

Beyond the garden

by Ilaria Macchi

Going Beyond the garden means considering the link between us and nature as a proper **relationship between living organisms** who live in the same world, understanding that these relationships have a considerable social and political significance in a historical period such as ours, in which the search for an alternative to our current lifestyle among humans, and between humans and non-humans, is dramatically urgent, with the hope of inventing original ways of inhabiting the earth.

The historic gardens of Lake Orta are examples of a search for beauty and wellbeing that spans the design, research and care of local and exotic tree varieties. Some examples include the gardens created by Carlo Nigra, a former owner of the Villa of the same name, which houses this exhibition, and that of Villa Monte Oro. But also Miasino's botanical garden or "garden of simples": all examples of different gardens united by a poetic approach that brings to life that ever-present metaphor that sees gardens not only as physical places but also as spaces for the soul.

Philosophies from every era and culture have borrowed the image of the garden as a metaphor for an inner place to be cultivated with care, in which to sow different essences that together make up a balanced and flourishing ecosystem, a landscape of the soul that promises serenity and eternal happiness: paradisiacal gardens in which to live eternally, as promised by the Koran, the Garden of Eden, Zen gardens, in which to seek balance and peace.

Paradise is a Persian word meaning enclosed garden (*pairidaeza* from *pairi*, around, and *daeza* or *diz*, wall, brick or shape): the Garden of Eden was in fact a protected, safe place in which lush vegetation guaranteed happiness and wellbeing to humans and animals, who lived in peace with one another. Outside, wild and dangerous nature, devoid of human domination. A contrast between good and evil, between protected and dangerous, between culture and nature, for which Adam and Eve pay the price when, by committing the first sin, they break the natural balance between themselves and the rest of creation and are thus expelled from the Garden of Paradise.

The garden is a place of innocence and justice, where one can find a solution to the bewilderment of humanity: but as such it is also a symbol of a deep inner quest; it is the unveiled mystery, absolute wonder and pleasure: the recapturing of a lost dimension. A garden is also a place where nature bends according to human will until it coincides with the dream of perfect nature while being simultaneously perfectly dominated by man; it is the moment of transformation of the infinite into the finite, and as such a place of peaceful refuge: both in terms of internal order, which contrasts with external disorder - the known against the unknown - and also in terms of the finite dimension, which relates it to the life of man¹.

Christian interpretation, mysticism and folkloric imagery feed on the symbol of the garden and centre around it: the fundamental events of sacred scriptures take place in a garden. But for a garden to be such, it must have three fundamental characteristics: it must be limited, enclosed, well recognizable with respect to what is different from itself, from what a garden is not; it must be characterized by a harmonious balance of nature and culture, that is, by a development of nature that is continuously controlled and directed by human will, by a constant dialectic relationship between propositions of a vegetal nature and man's

¹ Franco Cardini, Massimo Miglio, *Nostalgia del paradiso. Il giardino medievale*. [Longing for paradise. The medieval garden] Editori Laterza, 2002

architectural responses; spatial limits and the balance between the natural and the human must translate into a constant risk, a danger.

The beauty of wild and spontaneous nature is not negated but is perceived as risky and sinful: the dominated and controlled nature of a garden then becomes a symbol of an anthropocentric universe in which humans not only reign but are even *creators*².

Thus, a duality between wild and civilised is established, which is also reflected in the design of gardens. The fence, the dividing wall, has a concrete meaning: the garden is sweet and welcoming when seen from the inside, for those who own it and those who use it; it is hard, hostile, inviolable and sometimes invisible when viewed from the outside. So-called weeds must be eradicated, no space left for spontaneous species, infesting plants dominated. But what happens when vegetation is allowed to spread spontaneously, allowing itself to be surprised by the results and the goal of indeterminate direction? This is what happens in **Matteo Giuntini's** art, which gives space to spontaneous intuition, of unknown origin, like some plants whose seeds are carried by the wind or by animals. In **CORIANDER (Pick and throw away)** a flower traced in charcoal encloses a medieval-inspired medal, a votive offering. The spontaneous touch of nature bursts in with flames of colour that conquer the foreground, in that game of stratification and randomness that characterizes all the most beautiful gardens and which, with a touch of irony, overturns the plans of less avid and more conciliatory gardeners, replacing them with the self-organization of plants. Playfulness and irony also find space in Giuntini's work in the choice of titles for his works: free words approach the works in a game with the viewer that resembles Rodari's imagination techniques.

