

Presence and Boundaries in the Garden

A garden is a living space.
—Elizabeth Scott, *Habitat* project participant¹

Habitat is the outcome of a two-year photographic project on gardens in the Moreton Bay region devised by Renata Buziak and Lynette Letic. It involved photographing eleven privately owned gardens across the region, from Strathpine to Mount Glorious, ranging from suburban gardens to large properties in the country.

Both artists create photographs, but in very different ways. On the one hand, Lynette is a documentary photographer; she used a camera to record the project participants and the particularities of their gardens. Renata, on the other hand, works with soil, microbes and plant material; she gathered such materials from the various gardens, and used photographic paper but no camera! As such, this unusual photographic collaboration not only studies gardens and the plants, animals, landscaping and other features within them, but also crosses the boundary of sight to what lies beneath the surface of the soil and how that ‘looks’ or ‘registers’ on light-sensitive materials.

A synergy is implied by this deliberate conjunction between what appears above and below the soil. It is an interconnectedness that gardeners also have to understand if their gardens are to thrive. Yet, non-gardeners and amateur gardeners also understand this synergy. For example, when we talk of “planting the seed of hope” or “finding our roots”, we connect that which is below with what lies above, and intuitively relocate ourselves in ways that are more meaningful.

According to American writer Robert Bly, “The word *garden* in the mythological tradition suggests a walled garden.”² He continues by describing the lushness and rarity of the flora and fauna enclosed, and notes: “... plants develop by intent when inside the walled garden”.³ Bly’s observation on what might constitute a garden is somewhat removed from many of the gardens I see. The difference is partly one of a lack of richness of flora and fauna, but to pick up Bly’s point more specifically, it is also the paucity of gardens’ boundaries that somehow dismays me. For, while the “walled garden” assuredly shelters plants, it is also a psychological container that invites us to look inward, much like the composition and framing of a picture.

As Martin Heidegger reminds us, “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.”⁴ The ‘presence’ of a garden is a nebulous thing that has nothing to do with particular forms of plant species, the size of a garden, or the value of its location. Rather, it has more to do with the way a garden suggests itself as whole, while revealing its parts. It evokes the subtle relationship between human cultivation and natural order/natural disorder that every successful (and unsuccessful) garden pivots upon. Most gardens – including my own – are marked by a uniformity that suggests an ease of maintenance over a depth of imagination. This is often because we do not *cultivate*, so much as *allow* by diffidence. But the most interesting gardens confound and surprise, especially when their secrets are revealed, and we feel pleasure in the feeling that, while the garden rightly contains its centre and boundaries, it also cannot be contained psychologically. There is an

indefinable rightness to this holistic ideal (centre/periphery as one) being leavened by the remorseless pleasures of muddy boots, pruning, weeding, the vagaries of the seasons, and interminable pests eating new growth. Nature suggests the ideal, we struggle to realise it, and then nature challenges our efforts.

It's hard to summarise, but what we see in these photographic works is as varied as what we might feel in a garden and vice versa. Furthermore, a garden is always a work in progress, and the photographs of Renata and Lynette in this exhibition are also a kind of 'work in progress', since their practice is ongoing. Yet, placing a frame or boundary around a body of artworks and exhibiting them allows us to take stock of what has been gathered. These photographs are the result of two different art practitioners who collaborated with the owners of eleven different gardens. In this, we have much more than a snapshot of the horticultural diversity that one region holds. Artists plant imaginal seeds, and surely gardeners are artists by a different name. So, who knows where the boundaries of this project truly lie?

Dr Stephen Hobson

NOTES

¹ Elizabeth Scott, interview with Renata Buziak, February 2014.

² Robert Bly, *Iron John* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1990), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York & London: Harper & Row, 1975), 154.