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It's Alive! Paula Hayes's Green Art

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Growing Power

Creating tabletop terrariums,
residential gardens,
immersive environments,
and a 240-gallon glowing aquarium
brimming with sea creatures,
Paula Hayes considers herself
a maker of living artworks

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS



Paula Hayes in her Brooklyn studio with one of her handblown biomorphic planters. She got tired of conventional containers, so she designed her own.

When Paula Hayes was invited to make a botanical sculpture for the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, the artist-cum-garden-designer had the museum's director, Glenn Lowry, and its chief curator of painting and sculpture, Ann Temkin, watch a YouTube video of mating leopard slugs (*Limax maximus*). In the mesmerizing clip, the two slippery hermaphrodites intertwine and twist into one long curvaceous form while their male organs fan out to form a separate flowerlike globe through which sperm passes. Hayes had already sketched out serpentine and orb-like shapes for the vessels in which she would plant her miniature landscapes before her son showed her their visual similarity to the amorous slugs, which delighted her.

"The thought that the smallest things that we think are nothing or disgusting, which are part of our natural world, are performing these miracles resonates with me poetically," says Hayes. She cast the organic shapes large-scale in milky acrylic to create two translucent, radiant sculptures—a 15-foot-long, wall-mounted horizontal piece titled *Slug* and a 13-foot-tall floor-to-ceiling piece titled *Egg*, each lit from within and host to a lush universe of plant life.

Temkin admits she would not have made the leap from

A to B after watching the video of the slugs. “I don’t know if the average viewer would have identified it as a romance, but there was a kind of dance in the exchange between the freestanding egg and the wall-relief slug that transformed the lobby from a space of neutral emotions, at best, to one of joyful experience,” says Temkin of the show, which was titled “Nocturne of the *Limax maximus*.”

“Paula doesn’t want art to be something you need background information on to get a lot out of,” Temkin adds. “It’s not just the varieties of plant life; it’s also her crystals and shells and all these treasure-like elements that go into the containers that do create a magical, fairy-tale environment. Everybody has an appetite for the promise of an imaginary place full of sparkle and color and texture—and that’s growing.”

The populist aspect is essential to Hayes, who considers herself a maker of living artworks that inspire happiness. These range from tabletop terrariums with miniature edens cultivated in handblown glass containers, to residential gardens sculpted with playful, squishy planters and landscaping accessories she designed herself, to museum and gallery installations that often look like friendly visitations from another planet.

“Probably the most radical aspect of my work is that it can die and requires maintenance continually,” Hayes says. She is committed to a lifelong relationship with each of her living artworks and will make house calls or send surrogates for upkeep as needed. “The person who’s collected it can never really own it and is more of its caretaker,” she says of each work. For those who insist on keeping their terrariums in rooms without light, Hayes may suggest swapping plants for a glittery landscape of crystals and minerals.

With her long graying hair and freeform clothing, Hayes, 54, refers to herself as Mother Hubbard. But if her manner is hippy-ish, her design sensibility is anything but. Cool and sleek, her gleaming, pristine terrariums and luminous biomorphic planters and birdbaths

have a futuristic look and appeal to cutting-edge art-world patrons and dealers including Marianne Boesky, Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, and David Zwirner, who have all commissioned private gardens from her.

Greenberg Rohatyn exhibited Hayes’s first glass terrariums at her New York gallery Salon 94 in 2004 and showed her work there again last spring in tandem with the book launch of Hayes’s new monograph published by Monacelli Press. Boesky, the first to buy a terrarium, gave Hayes solo exhibitions at her Chelsea gallery in 2009 and 2010. Hayes likes to work on a project basis with these dealers, but she remains independent.

“The nature of my work is like a hydra,” she says. She explains that it is easier for her and her husband and collaborator, Teo Camporeale, to organize the main-

tenance of all the living artworks she has sent out into the world as well as the sale of works. They range in price from \$8,000 for a small terrarium to \$300,000 for a large-scale piece like *Slug*.

In her own garden, behind the Brooklyn brownstone she shares with Camporeale, Hayes likes to entertain guests in a teepee. Their studio, recently relocated from a small storefront in the East Village, is nearby. Hayes uses its terrace as a laboratory for the soft retrofit roofing system she has been developing since 1999.

