

CURATORIAL INTRODUCTION

BY
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Art is not merely an imitation of the reality of nature, but in truth a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed alongside thereof for its conquest.

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

The many great gardens of the world, of literature and poetry, of painting and music, of religion and architecture, all make the point as clear as possible: The soul cannot thrive in the absence of a garden. If you don't want paradise, you are not human; and if you are not human, you don't have a soul.

- Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516)

Nature and culture are often regarded as dichotomous, a divide in Western culture that has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy, where the Sophists of the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE cast *physis* ("nature") or *phuein* ("to grow") contra the concept of *nomos* (which correlates to "social convention" or "culture"). Over time, a strand of this debate has morphed into the ongoing "nature versus nurture" argument in the field of psychology – a question that dives into the conundrum of 'human nature', probing the degree to which human behaviour is a predisposition determined by innate qualities and genetic make-up, as opposed to life experiences and the environment.

Central to these discussions is the question of what might, in the first place, constitute 'nature'. A survey of the discourses on nature in disciplines such as philosophy, social and natural sciences, environmental studies, religious and spiritual texts, anthropology, cultural studies, art and literature reveal there are varied and contesting conceptions of nature in Western and Eastern thought. Nature has been conceived as a passive but bountiful resource to be harnessed, a muse for artistic creation, a land to be tilled, an environment to be safeguarded, a host of primal, animist spirits to be appeased or accommodated, and a mystical life-force that encompasses all living organisms. Significantly, these divergent views pivot on humankind's relationship vis-à-vis nature and the natural world, be it man being regarded as an external agent who adopts a position of domination, or an entity who co-exists as part of, and one *with*, nature. It is a dynamic that has been forged by notions of power and control, especially during a time when – prior to the surety offered by modern amenities – individuals had to confront the vagaries of nature and weather directly, and such an oppositional approach has arguably privileged an

instrumental value of nature that holds sway today. Yet the dire effects of environmental and climate change in recent decades underscore the urgent need to redress stubborn and flawed assumptions that the natural environment is an infinitely exploitable resource, in favour of a more holistic and sustainable relationship for the Earth and its inhabitants.

Rather than regard Culture and Nature as diametrically opposed or hierarchically ordered, the curatorial introduction to the zone 'A Culture of Nature' adopts a more dialogic perspective on the connection between these two expansive fields of inquiry. While nature and the natural world have been fecund subject matter in art and throughout much of art history, nature itself and the environment have been relatively minor considerations in aesthetic theory. By focusing on specific works in the Singapore Biennale 2016, this text places special attention on the 'aestheticisation of nature', that is, human intervention into nature for the purposes of aesthetic and artistic reasons – a 'culturing of nature' as it were. Moreover, while human mediation or interference into nature may be driven by anthropocentric hubris or, conversely, by benign motivations, the aesthetic dimension has persistently played a decisive role in determining our approach towards – and by extension, treatment of – the natural world. In critiquing the divergent attitudes we hold towards mountains over marshes, fields over fens, the academic and conservationist Rod Giblett observes that beautiful and picturesque landscapes have been unfailingly valorised over other terrestrial features such as swamps and sloughs, even though the latter are equally in need of urgent environmental conservation. He writes, "What constitutes nature and how our relationship to it is worked out is invariably couched in aesthetic terms. In any discussion of nature, aesthetics usually raises its

ugly head! What is valued in nature is usually what pleases aesthetically. Conversely, what displeases aesthetically is not usually valued culturally."¹

While mountains and jungles as emblematic of wilderness untamed – nature as ‘natural’ – have been sources of fascination and admiration from afar, it is the more genteel and ‘civilised’ expressions of nature that afford greater and more regular human contact and interaction, and equally, fodder for the imagination and creativity, than their unfettered brethren. In this regard, it may be said that the idea of the garden best epitomises the notion of a ‘cultured nature’ and ‘nature cultured’ – or going so far as what one book about gardening declared in the subtitle: “nature perfected”. Since ancient times and in myriad world cultures, the garden has been an enduring and enthralling concept, for beyond providing sylvan sanctuary, it has been inextricably entwined to the idea of paradise and utopia. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is most indelibly imaged as Eden, the biblical Garden of Paradise – at once a space of heavenly creation, human downfall and redemption, and ultimately, a locus of perpetual longing. An ideal and an idealised nature, the garden has been described as humanity’s attempt to fashion a “perfect earth”.²

Critically, the conception of the garden as a verdant utopia is far from the sole province of the West, for the word ‘paradise’ is derived from the Old Persian term ‘pairideza’, which refers to a walled garden.³ Records point to gardens

in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were renowned as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Indeed, more than a mere pleasure garden, some historians have speculated that the actual Gardens of Babylon can be mapped onto the capital at Nineveh in 700 BCE – a massive ‘city garden’ construction by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, in which the urban design of the city and its garden went hand-in-hand.⁴ Singapore’s much-heralded ‘garden city’ status thus finds echoes in the Near East well over 2,000 years ago.

