

The Distracted Gardener & The Plumbing Subverter

Essay by:

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A maze of interconnected lobbies, patterned carpet, a buzzing silence. I still feel cocooned from the flight. Each set of lobbies I pass has a sunken garden. Fat broad-leaved plants, heavy with moisture, almost iridescent under the artificial lights. Looking back I can't remember whether these gardens were inside or out, perhaps that's important. I'd later see numerous urban towers punctuated by multi-story forested voids. Babylonian gardens set fifty floors above the world's 'fourth largest financial centre'. Arcadian visions towering over my taxi window though there's certainly no sense of the pastoral here. Urban imagination has for centuries imagined a blurring of inside and out. The irony however is that the very idea of an outside is a product of urbanisation. As I pass airport customs a smiling computer screen asks me how my experience was, I hesitantly answer positively.

The roads are deserted as we drive toward the city. Audrey tells me the arrow-straight tree-lined avenue we are on double as emergency runways in times of war. This brings the conversation to politics and I'm surprised to hear that the same political party have been in power since Singapore's foundation. We arrive at Audrey's apartment block in silence as she fumbles for the remote to open the metal gate to the underground parking.

At the gallery the next morning Khim's awaiting us, the space is a mess, construction still in progress. I'm surprised to enter the gallery, well more so the location: Gilman barracks, as the name suggest, is really an old army barracks. Now home to a series of galleries of course, but you still sense its past. I hadn't imagined it sprawling across such a large area. I think it's partly the colonial style architecture, but equally the grassy areas in-between, which speak of occupation. These are not grassy areas meant for relaxing. Lawns have a long military tradition. But they also have a long modernist tradition symbolising a space given over to the factory worker for collective recreation, gathering and exercise. Symbolic activities promised to the future industrial worker by the ideology of progress. I've a sneaking suspicion these two aims meet somewhere along the way in a deeply muddled union.

After a fish head curry at the Banana Leaf Apolo, Khim, Audrey, Brandon and I drive round the corner in search of hosepipes for my show. We park next to a shop selling rubber belts, only rubber belts. I have no doubt you could acquire a replacement belt here for any kind of machine you desire. The next shop specialises in fans, followed by one selling PVC air hose. A taxonomy of component parts; I'm certain now this was the right place to come. We press on. I've an image of what I'm looking for. We encounter hoses, but surprisingly there seems to have been only one hose supplier, and it's really not what I'm looking for. At this point it had been about a year, perhaps a little more, that I'd been looking for a way of working with hosepipes. It all started when I was in Geneva installing a show and visited the botanical gardens. The hosepipes there were most striking. Mimetic patterning. Tightly coiled in crafted steel reels. There was something so potent about these hoses that's been haunting me since.

We're running late, Audrey's on the phone to the shop owner asking if they can stay open a few more minutes as we're just round the corner. She's willing to stay open a few more minutes, good sign, I think to myself, but am quickly disappointed as I enter and see the walls of the tiny shop covered in pastel shades named after human emotions: Passionate, Tranquillity, Calm, Joyful. The desire to equate human emotion with a colour indeed parallels to one of the main focuses of my work: the imparting of emotion onto nature, the humanizing of land. I ask if they have a more extensive colour chart. I pick the most toxic yellow I can find, an unusual blue, an unstable green on the edge of being a minty colour. I guess I was looking for some quite aggressive colours, perhaps rebellion was taking hold of me.

I have about an hour at the botanical gardens before returning to the gallery. My attention is on the garden's infrastructure, I'm looking specifically for hoses, but they are hard to find. Any inference of a sprinkling system or similar elements sparks my enthusiasm. But they are elusive, the gardens are clearly designed to hide any evidence that they are maintained. I look for the greenhouses in the hope that the infrastructure would be more evident but no, they are perhaps even more extremely choreographed. What's surprising to me is that the green houses are cool houses, climate controlled environments to support high altitudes orchids. There's a grotto under an artificial waterfall where a young couple are having wedding photos composed. The photographer roots around in his trolley for the right props to complete the scene. Cartooned anthropomorphic bear head shaped balloons are deemed most appropriate. In a lucid daydream I imagine an animated Marie Antoinette and Rousseau strolling the short distance from the *Hameau de la Reine* to the *Grotto des Bains d'Apollon* but losing themselves in the neatly trimmed 'wilderness'. A heady mix of ambition, desire, responsibility and escapism.

At the anniversary of rooftop bar Fabrika, a Chinese themed party is underway. Donna discusses with the man employed to paint hand-held fans for the guests what my name would be in Chinese characters. Leaning against the balustrade I look over the illuminated container harbour; apparently one of the world's five busiest ports, but in the dead of night it looks surreally tranquil. We drive across a small bridge to Sentosa, Singapore's 'leisure' island. At a newly build marina, half empty themed restaurants serving food from around the world are lined up. Brussel Sprouts seemed our best bet. Still to this day I'm not quite sure what Sentosa is. Sure enough its an island, people live there, and I'm told there are various theme parks. Two of Audrey's friends join us as we're finishing dinner, they're over from Melbourne for the week and have booked a couple of nights in the newly built W Hotel in Sentosa Cove: 'Unleash your island fantasies'.

The workmen have left the gallery for the evening and I'm taping sheets of *mahjong* paper to the wall. With the wall covered I open the yellow paint and pour a good dollop into the tray. Clumsily I dismantle my paint roller to remove the patterned front element, leaving only the sponge second roller on the handle. It's the first time I'm using this roller and it takes some getting used to. There's a technique to it, you've got to be precise so that the lines become straight and the patterns meet. I tape more and more paper to the walls discarding the first painting tests I make in a crumpled patterned paper mountain in the centre of the space. As I get a feel for the amount of pressure and speed to apply I begin to experiment with curves and other eccentric shapes. It's the gesture of rolling I like. Physically yes, it's satisfying to be able to instantly cover a wall in pattern. But also symbolically. The idea of the artist

as 'painter & decorator' arriving at the install of an exhibition with paint bucket and roller in hand.

On the gallery floor I've arranged all the Marimekko fabrics I've collected. Two-dozen plant inspired patterns spanning fifty years of iconic Finnish designers. A modern day artist guild and mass-produced contemporary 'lifestyle' product all rolled into one. The show's already installed but we're restaging some preparation for a film crew. I roll the fabric diagonally into a string to try to avoid the non-patterned white excess of each piece coming out on top. It's difficult to concentrate with the cameras around. An audience drifts in from the park. Elegant couples, in mesmerizing colours, merge with the standing sculptures.