Woods and forests are places of danger, places where fairy tale characters venture out to face wild beasts, stormy nights, disturbing creatures. Moving through the forest, characters get lost, but once they get out after facing incredible adventures, they find themselves grown up, changed, able to face the (usually tragic) events that await them at home in a different way. The wild leads us on a journey of realisation, of awareness: facing the real dangers of the world, it forces us to rely on ourselves.

Wilderness will bring you much happiness, wrote Derek Jarman.

Wilderness is also spontaneity, instinct, abandonment of the established path to immerse oneself in a search for an absolutely personal, inner, self-determined awareness.

*What would become of us if we were only allowed to walk in a garden or along an avenue?*³

Seeking one's own personal paths, creating one's own way of crossing the landscape we inhabit, is something that is instinctive and necessary, as demonstrated by the theorization of "desire paths", spontaneous paths created by the repeated passage of people over areas other than those indicated by sidewalks and paved avenues. The concept is ancient, but the term "desire path" was apparently coined in 1958 by Gaston Bachelard in his book *La Poétique de l'Espace*. Desire paths are generally shortcuts, paths that are more immediate than those deliberately traced and constructed. Once a path has been repeatedly trodden through the vegetation, other people and animals will tend to follow it and the constant trampling will erode the grass until a clearly visible path emerges.

Once again, the role of humans as "creators" emerges. Creating is a constant human activity, which now more than ever needs to be carried out with a more sensitive, more poetic, ecological approach (meaning a relationship with nature and with what is not human), considering ourselves inhabitants of nature, an

² Ibidem

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Camminare*, curated by Massimo Jevolella, in the translation by Maria Antonietta Prina, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2009

integral part of it. Creating by moving through, listening to and entering the vegetation, rather than dominating, controlling, building. As H. D. Thoreau wrote, *Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. To preserve wild animals implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to. So it is with man.*⁴

If, as the feminist theologian Sally McFague writes, the various instances of economic, social and ecological exploitation are connected, it becomes necessary to think of the bond between us and nature as a real relationship between living creatures, pursuing an eco-compatibility in accordance with existence itself, to guarantee a quality environment where we can perceive the overall wellbeing of ancient dialogue, in which not only men, plants and animals, but also stones have a voice.⁵ Create and build your own external and internal spaces leaving room for wildness, become gardeners-poets. Act out the poetics of doing with a view to beauty, getting to know the landscapes enclosed in the soul-garden, cultivating it wisely.

As Pia Pera wrote in *Against the Garden. With regard to plants, when designing a garden, the presence of a landscape in which nature remains at least a hypothesis, a possibility, a not too distant memory, is essential.*

The garden is a creative expression directed towards the future, it requires generosity (essential when planting trees that we will never see in their full beauty), it requires a thirst for freedom, responsibility.

The social and political significance of such a concept should not be taken for granted. We need to involve and empower people in landscape projects, we need everyone's collaboration to change the direction in which our planet is heading. Ecological thinking concerns the different levels that condition our humanity and our future. These different levels affect both the wellbeing and the malaise of our organism, our environment, our communities, our institutions, our languages, etc.

*Give me water
give me your hand
give me your word
that we are
in the same world.
(Show yourself, Chandra Livia Candiani)*

Give me your hand. It is touch more than any other sense that allows us to realise that we really are all in this world: humans, plants, animals, stones.

