Fertile Imaginations

Five Artists Have Found Their Giverny in the Flower Beds, Potting Sheds and Lawns of Southern California

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Mixing and matching plants, sketching with paths and hedges: If making a garden isn't truly art, it's undeniably artistic--and some gifted artists who are gardeners definitely blur the line between the two realms. They compose landscapes with plants they want to paint, or grass and bamboo they can haul indoors and play with like so much plaster and wood. What sprouts beside a bench becomes a statement, a sculptural tool, the fixed piece of a collage. As Blue McRight, a Venice painter, puts it, "Artists are like Montessori kindergartners. They find 'materials' in the world around them. 'I could use that,' they're always thinking."

In gardens, of course, plants die. Seeds sprout in odd spots. Bugs eat leaves and other bugs. For a gardener, such is life. For an artist, it can be art. McRight and these four other Southern California artists have gravitated toward gardens in their art. The plants suggest patterns, surprises, themes. They create a stage for ideas.

BLUE MCRIGHT

Ordinary butch-topped turf grass is what preoccupies Blue McRight, who grew up weeding dandelions out of her dad's Delaware lawn--"and not happily," she snorts. For her, the vast clipped and chemically treated rug that rolls out from the East to California symbolizes some of our country's problems and pretensions. "We act as if lawn is part of our aesthetic heritage," she says. "But it's an import from Europe and an absurd one for our climate." Despite its commonness, she believes, lawn dramatizes the gulf between poor neighborhoods and wealthy enclaves, where emerald carpets are always perfect--so perfect, in fact, that during the drought of the early '90s, wealthier owners resorted to lawn paint to preserve a green illusion.

This Hollywood-style makeup job gave McRight an idea. Known as a painter for her resonant mix of landscape and figurative elements and as a public artist for environmentally conscious urban sculpture, she decided to paint bits of living turf shaped in patterns drawn from European parterres. In 1998 she installed her "Lawnscapes" at the Patricia Faure Gallery in Santa Monica. When the show ended a few weeks later, her pieces became compost. "My passion for the environment and nature has put me on a separate track in some ways from the current art scene," she says.

McRight can trace that track back more than 20 years, to her decision to leave the Rhode Island School of Design for a teaching stint with Outward Bound, two years at Evergreen State College in Washington (she majored in fine arts) and a stretch as a river guide and ski instructor in Santa Fe, where she met her husband, architect Warren Wagner.

In Santa Fe, as a way of bringing home the wildness she loved in nature, McRight would garden when she had the chance. Corn, herbs and 200 sunflowers erupted in her first small yard, and when she and Wagner moved to L.A. in 1985, McRight went on planting--vegetables, succulents and assorted flowers in a Venice parkway, and flax, geraniums, ferns and clivia in an Inglewood front bed that earned her a negative citation from the city. "They said our lawn was overgrown. It wasn't a lawn. They didn't get it."

Well, eventually they did, and so did the people who saw her "Lawnscapes," which, according to one reviewer, had a quality foreign to most gallery shows: scent.

Since then, McRight has moved on to a new series of landscape paintings called "On the Lawn," in which she plays with traditional grass-based images and activities: lawn jockeys, lawn chairs, lawn tending. She is plotting a new garden, around the solar-heated studio that Wagner designed for them in Venice. So far, though the plants are still sketchy, she knows this: They will be 90% drought-tolerant and low-maintenance and 100% non-lawn.