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A giant glowing aquarium was the centerpiece of “Land Mind,” Hayes’s installation in the Lever House lobby in 2011-12.



ABOVE Installation view of "Forest," 2004, at Salon 94 in New York.

RIGHT Tabletop plants in free-form containers, 2006.

Hayes comes from a family of original thinkers. She spent her early youth in Westborough, Massachusetts, with her mother and grandparents. Her grandfather was an inventor with several patents to his credit, including one for a part that made pump sprayers more effective. "I just loved that my grandfather was an inventor," says Hayes, whose favorite spot was his workshop. "It was always this goal of mine to patent something."

She met that goal in 2010, when she was awarded a patent for her "dumpling planter," a pouch made of rubber waterproofing membrane, with an internal drainage system, that cinches looser or tighter at the top as needed around a plant or a tree and has the pleasing appearance of a dumpling. Hayes received a second patent for her "garden necklace," a braided rubber rope used to shape and hem arrangements in planted areas. Both inventions are part of her flexible and lightweight roofing system, which also includes hexagonal, pond,



and silicone planters that can be grouped together in various configurations to create a green environment in black-tar urban spaces.

When Hayes was five, her mother remarried, and the family moved to a farm near the village of Fonda (population approximately 800), in upstate New York. "It was sort of getting off the grid" before it was fashionable,

says Hayes, who learned her way around the natural world through a life centered on farm work and horse riding. At age 16, she went to Fulton-Montgomery Community College for a year. She married shortly afterward, in Saratoga Springs, and had two children. When she was 27, she entered Skidmore College, where she studied weaving and textiles while taking art history classes.

Hayes's life changed after one of her professors gave her a catalogue of Louise Bourgeois's sculpture. Hayes felt so strong a connection to Bourgeois's organic forms charged with sexuality and personal narrative that she impulsively phoned the septuagenarian artist, and was invited to pay her a visit in New York. Having navigated the unfamiliar city to Bourgeois's Chelsea townhouse, she found the artist waiting in the vestibule. "I showed her my slides, and she thought about it and said, 'You're a natural-born artist, but you're very naive,'" Hayes recalls. "'I think you should move to New York City and you will not be naive.' And I said, 'Okay!'"

Hayes immediately applied to Parsons for graduate school and was soon commuting between New York and Saratoga Springs, where her children were living with her ex-husband. She also started working as a gardener, taking care of plantings on rooftops and in office-building lobbies to support herself and her children. Throughout her

"Excerpts from the Story of Planet Thear," 2009, Marianne Boesky Gallery rooftop installation, 2009.

time at Parsons—she graduated in 1989—and through the following decade, Hayes made loose, ephemeral assemblages of found objects, fabrics, branches and leaves, and delicate Chinese and Japanese papers on which she inscribed references to writers who had inspired her, including Emily Dickinson and D. H. Lawrence.

Hayes had her first solo exhibition at New York's Fawbush Gallery in 1992, and she continued to show her wall and floor assemblages throughout the 1990s while still working as a gardener. But at a certain point, she began to lose interest in exhibiting her art. "The gardening was just so completely satisfying—it had everything in it that I was loving about art making," she says. She wanted to design her own gardens.

"I didn't want to see another classically shaped or square pot," Hayes says. In 1999, using translucent silicone, she designed a new kind of planter that could stretch and shift like a womb as the plant inside grew. Boesky bought the first one and in 2000 commissioned Hayes to design a rooftop garden for her place in Tribeca. Hayes was launched on a new—art—career.

"Paula has managed to penetrate what might seem to be pretty stiff boundaries between design and sculpture as well as between nature and culture," comments Temkin.

Lately, Hayes has made significant inroads into the culture world by bringing living artworks inside institutional walls. In 2010, in addition to her MoMA installation, she designed an immersive environment at Skidmore's Tang





View of “Hills and Clouds” (detail), 2011, installation at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio.