McFague suggests that the relationship between subject (reason) and nature/matter (object) should instead be considered a relationship between subjects. According to this model, the instrument of knowledge is no longer sight, which "creates distance, objectifies and controls", but touch. This requires the ability to "let yourself be touched" by nature by entering into an empathic relationship with it.

The research of **Titta C. Raccagni and Barbara Stimoli** goes precisely in this direction. Physical contact with the other, with the mineral, allows matter to be given new meaning, creating a relationship with it. A somatic practice that involves listening to the physical space and to the other, in a change of perspective which, starting from the subject, relocates the object, the matter (in the relationship), acknowledging its intelligence and bringing it to an equal and empathic level.

⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵ Elizabeth Green, Between groans and hope. Introduction to ecofeminist theology, speech at the 1st Conference on Eco-theology organized by the Cenobio Cristico, September 2011.

The artistic duo's research moves between the boundary and the possibility of encroachment: the porous encroachment of matter, between the human and the non-human. The sinuous encroachment of pleasure, which is sought after and given new meaning with every experience. ***Pleasure rocks*** project, launched in 2018 with the visual artist Alessia Bernardini, focuses precisely on the relationship between human and non-human bodies, particularly with stones and minerals, taking unexpected directions and gradually moving away from an anthropocentric focus.

We need to move towards a physical and psychic anthropo-poietic concept of the human being, based on social, political, cultural, religious reciprocity, in contact with the sacredness of the earth-nature-environment relationship, in order to grasp the impact of man's relationships with his surroundings. The idea of a social and cultural construction of human communities cannot ignore the necessary interaction with ecologies shaped by the technical and semiotic practices of men.⁶

It's not enough for us to acknowledge that we are vulnerable for us to take care of the world. *We also need imagery of the world we would like* because, as Pia Pera wrote, *truly beautiful gardens are those that help us discover, look at and respect the larger garden in which we would all like to live.*⁷

Taking responsibility for protecting the environment shouldn't be something that arises from emergencies and anguish, but from the possibility of living together as living beings linked by desires and cultures, but also rooted in matter and united by vulnerability.

This rethinking of the human subject should lead us out of that dry and tragic alternative of *your loss is my gain* and motivate us towards work characterised by care, a weaving through which salvation always also includes creation.⁸

A creation that makes use of a spiritual flow that never dries up: the symbols (the inner garden, the trees) continue to be effective because they are part of our culture in the broadest sense. There is no distinction between nature and culture, only by integrating nature into culture can we think of continuing to inhabit the world for a long time to come. The same garden metaphor, the philosophy of the garden combined with the philosophy of living, conveys an overall vision of life as a union of nature and culture.

The garden welcomes this principle by questioning the world in an uninterrupted, poetic dialogue full of sacredness: a philosophy of life that looks forward to tomorrow, solemnly dressed in landscapes and gardens that must be revealed in order to recognize their process and to question it with a view to the future.⁹

Humanity has always tried to "fix" the form of nature in more or less realistic symbols or representations for ritual or cataloguing purposes, such as with herbaria. The study and observation of plant species has allowed us to understand their nature and dynamics.

The shape of leaves, trees, fruits has not changed over the centuries: fossil ferns have reached us from prehistoric times, in Val Grande there are tree-shaped rock engravings (indeed, those on the rocks of Sassoledo inspired the logo for the Val Grande National Park), the rock paintings of Serranía de la Lindosa, in Colombia, depict plants and leaves.

⁶ C. Calame, *Avenir de la planète & urgence climatique. Au-delà de l'opposition nature/culture*, Lignes, Fécamp 2,015 p. 9

⁷ Pia Pera, Antonio Perazzi. *Against the garden. From the plants' side*. Ed. Ponte alle Grazie, 2,007

⁸ *Eco-teologia delle donne: un'introduzione*. Abstract – Lucia Vantini

⁹ Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, *Beyond the garden. The philosophy of landscape*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2,019

If someone plants a garden, as Hugo von Hofmannsthal writes, *he expresses an era as singular, mysterious, full of inner vibrations as there has ever been, an era infinitely rich in relationships, an era full of history and pulsating with the future*¹⁰. Art similarly fixes the ephemeral existence of the living beyond the passage of time, halting the brief existences of humans, animals and plants in the infinite temporality of nature and history.