JACCI DEN HARTOGG

Sculptor Jacci Den Hartog has spent years moving through landscapes both natural and human--from Iowa farmland to Utah hills to Alabama and New Mexico schools where her father, a restless, idealistic teacher, landed. One college semester, she left Oregon to study in Costa Rica. She has traveled to China twice to study gardens. She also spent six years living in a downtown L.A. loft above a dog food factory, staring at a landscape cobbled with cubes and spires, water towers, air-conditioning units and industrial pipes. "I think a lot about space, movement through space and how to bring the expansiveness of space into objects," Den Hartog says. Though she describes herself as "a committed object-maker," her fascination with landscapes has driven her to imbue her sculptures with the mystery and depth of places such as stony cliffs and strolling gardens. Until recently, she had done this with synthetic materials. When she worked in the downtown loft, alongside her husband and fellow artist Patrick Nickell, she created moody urban abstractions by casting black rubber in plumbing pipes. In the early '90s, before leaving downtown for Eagle Rock, she discovered that she could produce ethereal effects by pouring polyurethane over plaster molds in the shapes of rocks and mountains. "Some parts receded, some projected, as in Chinese landscape paintings with their multiple perspectives. You have to walk around a piece to see it all."

But after these wall-mounted pieces appeared in critically acclaimed shows, at the Christopher Grimes Gallery in Santa Monica and around the country, something happened to extend Den Hartog's palette. Starved of greenery in the city, she took up gardening in Eagle Rock, buying plants willy-nilly to plug in around her house. Some lived, some didn't, and she slowly figured out why as she composed beds in the shade of a venerable oak and laid strolling paths near a screen of timber bamboo. In search of like-minded company, she helped organize the Germinators, a hip alternative to the traditional white-glove garden club, and from there wound up in "The Flower Show," curated by then-Germinator Zazu Faure for her mother's gallery, Patricia Faure in Santa Monica. Guidelines? "Organic material arranged with artistic flair."

Den Hartog, who teaches sculpture at Otis College of Art and Design, had stricter rules for herself.

"I decided to make a piece that was both a sculpture and an actual landscape, and I eliminated all materials except what grew in my garden."

For weeks she agonized over how to do this, spending hours outside "trying to see the familiar in an unfamiliar way." One day she noticed the arc of a bamboo cane and imagined its hollow form as a vessel. Close by, in a planting border, she saw some flower-like succulents, aeoniums and echeverias ranging from minuscule to several inches wide. In short order, she was drilling a 14-foot length of bamboo and poking in two rows of succulents that diminished in size along the pole, creating a flowery "path" for visual travel.

In the two years since that first "Succulent Viewing Pole," Den Hartog has done two more, refining the concept to include a cactus planting mix in the bamboo's core, thereby ensuring that the succulents live and develop as they would in any garden. This means that unlike the synthetic sculptures she continues to make, currently inspired by the sky, viewing poles change over time. The bamboo pales from green to yellow, the echeverias grow too big and need replacing. They will even die, as the decades-old oak in her garden did recently. Crashing over in a storm, the tree left a hole in her landscape. At first, she reflects, "I considered it a catastrophe."

But as she walked her paths and studied the view, the hole became space and the space suggested possibilities. "I realized that I could plant things, different things. I was looking at a new frontier."

PARNELL O. CORDERG

Because he lives in a hillside house, in the splattered shade of eucalyptus trees, Parnell O. Corder has little ground for the plants he sketched as a boy--roses and irises and the hyacinths his Kentucky grandmother grew. Like his life in the Hollywood Hills, which is about as far from Indianapolis as he could get, his plants are more exotic now, waxy yellow and green, shrieking pink, with open mouths and nodding heads and a stagey, calculated poise. Orchids--some more like insects than flowers--crowd the flat space near his back door, sprout from pots on his wood decks and cram the sunny corners of his house. When their moment comes, and their scrawling spikes break into bloom, Corder carries them to his studio to preserve their fleeting glory in watercolor paintings. These simple renderings suggest both botanical illustrations and quirky portraits of characters on the verge of something--song, dance, speech. You can almost imagine greeting them as you pass, or patting a cheeky little face.

Such individualists played no part in Corder's childhood garden, where roses skirted a huge lawn and shade trees were the main attraction. But after leaving Indiana to enroll at the Art Institute of Chicago, he got a job with a florist who used cymbidiums in his designs. "They were thick, wild, mysterious," Corder recalls. In cold Chicago, they exuded something like heat. But it wasn't until he moved to New York and then to L.A. (lured by work as a commercial makeup artist) that he acquired his own orchids and started painting them: phalaenopsis, dendrobiums, cymbidiums and brassias, which resemble spiders on a string.

