

A growing medium

Julia Jones, Sydney



Janet Laurence, *Treelines Track, Bundanon NSW*, 2014–16, detail views; linear passage of trees forming a walking track; stones scripted with text; dimensions variable; images courtesy the artist

The garden in art and design

Trees tell stories.
Art grows on trees.
Plants merge with architecture.
The artist forages for weeds.
The garden catalyses culture.

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, sanctuary 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 1999.¹ 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,² and which he envisages could exist in various combinations throughout post-pastoral forms.³ 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,

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.’⁴ 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.



Diego Bonetto, *5 terrariums, 5 tours and a world of Facebook friends*, 2010, detail views; terrariums, soil from 5 locations in the Sydney Basin, guided tours of the locations, Facebook profiles of the plants visited; 5 terrariums 80 x 55 x 55cm each; images courtesy and © the artist

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'.⁵

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',⁶ as Alana O'Brien observed at the time. From tomatoes to ruby salt-bush, 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 Leveté's design for the 2015 MPavilion, installed in Melbourne's Queen Victoria Gardens.⁷ 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 Leveté has suggested.⁸ 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



Lauren Berkowitz, *Manna*, 2009, various medicinal and edible food plants, 40 x 70 x 460cm; images courtesy the artist and La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne; photos: Kalli Karvelas

passive contributors to our cultural experiences. Sydney and Port Dickson artist Simryn Gill's site-specific exhibition 'Here art grows on trees', in the Australian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, facilitated connections between the indoors and outdoors through an architectural intervention. Gill arranged to have the roof partially removed to open up the exhibition space to the outdoor elements of the Giardini site. Inside the pavilion were Gill's collaged drawings and sculptures, along with photographs featuring open-cut mines in Australia. As the leaves and rain from the garden blew into the pavilion over time, these materials subtly shifted the dynamics of the exhibition in a metaphorical way, contributing to entropy in the work.⁹ Nature and culture were presented as a continuum, a feature that can be related to the integrated vision of the post-pastoral concept. Another example of this continuum can be seen in Gill's photographic series 'Forest' (1996–98), featuring plants subtly fused with printed text.

The garden can also operate metaphorically to raise awareness of social and environmental issues. An example of this is Melbourne artist Emily Floyd's *Garden Sculpture* (2009), which takes the form of a 1970s-style wooden garden ornament, shaped like a DNA double helix, suspended from the roof. Inscribed with the URLs of websites, the work draws our focus to the type of communal information-gathering and thinking afforded by the internet, paralleling this online world with utopian community ideals, including the formation of community gardens which are currently popular. Gardening can be, as Glenn Barkley has observed in his analysis of Floyd's practice, 'an immensely political activity'.¹⁰ This was highlighted in an art-world context by Floyd's *How to make a manifesto grow* (2008), at Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, which encouraged children to compost twentieth-century art manifestos in a leafy indoor garden. The composting of text in this work can be related to the post-pastoral embracing of a creative-destructive universe, as the printed texts were destined to re-emerge as regenerative compost.

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.

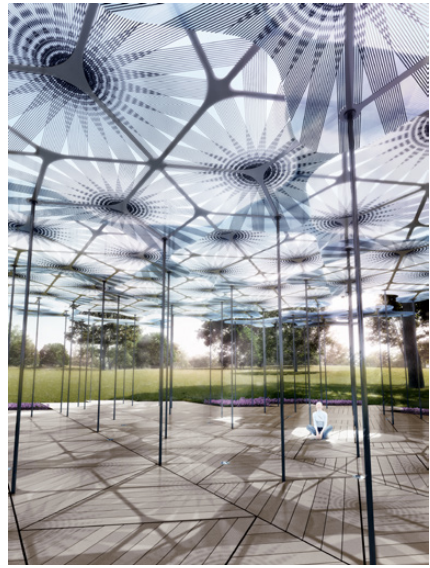
As these examples help demonstrate, when art and design projects engage closely with the garden, there is the potential to create powerful statements regarding our relationship with the natural environment. These projects share in common their integration of human culture within the natural world in 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.

1. Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, Routledge, London, 1999. (See final chapter for the definition of post-pastoral.)
2. *ibid.*, p. 151.
3. *ibid.*, p. 150.
4. Felicity Fenner, 'A hospital for plants: The healing art of Janet Laurence.' *Art & Australia*, vol. 48, no. 1, Spring 2010, p. 65.
5. Rachel Kent, 'Diego Bonetto: Weedy connections', *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2010, p. 34.
6. Alana O'Brien, *Three Degrees of Change*, exhibition catalogue, La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2009.
7. Levete's MPavilion runs from 6 October 2015 until 7 February 2016.
8. Cited in Jane Cornwell, 'Outside the box', *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*, August 2015, p. 26.
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, 2013, p. 73.
10. Glenn Barkley, 'Emily Floyd: In the knowledge garden', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 268, April 2014, p. 29.



Lauren Berkowitz, *Physic Garden*, 2013–14, medicinal and edible plants, 345 x 100 x 52–70cm, National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne; image courtesy the artist and the NGV, Melbourne



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 61 cm; 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

