. ibid., p. 151.
3. ibid., p. 150.
7. Levete’s MPavilion runs from 6 October 2015 until 7 February 2016.
9. As Anne Sanders has written, ‘Gardens … and the use of plant matter – have been an important metaphorical as well as material source for Gill’, *Artist Profile*, no. 23, 2015, p. 73.
Amanda Levete, 2015 MPavilion, Queen Victoria Gardens, Melbourne, computer renderings; images courtesy MPavilion

Simryn Gill, *Here art grows on trees*, 2013, exhibition views, Australian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, 2013; images courtesy the artist
Emily Floyd, *Garden Sculpture*, 2009, 150 elements threaded on rope, beech wood and hemp rope, 420 x 61 x 61cm; image courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sydney; photo: Paul Green

Emily Floyd, *Labour Garden*, 2015, installation views, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015; aluminium, steel, epoxy paint, books and brochures, dimensions variable; images courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sydney; photos: John Gollings