

Mantras for Plants: Carson Fisk-Vittori's Casual Object Gardens
By Claudine Ise
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Carson Fisk-Vittori. *Movies*, 2011. Archival Inkjet Print.

I've always been fascinated by accidental gardens. Some of the most beautiful gardens in Chicago can be found in the abandoned lots in-between buildings, or in the alleys behind people's homes and apartments next to the cars and trashcans. In Oak Park, where I live, you can find all sorts of lovely micro-gardens in the strips of dirt between property lines. Sometimes it seems like the best gardens arise in the spaces that people pay the least attention to. Carson Fisk-Vittori's use of plants, and particularly her manner of arranging plants and other objects in two and three-dimensional space brings these types of gardens to mind, although nothing about Fisk-Vittori's approach is accidental. I first encountered Carson's work at Chicago's MDW Fair a few months ago –

her vacuum-packed plant sculpture was set against a wall with a purple, stipple-paint background at Roots & Culture's booth. I've been curious to learn more about it ever since, and am very grateful to her for taking the time to answer my questions.

Claudine Ise: There seems to be a connection between plant life and movie making in your work. The photograph titled "Movies," for example, shows a bunch of dandelions wrapped up in newspaper printed with movie ads, including one for *The Prince of Persia*; the photograph titled *Deleted Scenes* shows a casual arrangement of rocks (some sort of rock garden?) placed on a white sheet. And in *Sunset, 2008*, a photographic print of a sunset is sort of stuck casually behind a cactus, like a painted backdrop in a movie, but it's obviously not an illusion that's comprehensive enough for anyone to believe. Looking at all of your other images it seems to me like plants function like actors playing roles in a scene. (As in the "advertisements" in your earlier bodies of work). Which is a pretty funny idea, in that in humans, being compared to a plant/vegetable is a way of saying someone is brain dead. Can you talk about the works I mention above a bit – what's behind your references to filmmaking or advertising production?

Carson Fisk-Vittori: My photographs are more connected to advertising and mass media than movies specifically. Though I guess movies are often times elaborate commercials anyway. Advertising companies are experts at feeding images and messages straight into our brains. So using that format in my work allows me to incorporate the techniques that may have taken them years to develop to act against or in opposition to our consumer-based economy through the celebration of the everyday. Some of my work directly references advertising by title: *Toothpaste Ad*, *Venus Ad*, and *Perfume Ad*, all from 2009, and many of the other photographs use techniques such as gradient backdrops, color, and arrangement to reference advertising culture. One of my intentions is for viewers to realize that you can make everything around you look intriguing with the right lighting and composition, and hopefully realizing that you already have everything you need.

An earlier work, *Sunset, 2008*, evolved from an experiment involving the use of gradient back-drops added to different domestic or ordinary scenes to examine if the technique would make an image more interesting to the eye. By revealing some of the "tricks" that are used in advertising, viewers will begin to question how images are manipulative.

Deleted Scenes 2010 is an image of a found arrangement of rocks by a creek bed that were re-placed onto a paper backdrop in the same found arrangement. The act of removing them from their natural context allows the viewer to examine the natural arrangement more closely. The graphic element of the backdrop removes the natural background element, making the image similar to a diagram, which is easier for us to understand.

CI: Tell me about the shrink-wrapping of plants in some of your recent sculptures and photographs (like the photos I saw at Roots & Culture's booth at Midway Fair). Shrink-wrapping is a preservative technique, but of course plants need air, sunlight and water to survive, like we do. Do you unwrap the plants after you've photographed them? *Lamp Design #2* is 3-D sculptural object, correct? It looks like you've inserted plastic balls within the fronds of two fern plants, and shrink-wrapped them to create and freeze their forms. How quickly do the plants decay once shrink-wrapped? Is decay part of the piece? (I've never seen one of the 3-d pieces in an exhibition, so I don't know if we are

meant to observe the object over a period of time). Tell me how the lamp design part fits in.

CFV: *Lamp Design #2* is a vacuum packed floral arrangement (as opposed to shrink-wrapped). It was part of the installation at Roots & Culture's booth at MDW, as well as New Capital's exhibition "Life Style Appropriate." It is three-dimensional in nature, but exists in the photographic form as well. This piece recalls the floral arrangements I have previously shown which are ephemeral in nature but exist as photographs for the purposes of documentation. My first iteration of a "lamp design", *Lamp Design*, 2010 was part of "Casual Object Garden and Other Material Matters," a collaborative exhibition with Michael Hunter at Roots and Culture in 2010. It consisted of a large light box with a plant resting on top of it. *Lamp Design #2*, 2011, which you described as two fern plants with plastic balls, also has a light component: the marbleized ball lights up with led lights. Titriling them "lamp design" is in one way blurring the boundaries between art and design, and also playing with the idea of producing absurd furniture designs.

My first experimental floral arrangements appeared in the Real Normal Spring Collection (2009), at the now-defunct Scott Projects in Chicago, IL. I installed floral arrangements that were scattered around the space, some of which were very minimal, with crude or simple constructions using basic household supplies and containers in the arrangement. At the time I was becoming interested in Ikebana, the art of Japanese floral arrangement, and wabi-sabi, a Japanese philosophy on the beauty of all things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. The floral arrangements I create have a life span ranging from days to weeks, and often times change multiple times during an exhibition. I am interested in the gesture that impermanence implies. In the art world objects are generally made to be archival and last forever, however this is a false permanence since everything is evolving from and going towards nothingness. The floral arrangements are a moment in time and an appreciation for the ephemeral and un-monumental.

