McFARLAND, Scott (b. Hamilton ON, 1975)

Over the last several years, Vancouver photographer Scott McFarland has photographed gardens, most notably the Huntington Botanical Garden, and those belonging to the well off of Vancouver’s West Side. He first became interested in photographing these sites while studying the medium’s history; he was taken by the fact that gardens and botanical studies comprised some of photography’s earliest subject matter, including the cameraless work, or photogenic drawings, by William Henry Fox Talbot, and Anna Atkins’ cyanotypes. As McFarland has noted, the garden has continued to be “inherently photogenic”¹ and his work reflects the incredible complexity and intricacy of garden ecology.

The garden, as a combination of human and natural efforts, is a creation of delicate balance. In an understated way, McFarland’s photographs draw attention to nature’s beauty and vigor, as well as the efforts that go into its cultivation; we see the cutting, pruning, weeding, spraying and planting that must take place in order to produce “desirable” results. For example, in the photograph “Inspecting, Allen O’Conner Searches for Botrytis Cinerea” (2003), O’Conner appears stretched over a plant closely examining a leaf, while a second worker crouches on the ground, busily weeding. Another photograph depicts a more radical intervention. In “Pouring, Ben Kubomiwa Treating Fountain with Potassium Permanganate” (2002), in the collection of the National Gallery, the gardener Kubomiwa pours a brilliant magenta solution into the water. The liquid, which is supposed to enhance the quality of human made water sources such as ponds and small lakes, looks almost poisonous and its striking purple colour is at odds with the lush green foliage of the surrounding garden. Through images such as these, McFarland gives the viewer a behind the scenes look at the elaborate methods used to make nature appear “natural” in the garden setting. The garden, in this sense, and the photographing of it, is a way of combining art and nature, an idea that many philosophers and designers such as Lewis Mumford, Frederick Law Olmstead, and Ebenezer Howard have found attractive.

In many respects, McFarland uses the garden as a theatre in which certain activities are acted out. The photographs, and their seeming ordinary views of gardens, are highly staged; even though workers are depicted going about their tasks, they look stiff, their stances appearing somewhat contrived. The staged quality of the images is also supported by the highly formal and rigorous manner McFarland composes his shots. On one level, the strict geometry of the shot echoes the geometric patterns and shapes that nature has been molded into. For example, in “Analyzing, Ryan Otto Conducts Water Test” (2003), the geometry of pathways, garden sheds, lawns and the fountain itself are tightly arranged.

within the camera frame. In the above mentioned “Inspecting, Allen O’Conner Searches for Botrytis Cinerea” the arched backs of the workers match the curved bends of the hedges and shrubbery in which they work. In this sense, the exacting composition and posing of workers underscores the idea of human activity merging harmoniously with that of nature. On another level, however, the overall effect appears artificial and emphasizes the precariousness of the garden’s state of harmony and peacefulness, and, even further, the role of human beings within such a setting.

The constructed aspect of the photograph also makes the garden seem “otherworldly.” The types of gardens McFarland photographs also support this notion; most are nestled within private estates, hidden from the public’s eye. Such gardens, therefore, are self-contained and enclosed places where connections to the “outside” world are radically played down, including the presence of people who enter this realm in order to maintain it. McFarland’s photographs thus provide a small glimpse into these private worlds, which, for the most part, remain concealed beyond a high fence or carefully clipped border of tall foliage.

However, even though the garden appears to be detached from worldly affairs, objects appear within the foliage that indicate otherwise. In earlier works, McFarland focused on certain objects and devices that owners had set among their plants—machines in the garden that challenged its pastoral or edenic quality. For example, in “Hedge with Border, Study; Chamaecyparis, Papaver, Satellite Dish” (2001), a huge satellite dish is set just beyond a large, shaggy looking false cyprus. Other works depict additional “unnatural” elements. In “Sick Optix Motion Sensor, with Acer palmatum f. atropurpureum, Tsuga Canadensis ‘Pendula’” (2000), a small motion sensor pokes out of the shrubbery. The sylvan “View Study; At the Forest Edge; Gunera manicata, Pleioblastus auricomus, Sick Optix Motion Sensor” (2001) includes a sensor planted at the edge of a pond. Such elements reinforce the idea of private property whose boundaries are clearly marked. The garden is therefore a place of harmony that must be constantly policed, and is not an area to be entered casually.

Scott McFarland is a young Vancouver photographer who is quickly gaining international status for his work. His photographs have been shown in Vancouver, Toronto, New York, Berlin, London, England, Salamanca and Antwerp. His works are found in the collections of numerous galleries and museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art (that just purchased “Orchard View, Early Spring; Rubus discolor, Prunus nigra, Prunus serrulata”), the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Centro de Arte de Salamanca, Spain, National Museum of Film and Photography, Bradford, England, Ackermans Collection, K21, Dusseldorf, Germany, Morris & Helen Belkin Gallery, Mendal Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Oakville Gallery.

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