From gardens revered as sacred spaces, to palatial gardens that proclaim power and ambition, to allotment gardens as shared spaces of communal bonding, and botanical gardens that are repositories of plant specimens, the garden has been a space of the human imagination, ritual and agency. And while the garden evokes a mythic, timeless haven and the eternal yearning to return to paradise, it is simultaneously manifested in our daily – even prosaic – reality; it is a tangible utopia that responds to the real-life conditions of weather and surroundings, and finds expression in infinite iterations and variations. Regardless of their intended function, scale or floral contents (or purely rocks, in the Zen garden), gardens all share one trait: ‘four walls’ and boundaries. By dint of human intervention, it is nature defined and confined, ordered and organised, shaped and made. As aesthetic expressions that conjoin art and the natural world, gardens are displays of taste and cultural ethos, so much so that the typology of gardening styles and designs

1. Rob Gillett, *People and Places of Nature and Culture* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011), p. 59.

2. Annette Gresecke and Rabele Jacobs, “Nature, Utopia and the Garden,” in *Earth Perfect? Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, ed. Annette Gresecke and Rabele Jacobs (London, UK: Glass Dog Publishing, 2011), p. 9.

3. Elizabeth S. Boylston, *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Beyond* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1979), p. 1.

4. Stephanie Balley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

often take their names from cultural or even national referents: French, Dutch, English, Japanese, Chinese gardens, and others.

Yet beyond performing as paradigms of a singular culture, the garden has also been theorised and regarded as an entire world unto itself, what post-structuralist Michel Foucault referred to as a heterotopia: a space of other spaces. Outlining various principles for a heterotopic space, Foucault writes in the “third principle”:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. [...] Perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its centre (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. [...] The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.⁵

If the garden is a micro-reflection of the “totality of the world”, then in the immersive installation of Chinese artist Deng Guoyuan, one encounters a world that is a reality rendered radically unfamiliar. An installation of two octagonal glasshouses made up of mirrors, and sited within the Chapel of the Singapore Art Museum, *Noah's*

Garden II (2016) locates the viewer in a kaleidoscopic environment, surrounded by live and artificial plants and ornamental stones. Known in Chinese tradition as “scholars’ rocks”, these naturally ornate stones have long been admired for their aesthetic and formal qualities, and are highly sought after by connoisseurs. But here, painted in bright, vivid colours, these scholars’ rocks – in tandem with the naturalistic-looking artificial plants – conjure up a bewildering utopia that commingles the real, the sum and the unreal.

Nature is evoked once more in a mirrored reality in the outdoor installation at the Asian Civilisations Museum by Jiao Xingtao. *The Unity of N Monuments* (2016) comprises what the artist calls “authentic fakes” – the humble, quotidian stool is usually mass-produced and made of plastic, but in this case, the 100 stools are cast in solid copper or carved wholly from cypress wood. While the interactive, public sculptures by the artist are simulacra of their factory counterparts, as hand-crafted versions from naturally occurring materials (wood and metal), they touch on issues of human labour and the resources that are drawn from the earth to produce the conveniences and objects of modern life.

Another work that calls upon a resource that is truly extracted from the earth is *Good Boy, Bad Boy* (2016) by Chou Shih Hsiung. The two ‘paintings’ bring the idea of painting to its most literal, and elegiac, levels: comprised of petroleum sealed between two layers of Perspex, the work utilises a material millions of years in the making. Formed from dead organisms that lived in primordial swamps and oceans, petroleum is the foundation for today’s multi-billion global economy that runs on oil. However, the extraction, refining and combustion of oil are detrimental to the environment, and like all natural resources, this

'black gold' is finite and ever-diminishing in supply. Humankind's callous treatment of the environment and its consequences for the present – the future are also the central concerns of Singapore sculptor's Han Sai Por's foreboding installation. *Black Forest 2016* is a grim reminder that the effects of deforestation in other locales can be felt in Singapore's immediate environs, where the slash-and-burn tactics to clear forests in Indonesia result in the noxious haze that has become an annual, dreaded affair.

In a world that we have made precarious by our exploitation of natural resources, what protection might we have or need to face an uncertain future? Performance artist Chia Chuyia returns to her cultural roots for a metaphorical answer. *Knitting the Future* (2015, 2016) is a dramatic, elongated dress knitted from leeks, and references the modest vegetable's significance in Teochew culture as a fixture during the Chinese New Year reunion dinner because it is believed to bring wealth. An agricultural crop cultivated in many places around the world, the leek becomes both the means and material that connect the artist back to the land, as her performing body and the earth are metaphorically conjoined as terrestrial sites that need to be protected.

Cultivation and the cultivated also emerge as themes in Patricia Perez Eustaquio's *The Hunters Enter the Woods* (2016). Centring on the motif of the orchid flower, the diptych explores the paradoxical connotations of a flower that is both an elusive prize when discovered in the wild, and a common public attraction in botanical and ornamental gardens. Extensively nurtured, tens of

thousands of orchid hybrids exist today, even as the original, 'authentic' wild species are endangered in nature – a rarity that has fuelled the obsession of flower hunters.