CI: Works like your installation *Casual Object Garden*, 2010, and photographic images like *And Also More*, *Weekend Shapes* and *New Forest Table* from 2010 lead me to ask if you see a relationship between the making of a pictorial composition and the act of gardening? Both in terms of artistic intent and the impact of chance occurrences on the results?

CFV: I'm interested in playing with casual placement and intended placement. There is something interesting about examining a presentation of objects that have no intended organization. When I was installing *Casual Object Garden* with Michael Hunter, we would be unconsciously unpacking our work, and later come back to it and find something interesting in the way it was, in a way, automatically arranged. By accepting such cosmic arrangement you are sometimes left with more interesting possibilities than you might find by organizing in the grid-like way that our minds think. I like going back and forth between those two extremes.

CI: I liked the collaborative group show you participated in with Derek Frech, Justin Kemp, Joe Lacina, Joshua Pavlacky, and Daniel Wallace at LVL3, which was titled "A Rod Stewart Little Prince Charles Manson Family" and, like the title of the show, looked like it was produced according to the principles of exquisite corpse. The individual works on view did not have an artist's name attached to it; rather each appeared to be the product of the entire group. Can you tell me about how that show came about, and how

you as individual artists worked together to create the objects in the exhibition – you communicated remotely, right? Via Internet, etc.? Was having to communicate in spite of your geographic remoteness from one another part of the idea?

CFV: The show originated from three Philadelphia artists, Derek Frech, Joe Lacina, and Daniel Wallace, at their space Extra Extra. They previously collaborated on a similar exhibition, “Soft Focus,” 2010. The new iteration of the project, “A Rod Stewart Little Richard Prince Charles Manson Family,” 2011, added three additional artists: Massachusetts-based artist Justin Kemp, Philadelphia artist Joshua Pavlacky, and myself. No work in the exhibition had a single artist attached to it; rather the entire project was a collaborative endeavor. This in part removed the artists’ ego from the work and allowed for a free flow of ideas.

Communicating remotely between 6 artists in 3 different locations became a large component of the process. To begin, we created Twitter and Tumblr accounts. Our collaborative Twitter was also anonymous, which further enabled a free flow of uncensored ideas. Our Tumblr acted as a work-shopping tool; everyone uploaded mock-ups of ideas that would then be commented on and further discussed in video chat meetings. This collaboration began about six months prior to the exhibition. Once the in-person installation began at the gallery, all of the artists were together in a real space, except for Justin Kemp who was Skyped in daily and acted as a consultant for the duration of the installation. During the installation, materials and objects were arranged and re-arranged until the group made a consensus.

CI: What do plants mean to you? When did you start using them in your own work, and why?

CFV: My work with plants started as a reaction from moving from a rural setting in Austin, TX to the urban Midwest city of Chicago six years ago. In the city the wilderness is very contained. Everything is either manicured or intentionally abandoned, to a point where the flowerbeds on Michigan avenue contrast with the abandoned empty lots, and both, in their differences, become these kinds of arrangements. They at once show our love of natural beauty, our need to control it, our ignorance and arrogance. I began to look at it in this way where a soda can thrown in a flower pot is a gesture, because it is intentionally placed whether or not the person was aware of it or not. It’s really a natural gesture, like eating a cherry and spitting out the core, but in our world we are dealing with these man-made objects that are specially designed and branded. The contrast of man-made object and plant life really shows how far away we are from living with nature. I basically started looking closer at these casual arrangements and creating my own with elements of plants and man-made objects. My first gesture was in my backyard, Portal, 2007, which is an image of a mirror leaning against a bush. In the image it looks as if the grass is climbing up the bush in the form of a prism, and almost looks like a digitally constructed image. From there I really started to get interested in exploring my own arrangements of natural and man-made rather than found situations. I view these arrangements as microcosms for our relationship with nature.

CI: What type of houseplants do you have in your own home/apartment? Do you have a garden, and if so, what’s in it?

CFV: In my apartment I have a lot of succulents and aroid plants, I am also growing some herbs and vegetables outside. I also have another garden:
<http://flowershop.tumblr.com>.

CI: What you are working on right now?

CFV: I'm currently in the midst of a few different projects. I am working with Seattle-based artist Sol Hashemi, on a landscape design proposal, that we hope to begin materializing in the next year or two. Philadelphia artist Derek Frech, and I are collaborating on an installation relating to man-made displays of natural bounty. And the latest iteration of my ongoing collaborative practice with Chicago-based Michael Hunter, NewHands, it is a mainly text based practice.

I will be included in a group exhibition at the Philadelphia ICA this fall entitled "Blowing on a Hairy Shoulder / Grief Hunters," curated by Israeli artist Doron Rabina, and I will be having my first solo exhibition this August at Important Projects in Oakland, California.

Claudine Isé has worked in the field of contemporary art as a writer and curator for the past decade, and currently serves as the Editor of the Art21 Blog. Claudine regularly writes for Artforum.com and Chicago magazine, and has also worked as an art critic for the Los Angeles Times. Before moving to Chicago in 2008, she worked at the Wexner Center in Columbus, OH as associate curator of exhibitions, and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles as assistant curator of contemporary art, where she curated a number of Hammer Projects. She has Ph.D. in Film, Literature and Culture from the University of Southern California.