Teaching Museum in a room that served as exhibition space, lounge, and dining room combined. She landscaped the space with glass terrariums and with Norfolk Island pines growing from slouchy, colorful silicone planters. The planters’ sensual curves were echoed in the abstracted botanical shapes on the wallpaper she designed for the room and in the handmade glass and ceramic tableware she produced for ten thematic farm-to-table dinners held there throughout the year.

Skidmore’s executive chef, Jim Rose, who coincidentally had gone to high school with Hayes, found that these “slow food” dinners liberated him from the institutional approach to food service at the college. “As a result of these dinners, he was able to connect the local farmers to be suppliers to Skidmore,” says Hayes, who was particularly gratified by this unanticipated consequence of the show.

In her 2011 exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, in Columbus, the centerpiece was an installation of 100 palm-size glass terrariums set on a graded platform like pods of extraterrestrial life that had landed from outer space. “I’m really fascinated with alien visitations,” says Hayes, an interest she and Campo-reale discovered they had in common when they met, in 2006. The audio component of the exhibition described each object through the eyes of “Jill Poet,” a character from another planet

whom Hayes has woven into her work for 15 years. (Jill Poet also stars in the book Hayes just completed, titled *Lucid Green*, a poetic science-fiction story that takes place in a nature sanctuary sometime in the future.)

At the Wexner, as at the Tang, Hayes trained students to water and clean the terrariums and to treat any mold or other fungi that developed. She specified that the students had to work during regular gallery hours to make the caretaking visible to the public. “People may look at the terrariums and think, ‘There’s a scale of earth I could

manage and keep pristine,’” says Hayes. “They’ve been very successful as ambassadors of ideas.” She also created a permanent garden installation on the rooftop of the university’s film and video center.

In a major project last winter, Hayes turned the glass-walled lobby of Lever House—the iconic Modernist office building on Park Avenue designed by Gordon Bunshaft—into a huge terrarium with a landscape of tropical trees and foliage. But what stopped passing pedestrians in their tracks was a giant, glowing aquarium on a raised platform with brilliantly colored coral and saltwater fish swimming

“Nocturne of the Limax maximus,” 2010-11, in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art.



around inside. The 240-gallon vessel, reminiscent of a Kool-Aid pitcher, had a long umbilical cord attached to its belly that provided a loud, gurgling life-support system. A holder shaped like a sea creature dangled from the ceiling and beamed down full-spectrum light.

"Usually a tank will be up against a wall where you can hide all the guts, but I wanted to expose the whole thing," says Hayes, noting that feeding time, when the caretaker filled the tank with brown powder, was not pretty. She adds that she finds beauty in how the fish cleaned up their ecosystem quickly. "Birth and gestation is so obviously a part of everything I do," she says.

Hayes envisioned the whole installation in a flash, but it took two years to work out the technical issues, from casting the clear acrylic aquarium—the largest hollow vessel Hayes's fabricator had ever made—to working with marine biologists and reef-scapers to create a peaceable kingdom of sea creatures.

Hayes and Camporeale are currently working on a collaboration for the exhibition "EMSCHERKUNST.2013," which will open in June on Emscher Island in the Ruhr region of Germany, in a park that was once an industrial site but is now in the process of being renaturalized.

"It looks like a Dutch landscape painting from the 16th century, and then to the left there's this crazy, destructive-looking coal plant," says Hayes, who is focusing

on bioremedial plantings to try to cleanse the earth of heavy metals, while Camporeale, an animator and composer, is working on a sound installation in a nonfunctioning wastewater management facility.

They also dream of using Hayes's roofing system to carpet the tops of factories in Long Island City, where they spend a lot of time during the fabrication of her acrylic pieces. "Just picture driving in from LaGuardia and seeing a vast sea of green rooftops insulating these factories and improving the quality of life for the people who work in them," Hayes says.

"Usually only wealthy people can have rooftop gardens. It could combine ecology and economy and life improvement in one package—and also be something with that happy feeling for public viewing." ■

RIGHT *Moon Gem Crystal Terrarium MG031, 2009.*

Materials include semiprecious stones and recycled glass beads.

BELOW *Teardrop Terrarium T027, 2006.*

Hayes will make house calls to care for her living artworks.

