Is this Not a Renaissance Garden?

Margaret Rodgers

Spacing out
Numéro 83, printemps 2008
URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9176ac

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In the village of Carrying Place, in Prince Edward County, sits Oeno Gallery, named for its location in Canada's fastest growing wine region. Rich in history, the site offers wide scope for the outdoor exhibition titled *This is Not a Renaissance Garden*. The title recalls the elaborate gardens built all across Europe by Renaissance princes, constructed as a three dimensional journey into their century's thinking, and a synthesis of their era's aspirations.

The Oeno installations take an oppositional stance to the formalities of Renaissance gardens, while adhering to their conceptual aspects. Contemporary art is nothing if not conceptually conceived and therefore a manifestation of current thought and aspiration. As guest curator, participating artist, and professional gardener, Anne O'Callaghan brings significant experience to the project.

Originally consisting of seven outdoor works, the exhibition now has four remaining pieces, ones that can withstand the rigours of Prince Edward County winter. They include: *The architecture of trees 2007* by Orest Tataryn, *The Transported Forest* by Robert Wiens, *Red Nova* by Shayne Dark and *Urn* by O'Callaghan. Site-specific, they make rich connection to their location, drawing on local histories and timeless illusion. O'Callaghan's *Urn* makes poetic associations between the history and geography of Prince Edward County and the enduring beauty inherent in the form of this vessel.

Closest to the shoreline, *Urn* is a stainless steel and tempered glass structure that stands over five feet tall, its individual plates reflecting both the changing light of day and the bay over which it presides. It is a visual book of hours, marking the sun's passage through the sky. By evening the reflective nature of the amphora-shaped construction creates an illusion that it is filling up and then slowly emptying of liquid. The piece collects and disperses light, its shape recalling that most ancient method for storing and transporting wine, as described below:

By the first century BC, the Romans were distributing wine throughout the Mediterranean in amphora. They continued in use until the end of the first century AD, when there was a precipitous drop in wine exports. The replacement of amphorae, which were airtight, by wooden barrels in the second century AD meant that vintage wines would not reappear until the seventeenth century, with the development of the glass bottle and cork. While Quinte waters cannot lay claim to Roman wine distribution or Renaissance princes, the waterway has a lively history as the main method of transport for barley and hops. From eighteenth-century Loyalist settlement, shipping and travel was by water in vessels with romantic-sounding names: Kathryn of Hamilton, Nellie Hunter, Fabiola, Annie Minnies, Acacia, Katie's Eccles, Wm. Jamieson, Bertie Larkin, Oliver Mowat, Perlia, Olivia, Lyman M. Davis, Maggie L. The last named was a survival of the barley days... and later was used in the coal trade.

The suggestion of past glory, sailing ports and steamers, the assertion that "when Toronto was barely a village, Carrying Place was in the running to be the capital of Ontario" advance metaphorical possibilities for this urn: the idea, its shape, its filling and emptying process, and even the punning thyme that O'Callaghan has planted at its base.

Within the sightline of *Urn* resides Dark's Red Nova, a seemingly storm-tossed and chaotic deposit halfway up the meadow between the water and the gallery building. Like pickup sticks for amazons, it is an assemblage of ten-foot ironwood poles, painted a vibrant red and apparently scrambled together with an electrical conduit. This ostensible disarray belies the meticulous planning and arranging required to affect an artlessness in the piece, the choice of material making it almost indestructible.

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Indoors, a miniature version by Dark extrudes from the wall in magical defiance of gravity. Like Urn, this piece transforms visually as night falls, when its shadows and their wooden source become indistinguishable. Dark’s works rely on the delicate interplay of weight and tension, their physical properties carefully developed in advance of the installation. One is red, one blue, primary colours that make up the symbolisms of Canadian history. The deceptively random arrangements are suggestive of detritus washed ashore, perhaps from the Nellie Hunter, the Fabiola, or one of the other ghost vessels with fanciful names and hardscrabble histories.

In his the architecture of trees 2007, light sculptor Tataryn creates two five-foot towers near the front entrance of the gallery building. Existing somewhere between test tube, birdhouse and architectural whimsy, the piece consists of neon tubing installed within industrial off-cuts and surrounded by glass rods. Popsicle colours emanate from within aluminum housing bearing some resemblance to an urban high rise. The slotted windows stamped out in machine shop conformity. At ground level, the metal is designed with pointed arches that call up some of those euphemistically-named apartment towers such as "Riviera" or "El Mirador.** Whether reminiscent of Moorish temple or missile launching system, high-rise or playful toy, the piece proffers another luminous dimension to the idea of a (not) Renaissance garden.

Wiens' The Transported Forest consists of two hundred tiny Black maple saplings, a starter forest planted within the remains of an old orchard. The piece could be considered an extension of Joseph Beuys 2000 Oaks project, begun in 1982 and intended as a beginning for a worldwide tree planting endeavour to induce environmental and social change. Should this indelible wood prevail, it could one day provide maple syrup for the county, since Black maple tree sap is similar to that of the Sugar maple. But initially these tiny trees have a tentative hold on the earth. Indoors, a graphite drawing zooms to a micro-view of the mother tree, exposing the minuteae visible from close observation, and recalling a Renaissance preoccupation with botanical studies.

Earlier works in the exhibition included J. Lynn Campbell’s Silbénis, a black granite slab incised with its titled word, and a circular, bevelled mirror by E.J. Lightman, a window to the sky from its position on the woodland floor. Bay Clow was a summer showstopper that drew the attention of boaters throughout the season. Tataryn and Lois Andison installed fluorescent panels on the stair risers of the boat launch. Illuminated with black light, they were transformed by nightfall into a brilliant super-graphic, its horizontal bands of colour visible for miles.

Each piece, past and current, finds a way to play with light and memory in a multitude of ways. Art-historical echoes of medieval and Renaissance allusions intermingle with local history, with the bay itself, its surrounding orchards and vineyards, and the magical light of Prince Edward County.

Margaret RODGERS is an Oshawa-based author, curator, educator and artist.
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** Note: The original text contains a typographical error in "El Mirador," which is corrected to "El Mirador."