Humanity has always handed down forms of natural materials (including human beings themselves), organic and therefore subject to deterioration and loss, through drawings and artistic representation. The mark holds the shape, leaves a trace, preserving its memory and recollection.

Thus, the works of **Lorenzo Gnata** and **Leila Mirzakhani** fix the shape of leaves and flowers, one with a simultaneously graphic and sculptural form, the other with colour imprints on fabric, in modern herbaria that once again have the privileged medium of touch.

Gnata's approach to plant forms is inspired by '*panismo*', i.e. a sentimental and immersive attitude to relationships with nature. A dialogue with the arboreal world that arises from an all-encompassing, biophilic experience that the artist internalizes and expresses with a simultaneously graphic and sculptural approach. The use of the 3D pen with PLA filament allows the artist to fix the shape and the elusive identity of the leaves, drawing their profiles, veins and details, as in the best tradition of botanical drawing. Nevertheless, Gnata's chosen tool allows him to make the graphic trace tangible, giving it sculptural depth. Touch therefore comes into play as an instrument of knowledge, of internalization of a form destined to disappear with the deterioration of the material.

Leila Mirzakhani's work also begins with matter: petals, stems, leaves, blades of grass. The natural elements are the mould and brush with which the artist fixes shapes and colours on the canvas. Compositions that are often evanescent, sometimes more marked, which echo and preserve the memory of the beauty and delicacy of flowers, plants, small stones. Here too, relationship and knowledge derive from direct contact between hands, natural elements, colour and support. Cotton and silk sheets harmonise with the walls of Villa Nigra, with the frescoes and the precious wallpaper, which also depicts a scene in nature, permeated by the same dreamy, ancient and vital atmosphere that Mirzakhani recreates in her works.

After all, creating a garden is a way of invoking nature – enunciating a sort of prayer that whispers the hope of not having lost it yet. For this reason, the design and the plants chosen don't matter, a garden will be able to prevail on us only when it quietly transmits the feeling that there is some vibrating invisible rope that reconnects to something spring-like and perhaps wild. Let's call it an ancient search for life among plants.¹¹

It is in the most impenetrable and mysterious, almost inaccessible, gardens that these invisible ropes vibrate the loudest. Abandoned, disused gardens, part of that "Third landscape" theorized by Gilles Clément, are among the places most teeming with life, fundamental for the conservation of biodiversity. Parks and nature reserves, the large uninhabited areas of the planet, but also smaller and more widespread, almost invisible, spaces: abandoned industrial areas where brambles and scrub grow; weeds in the middle of a traffic island: these spaces are different in terms of shape, size and statute, united only by the absence of human activity.

The secret and mysterious scenes that open out on the canvases of *La prima passeggiata* (The first walk), the polyptych by **Linda Carrara**, are an immersion in greenery so deep as to generate disorientation, to

¹⁰ H. von Hofmannsthal, «Giardini», in *L'ignoto che appare. Scritti 1891-1914*, by G. Bemporad, Adelphi, Milano 1,991 pp. 213-20, 214

¹¹ Pia Pera, Antonio Perazzi. *Against the garden. From the plants' side*. Ed. Ponte alle Grazie, 2,007

confuse micro and macroscopic vision. Each one a portal into a secret garden made of sedimentations, stratifications, mystery, darkness and light.

*Nature is full of gardens, but to see them we mortals need to practice building our own, imagining them.*¹² And for spontaneous gardens to survive (thus ensuring our own survival) we must learn to hold back at times, to not act, to not intervene, allowing that stratification of species and meanings which is the only guarantee of a garden, a physical or internal place capable of adapting to the challenges that current events offer us.

¹² *Ibidem*