Ryan Villamael's delicate map-paper sculptures return the viewer to the locus of the garden. This time, the walls are made of glass: sited in the museum's second-level Glass Porch, the installation evokes the greenhouse as a repository for flora that have been dislocated from native soil, while the 'plants' housed here are incisions from Philippine maps from different historical periods and the present day that reflect the varying geographical realities rendered by cartographers. Borrowing its name from a Latin term, *Locus Amoenus* (2016) is a pleasant and idealised 'green' space of safety and comfort, a cultured paradise that is now positioned within a museum of contemporary art.

Ultimately, this most 'pleasant place' is a space of conceptual resonances, for Villamael's greenhouse finds an echo by way of another glass counterpart: the prismatic, mirrored *Noah's Garden II* by Deng Guoyuan. It is curiously befitting and apt that the loci of the Biennale's two 'glass houses' can be mapped onto the very heart of SAM; they both lie on the central axis – the line of symmetry – of the Singapore Art Museum's main building.

1. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Heterotopias' ('Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies'), manuscript of a lecture presented on 28 March 1987, trans. Jay Richardson, accessed 12 September 2020, <http://www.michel Foucault.com/other/foucault13.pdf>, p. 8.



PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO

The Hunters Enter the Woods, 2016

Oil on aluminium
800 x 140 cm (installed width of diptych)
Collection of the Artist
Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

Natural but manmade, erotic though elegant, endangered yet ubiquitous – the *Orchidaceae* is a curious creature. Patricia Perez Eustaquio's diptych seizes upon the ambiguity and contradictions that characterise our attitude towards the world – both the manmade and natural – through the metaphor of the orchid, and asks what truly lies beneath our quest for the unique and the authentic, even as we seek to manipulate and replicate the coveted 'natural' form.

With over 25,000 species, orchids are one of the two largest families of blooming flowers, and can be found in almost every continent around the world. Despite its seeming prevalence, many species of orchids are notoriously difficult to find in the wild – an elusiveness that has spurred the obsession of orchid hunters, who braved mosquito-infested jungles, perilous cliffs and raging rivers in pursuit of prized 'prey', often only to meet with gruesome ends. If such notions of the chase carry suggestions of sexual conquest, could partly account for why, in Freudian theory, flowers are regarded as representative female genitalia and, in particular, virginity. With their fleshy petals, voluptuous forms and vivid colours, orchids are undeniably sensual forms, but there is a counterintuitive gender twist in the name of the flower: it is derived from the Greek word *orchis*, meaning testicle.

Once treasured as rare botanical specimens, orchids are now big business in the global horticulture industry, and popular attractions at botanical gardens and flower shows. Going beyond 'nurturing nature', botanists and horticulturists have extensively cultivated and crossbred the flower to produce more than 3,000 hybrids to date – 'nature cultured' if you will. In Singapore, the hybrid *Vanda*

Miss Joaquim orchid possesses a special significance as the country's national flower, and orchids play a role in cultural diplomacy and popular culture, as new hybrids are named after visiting heads of states, VIPs and celebrities.

Echoing the zygomorphic form of the orchid, Eustaquio's pair of odd-shaped canvases reflect each other on the bilateral plane. The shapes are abstracted from orchid bouquets, but the biomorphic forms also evoke Rorschach inkblots and island formations. Rendered with hyper-realist precision, each painting holds a close-up, enlarged image of a particular orchid bloom, and although the panels mirror each other in shape, they turn upon the not-always symmetrical relationship between nature and culture.

The left side is based on the *Paphiopedilum fowlieri*, an endangered wild orchid that grows within easy view in the Singapore Botanic Gardens' Orchid Garden, where the artist located the species. The adjoining panel depicts an orchid hybrid that, only very recently, was bestowed with its official name. As part of the artwork commissioning process, Eustaquio paid for and acquired the rights to name this hybrid, which she called "Winter Wedderburn". (The alternative name was "SB2016".) The "Winter Wedderburn" references a H.G. Wells story, in which an orchid collector is killed by his deadly, bloodsucking floral possession. In Eustaquio's words, "The story of the orchid is an interesting metaphor for the thrills and dangers of discovery, of navigating through the jungle of things, whether living or non-living, to hang and collect that which is strange or unique." JTH



PHILIPPINES

Patricia Perez Eustaquio (b. 1977, Cebu, the Philippines) is known for her works that span different media and disciplines, from paintings, drawings and sculptures, to fashion, décor and craft. She reconciles these intermediary forms through her exploration of notions that surround the integrity of appearances and the vanity of objects, images of detritus, carcasses and decay are embedded into the handwork of design, craft and fashion, thus merging the disparate qualities of the maligned and marginalised with the celebrated and desired. Her works underline their aspirations and vanity, their 'desire to be desired', and provide commentary on the constructs of 'desirability' and how it influences life and culture in general. In 2009, Eustaquio received the Thirteen Artists Awards from the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and in 2016, she had a site-specific commission at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. She is based in Manila.

