

## Holly Mitchell

'One is nearer God's heart in a garden / Than any where else on earth.' Dorothy Frances Gurney, 'God's Garden', 1913

Traditionally, across many cultures from Europe to Japan, gardens have been viewed as places of grace, for quiet or rapturous contemplation. In both art and literature, as the quotation above suggests, gardens have been represented as refuges from the social world; as retreats where rest and recuperation can be secured. Holly Mitchell's primary area of enquiry is in exploring our imaginative relationship to such spaces as gardens. Her works unravel both the intellectual structures and commercial arrangements that have allowed these constructed 'natural' environments to act as 'liminal' spaces for us.

Mitchell's installation 'Magic Garden' yokes two types of practice originally viewed as distinct or incompatible: site-specific installation, and online virtual environments. At an initial glance, we might be tempted, wrongly, to relate Mitchell's work to the British land-art tradition. Or we might observe that in her use of organic materials alongside those with an explicitly chemical tang such as neon, she also resembles Arte Povera artists such as Giovanni Anselmo or Mario Merz. (In 'Magic Garden', a neon sign with the text 'showingnow' hangs over hundreds of plants.) But rather than viewing natural objects as either repositories of cultural history or conduits of energy, like earlier generations of artists, Mitchell's project reveals the connections and networks which permit us to inhabit a particular point of view.

'Magic Garden' is best described as a modern day 'hortus conclusus' – a 'walled garden' which envelops a small number of spectators in seclusion and intimacy. Upon entering the installation, a profusion of plant-life surrounds us on five sides, creating an immediate sense of isolation and containment. If we are initially overwhelmed by the spectacle of 'nature', consideration reveals that Astroturf is underfoot rather than real grass – a blatantly, knowingly artificial material. After inhabiting the space for some time, and being immersed in greenery and scent, we notice that there are two monitors secreted amongst the organic life. Moving closer, we discover that upon the screens are virtual gardens to explore, on a live website 'showingnowshowingnow.com'. In this 'virtual' space a further delirious, intoxicating excess of flowers smothers every square inch of the screen with growth so that it is impossible to tell what is wholesome, what cloying and what alarming.

The garden, as a category distinct to the landscape, is normally figured as a space where man controls nature rather than being subject to it: but these virtual environments feel to be both over-orchestrated and out of control. Our first impression is that each webpage seems to be a montage of the most clichéd symbols of nature as a benign force including pastel-pink spring cherry blossom and golden autumnal foliage. However, in Mitchell's hands each motif becomes hallucinatory and overcrowded. In doing so, the artist establishes dual sets of connotations. On the one hand, the images are child-like in their cartoon simplicity, suggesting that our attitudes to the vegetal world are based upon little more than infantile desires for wish-fulfilment. On the other, it is as though 'nature' in its entirety had been genetically modified to become superabundant, or to be aestheticised for our ease of consumption. Throughout 'showingnowshowingnow' online, the on-screen images re-imagine 'nature's bounty' as having become excessive almost to the point of grotesque absurdity. Birds such as storks – traditional symbols of fecundity – are pictured out of scale so that they become threatening rather than charming. Indeed, every aspect of natural life is depicted as excessively, uncontrollably fertile. Such over-fecundity is close to comically lurid and viscerally repellent. Whilst Mitchell never mentions GM technology, she invites us to speculate upon exactly how wide the gap is between the metamorphoses she undertakes by those which agribusiness and science have performed.

Navigating through the online programme, visitors are invited to click upon blind links which reveal different websites whose connections to 'showingnowshowingnow' are unexpected or oblique. The spectator, may, for example, be taken to sites for industrial and commercial suppliers of landscaping materials. Or they may arrive at sites for businesses who use organic imagery to convince us that their products are part of the natural order: Mitchell reveals the power which signifiers of 'nature' carry. An image of storks brings up the homepage for the multinational corporation Storks Material Technology whose chemical laboratories test polymers, for example. In her choice of links, the artist renders opaque our conflicting desires both to mobilize every aspect of the environment towards production, through ever more sophisticated technologies, and to identify with it as though it were a single unified entity. Her deployment of nature as a crude set of symbols suggests that, our attachment is to images first and foremost, rather than to the more complex and unwieldy realities of natural life.

One image of a waterlily throws up the site for 'Waterlily Acres' in Australia, a retail site whose homepage features the text: "In your garden there should be a place where you can hide from a humdrum life / Your spirit quietens and senses recognise previously ignored subtle times of nature... We all need somewhere to be alone to

relax and regain the inner strength to face the realities of the world again." Rather than offering explicit commentary, Mitchell implicitly contrasts her imagery with Darwin's vision of the natural world as a struggle for survival between competing species and individuals. In conjoining an environment made from thoroughly tangible materials to a virtual fictional one, we might also be reminded of the networks of trade we depend upon to access even the most basic information and commodities. The fact that this 'magic garden' is linked to the world wide web and sites hosted across four continents – and therefore to millions of miles of cabling – is only revealed to the viewer at a late stage in their experience of the work. Critic Ziauddin Sardar has recently argued that the networks of the web replicate colonial trade routes created centuries earlier. Our enjoyment of the vegetal world is, it is implied, the result of centuries of building trade-routes spanning the globe.

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