a Garden for Contemplation

susan Barton Tait

gallery 111

university of manitoba

school of art
a Garden for Contemplation

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SUSAN BARTON TAIT has created “a meditational space, incorporating energy transformation over time,” in the form of a garden to be installed in Gallery I.I.1. from September 26 to October 22, 1986. The components that usually make up a "garden": a gate, a circular path, a central pond or a fountain, and plants, are all here and are arranged geometrically to conform with the style of a traditional formal garden. Beyond that, this garden has none of the other attributes one would normally expect to find in a "garden". It is not beautiful. It is not a blissful nor an abundant paradise we imagine the original garden before the Fall to have been. It is not the garden of carnal delights of Bosch, peopled by romping nudes and stranger creatures. Susan Barton Tait's garden consists of wildly growing grass and plants which vie for position with the aggressively multiplying fungi, while rust from metal found objects and pigments from other societal wastes stain and bleed on the surface of the sawdust base from which the garden grows. Here and there are murky pools of solidified resin. Even the fountain in the middle tries its best to affect the "ungardeness" of the garden. The traditionally requisite phallic form that proudly emits jets of life-giving water is here replaced by an unthreateningly horizontal and colorless centerpiece, which blows up dust, feebly, at labourious intervals. It is a metaphor for the pollution-ridden breath of life.

Susan Barton Tait's garden is for contemplation, and, perhaps, in this respect, it can best be compared, improbable as the suggestion may sound, with a Japanese tea garden. The Japanese garden is an environment which is carefully cultivated and furnished to create for the participant an atmosphere of harmony and tranquility for meditation towards spiritual renewal. Tait's garden functions in quite the opposite manner. It is cultivated to create an atmosphere leading the participant to active contemplation of the physical universe. However, it is the conscious experience of the artificially produced environment in both the Japanese tea garden and of Susan Barton Tait's garden which induces in the participant a state of meditation. Both gardens close the gap between art and life.

SAWDUST, which could variously be defined as industrial waste, as insulation material, and as energy producing fuel, has been of considerable interest to Susan Barton Tait. the accumulation of which, on her studio floor, she had watched for some time, observing the color, smell, texture and sizes of the particles. She was particularly interested in its seemingly neutral characteristics—its appearance of sterility and its formlessness. She wondered what she might do with it and began to store it in small clear plastic bags that she found discarded among a video shop garbage. She filled each one and heat-sealed it. She says the repetitive action of filling and sealing became obsessive and when she ran out of the found bags, she made more and continued to stock pile these bags of sawdust in her studio space. Hundreds of these became building blocks for the four pillars which marked the architectural boundaries of a central sawdust-filled sarcophagus structure made of felt bricks. This is the dadæsque meditational installation piece which was shown in a gallery, Ace Art Inc., in Winnipeg, in January of this year.

During the period of this exhibition at Ace Art Inc., Tait noticed that moulds were beginning to form on the heretofore thought to be "sterile" sawdust within the plastic bags. The moulds were of beautiful hues of yellows and reds. The discovery of these mould forms gave rise in Tait to thoughts about the cycle of life, death and regeneration. We live in a society that consciously removes all reminders of death, and aging is regarded negatively. Here, the artist saw decay as beautiful transformations visibly occurring both in color and in pattern and the idea of cultivating mould in a garden came to her almost immediately.

It is, however, one thing to conceptualize and quite another to actualize, or to document, formally a phenomenon. The difficulties inherent in cultivating and controlling a "mould garden" in a studio environment, not to mention its eventual transportation to a gallery space for exhibition scheduled in a specific time frame were enough initially to discourage Tait from attempting a "real" garden and so she decided to experiment at simulating one. Sawdust, Roplex, selected found objects (to be seen as societal waste), and sprinkled dye (simulating mould colors) were cast in resin in 11" x 8" x 1" forms. These, Tait refers to as "mould tiles." They were, however, less than satisfying for her purposes. Objects cast in resin tend to take on the characteristics of resin. They become encapsulated.

Art and meditation compensate, penetrate and create each other.¹

LAMA ANAGARIKA GOVINDA

The man with the magnifying glass takes the world as though it were new to him. If he were to tell us of the discoveries he has made, he would furnish us with documents of pure phenomenology.²

GASTON BACHELARD
into uniformly shiny, molasses-like color and texture, losing individual identities. The mould tiles are of curious interest in their own right since objects are seen as frozen in time, but Tait wanted her sculpture to point out the processes of change which occur in minute systems of living organisms in real time. Only a controlled environment of a properly cultivated garden can reproduce these phenomena and effect the kind of contemplation she required in the participant.

