The New York Times

Nurturing Modernism With Spades, Water and Black Flowers

By: Ken Johnson
July 29, 2005

Postmodernist pests have invaded the formal garden! Or so an alarmist might react to "Down the Garden Path: The Artist's Garden After Modernism." This big, messy, uneven, but -- for patient and interested viewers -- intellectually stimulating show at the Queens Museum of Art is about how contemporary artists have cultivated gardens in fantasy and reality.

Traditionally, the garden has been a place of respite from the worldly problems beyond its protective embrace. So it is not without some dismay that you contemplate its transformation into a political football field on which all the obligatory issues of ideological contention -- class, race, sex and, of course, the environment -- must be kicked around. Yet the garden remains a powerful, even transcendental archetype. That gardens are good is one of the few beliefs that most people are likely to agree on.

Despite its confusing installation, an evocative tension runs through the show: not between the modern and the pre-industrial, or between culture and nature, but between the fragmentation and conflict of the real world and the life-enhancing integration within the mythic garden. For all its willfully provocative ideological sophistication, a romantic yearning for Edenic goodness gives "Down the Garden Path" a certain emotional poignancy.

Visual hedonists should be forewarned: This is a show about ideas and concepts; there are no beautiful paintings or photographs of Giverny-like places. The only works that stand on their own as exciting objects are the miniature gardens inside clear, organically shaped, blown-glass bottles by Paula Hayes. For most of the rest, we have to rely on plans, drawings, models, photographs and explanatory texts. In many cases there is still too little or too much information, which means that to get the full story, it is essential to study the exhibition catalog, with its well-written chapters by the show's organizer, Valerie Smith, the museum's director of exhibitions.

The show begins with some historical background. We are shown models and plans for serene Modernist landscapes by Isamu Noguchi, plans and drawings for Modernist garden cities by the Brazilian architect Roberto Burle Marx and absurdist visions of vegetation-bearing islands on barges in drawings by Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark. And, naturally, here we find a display about "Time Landscape," the unruly section of simulated primeval forest by Alan Sonfist that still occupies a lot on the corner of LaGuardia Place and Houston Street in Manhattan.

Among contemporary artists, the influence of the insouciantly pragmatic anti-idealism of Mr. Smithson, Mr. Matta-Clark and Mr. Sonfist prevails. Small, lovingly made models of sections of the Ramble in Central Park by Tom Burr, for example, allude to Smithson's celebrated essay "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." Also, because the Ramble has been known as a gay cruising area, Mr. Burr's models bring up age-old erotic associations of the garden.

More practically, the landscaper Diana Balmori and the sculptor Brian Tolle, whose Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park City is shown in model form, retrofitted a pickup truck with seed-sowing machinery and, with festive, beer-drinking passengers on board, drove around a field in the nearby Queens Botanical Garden to demonstrate an environmentally friendly method of cultivation. (The event is documented by a video, and the truck is on display outside the museum's front door.)

There are other didactic projects. With assistance from nearby residents, Lonnie Graham has created a small educational community garden on the museum grounds. Christian Philipp Müller offers portraits of upstate New York farmers proudly posed on their tractors and a series of large dirt-filled boxes proportioned to reflect the number of active farms in six Hudson Valley counties. And Nils Norman displays a movable library of environmental books contained in a wooden construction on an adult-size tricycle, by which the word about good environmental behavior can be spread. It has a solar-powered photocopy machine.

Perhaps the most ambitious of the socially activist garden designers is Mel Chin, who created an experimental garden in a toxically polluted area -- shown here as a model -- planted with species that consume heavy metals and thereby help cleanse the earth. For the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin, Mr. Chin is developing an expansive park in which sites from geographically and socially separate parts of that city will be reproduced to create a metaphor for and a practical inducement to integration.

Gardens traditionally have served as memorials, and so do at least two included in the show. Drawings by Mark Dion represent a faux-antique "Tasting Garden" that he developed with Robert Williams for a commission given by the Storey Institute in Lancaster, England: oversize sculptures of apples and pears that have become extinct because of modern agricultural practices are presented on neo-Classical pedestals. And a war memorial in Nordhorn, Germany, by Jenny Holzer has a circular garden planted with black flowers and passages of her vehement antiwar poetry chiseled into stone benches -- here shown in the form of texts drawn on paper.

Private home gardens can become works of art, too. We are given frustratingly limited glimpses of gardens by the filmmaker Derek Jarman and by the sculptor Ian Hamilton Finlay, who includes a hand grenade among a set of decorative carved sandstone garden sculptures on display in the museum. The catalog essay by Ms. Smith, the show's organizer, makes a compelling case for the personal garden as an idiosyncratic protest against an outer world perceived to be irredeemably corrupt.

What seems mystifyingly opaque at first but turns out to be among the show's most interesting items is by the filmmaker Stan Douglas, who made a series of color photographs of small community gardens in Germany called Schreber gardens. To help the poor in the first half of the 19th century, the German government provided urban garden allotments; today, maintaining Schreber gardens like the ones in Mr. Douglas's photographs is popular among the middle class. (Strangely, the idea was conceived by Daniel Gottlieb Moritz Schreber, a physician and pedagogue, whom students of psychoanalytic history may recognize as the sadistic, disciplinarian father of Freud's patient Daniel Paul Schreber, who wrote the classic autobiography "Memoirs of My Nervous Illness.")

Of course, you have to read the catalog to learn all this -- and to understand, as well, the relationship of the Schreber garden photographs to Mr. Douglas's "Sandmann," the haunting film set in a Schreber garden, which some viewers may recall seeing at the Whitney Museum of American Art 10 years ago. Do your reading, though, and you will surely agree that the garden remains a topic of wonderful intellectual and imaginative fertility.

"Down the Garden Path: The Artist's Garden After Modernism" remains on view through Oct. 9 at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, (718)592-9700.