

## Maria Ledinskaya

"We are in a garden walled around / Chosen and made peculiar ground; / A little spot enclosed by grace / Out of the world's wide wilderness."  
Isaac Watts, 'The Church the Garden of Christ', 1707

"Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less / Withdraws into its happiness. / Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade." Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', 1681

Maria Ledinskaya's installation 'Wonderworld 2' is an extraordinary and oversized 'magic garden' within which the artist combines both manufactured materials with organic elements. The pleasures that the artist offers, however, are intentionally double-edged, and offered to seduce us into a false sense of security. Our initial impression is likely to be that 'Wonderworld 2' contains sculptural equivalents of pictograms representing vegetal life. The intended impression is one of "a kind of 'dreamscape'" as she remarks – "a whimsical garden of fake reality and real fakeness". Three five-foot tall plaster toadstools, accompanied by a glistening pond, are adorned with vivid pillarbox-red caps atop brilliant white stems. Their scale is close to our own; we are invited to delight in their cartoon-like contours. Moreover, each of the fungi is convex as though ripe to the point of caricature. On the mushrooms' undersides, we encounter pastel-pink, perfectly folded fabric wrapped in tight formation; we also find translucent pink silicone snails and ruby red strawberries. The idealised and obvious signifiers of a benign 'nature' are matched by the child-like simplicity of the sculptures' forms. Such graphic representations might be thought of as the visual counterparts of nursery rhymes: simple imagery is transformed into iconic, even fetishistic form whilst carrying a darker and more double-edged undertow.

Each element of 'Wonderworld 2' is aimed at delivering visual gratification. Every object, for example, draws our attention towards its lustrous surface first and foremost. Each mushroom is not only painted in the most dynamic (primary) colours possible, but in brilliant gloss. Moreover, each is coated with a 'glaze' of honey which becomes a glistening and gloopy meniscus. Similarly, Ledinskaya's mirror-perspex pond features lilies whose heads are cast in melted sugar. Left over a period of weeks, rather than being sweet, the sugar develops a semi-saccharine, semi-acrid tang. The artist's method here, as throughout, is to create situations in which pleasurable sensations and cloying or nauseating ones uneasily coincide or overlap. Her gelatinous strawberries are similarly lambent, and intended to make us salivate; the comparison with nearby snails made of the same material elicits an equal revulsion. Every texture within the installation, it seems, is intended to dazzle and distract, and to allow our eye no place of rest. Each contributes towards a sensory overload; to an excess of visual (and indeed olfactory) gratification. As Ledinskaya argues, "the labour involved in the production of the work is invested entirely into the surface – and this fetishised 'blank' surface becomes a space of fantasy, desire and pleasure." Such clear archetypes, characterised by "blank surfaces" invite us to project our own associations on them.

As with several of the artists in 'Pleasure Gardens', Ledinskaya's work might best be read as an allegory about the possible functions that art can play after modernism. Or more accurately, it might be seen as a parable about "the possibility of art functioning as social critique or commentary". The artist has characterised her work, for example, as "intentionally ideologically vacant", accordingly offering seduction rather than social engagement, and hyperfamiliarity rather than formal novelty. In doing so, though, Ledinskaya reflects back the infantilising impulses of the 'culture industries'. The sentimentality 'Wonderworld' offers can only provide a misplaced nostalgia and a hollow escapism. The work is intended to generate what she describes as "a nostalgic impulse [where] selective memories from a real and an imagined past are revived to create a fantasy of the past, providing a temporary escape from the confusing present."

The artist's deployment of 'the garden' is instrumental in this. At one level, the role that gardens have traditionally been assigned matches that which Ledinskaya intends her work to play. Gardens are most obviously spaces for retreat and reflection, as the poems above suggest. But as the differing emphases between Watts's and Marvell's lines suggest, whether we regard fictional spaces as possessing a utopian 'grace' or perceive them as an alarming 'withdrawal' from the social world is up to us. The longevity of the metaphors attached to gardens has been recently illustrated by author Martin Amis, who has remarked that the artistic imagination is "the eternal garden: open to everyone, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year." Ledinskaya might be described as lending this metaphor visual form, and rendering it literal with glorious perversity.