For Corder, a slight and quiet man with a certain Midwestern reticence, the subject of orchids prompts a flood of talk. "I can't explain the thrill of bringing orchids back, making them bloom again after dormancy," he says, describing a regimen of watering, misting, training and feeding that includes a daily check of about 30 plants. Capturing their essence in paint is less predictable and involves much sitting and observing before the brush hits paper. But his plants, he notes, are willing subjects, even as their heads turn slowly with the light and their colors change as they age.

Orchids, however, are not Corder's only subjects. He also does emotionally charged pastel-and-acrylic drawings based on Polaroid self-portraits. Though he has shown both groups of work in galleries from Malibu to New York, the orchids grab the most attention. "They're more accessible," he says. And though he has flirted with other plant types, painting Japanese irises and specimen succulents, he always returns to his first obsession.

Recently he's been planning for a greenhouse. "I need more!" he cries, sounding like every gardener ever born. "Take cattleyas. They've never grown for me. In a greenhouse, they will!"

Nick Taggart and Laura Cooperg

If you let a leathery old distictis vine crawl up your house, push its way through a window and fan out comfortably on your studio wall, you probably aren't worrying about the divide between house and garden, plant and human, life and art. If Nick Taggart, who works in this studio, doesn't paint those actual vines, his wife, artist Laura Cooper, might thread them into a collage, and the collage might spark an outdoor color scheme, and the garden, raging up around Taggart's window, might inspire a painting called "Garden Party," dripping with vines and smeared with flowers.

A trip uphill through their terraced landscape is like hiking through a painting, and a lot of their own plants--yarrow and angel's trumpet, canna and cardoon--star on paper and canvas in their Glassel Park cottage. Cooper features these in stark, iconic silhouettes, in the style of vintage cameos, or packs them into busy visual bouquets with paint, fabric, seeds, stems and snips from plant catalogs.

In Taggart's hands the blooms whirl together more abstractly or show their creepy insides, hovering bugs and all. Or he might present two views of the same plant--the soft petals and prickly pods of love-in-a-mist or devil-in-a-bush, depending on which of its common names you choose. Such ambiguity is one of Taggart's themes and his focus in depicting images that might otherwise seem sentimental or cliched. "I'm fascinated by this familiar-yet-alien world with its subtle balance between wild and chaotic, beneficial and destructive, beautiful and grotesque." Cooper agrees: "Melancholy attends beauty. Decay is a part of life. Things start to get interesting when you can sense that edge."

A California native and a veteran of UC San Diego and Cal Arts, Cooper once escaped childhood shyness by plunging into fairy tales full of magic spells and bewitched gardens that weren't what they appeared to be. Fittingly, she was introduced to English-born Taggart, a product of rural Devon and London art schools, by a friend who had a vision of the two of them in Taggart's garden. Never mind that in 1989 little grew there besides old succulents and weeds, or that neither Cooper nor Taggart gardened. "This place spoke to me," Cooper says, remembering her first glimpse of green through the gate. "It wanted to be transformed."

Once she moved into the house that Taggart has owned since 1979, they began to learn about plants together, haunting botanical gardens and reading landscape history. By the mid-'90s, with their lot planted and carved into rooms ("pink garden," "moon garden," "outdoor bath"), they took up with other gardening artists to form the Germinators. And as their landscape grew, their artistic interests changed.

Working in three-dimensional outdoor spaces, Cooper was briefly inspired to craft evocative, wraithlike sculptures of fabric, resin and leaves, which she called "floating dresses." Taggart's wide-ranging subject matter--from interpretations of movie images to urban landscapes--became more organically based and, lately, almost all of their work has centered on the garden. "We like things to be as connected as possible," Cooper says. "Instead of bits and pieces, we want the whole web." Naturally, Cooper and Taggart, who teach at Art Center College of Design and Otis College of Art and Design respectively, have collaborated on a garden-art project for their "red garden": a pair of fiberglass body-cast planters of themselves, filled with ornamental grass.