Early in the spring, Susan boldly converted her studio space into what came to look like a botanist’s laboratory. At the beginning, five 4’ x 8’ plywood boards were placed on the floor and on tables to become the first garden “plots.” Each board was layered with moistened sawdust and then covered with plastic sheets to encourage moulding. As the moulds began to form, seeds of grass and plants were thrown into the sawdust and were allowed to germinate and to sprout. Within a matter of weeks green grass and other vegetations were living in predatory relationship with the furry moulds. Further plots of garden are to be planted at different intervals so that the complete garden, on the date of the exhibition, will reveal stages of development of growth and decay. The phenomena of life, death and regeneration occur together in this garden and we are reminded of the concept of cyclical time which is lost in the mechanized technological world of linear time.

Susan Barton Tait’s work, above all, alludes to the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. In walking through the garden, we focus down upon and become conscious of the minute transformations taking place before our eyes. We are made aware of the beauty inherent in this process of change. The artist, by the vehicle of this composition which juxtapositions natural elements and societal waste products, also points out to us the delicate balance which must be maintained if we are to look forward to regeneration necessary to continue the life cycle. Each phenomenon of change we observe is a system in itself, each dependent upon the other. Nothing happens in isolation, and we are forced to draw an analogy between ourselves and the larger ecological system in which we live and to question our own view of nature. It is a garden for contemplation.

Grace Thomson
DETAILS FROM GARDEN FOR CONTEMPLATION
WORKS IN EXHIBITION

1. Mould tiles.
mixed media. app. 8" x 11"

mixed media. 24' x 30'

Untitled installation at Ace Art Inc.
Biography

BORN
January 8, 1948

CITIZENSHIP
Canadian

EDUCATION
1970 BA(HON), Psychology, Mathematics: Queen's University, Kingston, Ont.
1971-72 Graduate courses, School Psychology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.
1972-present Independent Study
1977-78 Felting apprenticeship with Aganetha Dyck, Winnipeg, Man.
1984 The Banff Center, Banff, Alta.
1984-85 Art History and studio. University of Manitoba.

AFFILIATIONS
Canadian Artists Representation
Visual Arts Manitoba
Manitoba Artists for Women's Art
Plug-In/Inc.

RELATED WORK
1985-present. Participant in the Artist in the Schools program run by the Manitoba Arts Council for Manitoba schools.

ONE PERSON EXHIBITION

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1977 Contemporary Winnipeg Crafts, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1977 Decorative Arts, Oseredok Exhibition, Winnipeg
1978 "Fibres", Fibre Art Associates juried show, Fleet Galleries, Winnipeg
1978-82 Art Rental and Sales Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1978 Weavers Studio Fibre Show, Winnipeg
1978 Allied Arts Centre, Brandon, Man., a juried exhibition
1979 Genesis Gallery, Winnipeg
1980 Art and Artisan. Eaton Place, Winnipeg
1981-82 Eaton's Gallery of Fine Arts, Winnipeg, a juried exhibition
1982-84 The Inside Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery, juried
1984 "1984", A Juried Exhibition, Janet Ian

Cameron Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg
1984 Reflections on Three Plains: Contemporary Crafts, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1984 La Diva Gallery, Banff Centre. Banff, Alta.

AWARDS
1984 Manitoba Arts Council Project Grant (short term)
1984 Tuition Scholarship, Banff Centre
1984 Crafts Guild of Manitoba Bursary
1984 Manitoba Arts Council, Visual Arts Project Grant
1985 Manitoba Arts Council, Visual Arts Project Grant (short term)

COLLECTIONS
Parks Canada, North Battleford, Sask., and Dawson City, Yukon
St. John's College, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg
The Massey Foundation, Ottawa, Ontario
Manufacturers Life Assurance, Manulife House, Winnipeg
Private collections in Canada and United States.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
1977 CBC radio review by Leonard Marcoe on Information Radio, "Contemporary Winnipeg Crafts"
1977 CBC Radio review by Leonard Marcoe on Information Radio, "Oseredok Exhibition"
1977 Brochure for "Contemporary Winnipeg Crafts", by the Winnipeg Art Gallery
1978 CBC radio review by Leonard Marcoe on Information Radio, "Fibres", Fleet Gallery
1978 Winnipeg Tribune, review by Dot From, "Fibres"
1979 Winnipeg Free Press, review by Leonard Marcoe, "Fibres"
1979 Winnipeg Tribune, Massey Foundation announcement by Dot From
1984 Catalogue, "Reflections on Three Plains: Contemporary Crafts. The Winnipeg Art Gallery"
1984 Brochure for "1984", A Juried Exhibition, Janet Ian Cameron Gallery

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Susan Barton Tait
CREDITS

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Gallery 1.1.1.
School of Art
University of Manitoba

September 28 - October 22, 1986

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