



## Your face, like a lone nocturnal garden in Worlds where Suns spin round!

Susy Oliveira

Text by Tricia Wasney

### A Delicate Balance: Susy Oliveira's Gardens

*"A 'landscape', cultivated or wild, is already artifice before it has become the subject of a work of art. Even when we simply look we are already shaping and interpreting."<sup>1</sup>*

All gardens are fabrications. Throughout history this fact was celebrated by Italian and French garden designers in their exquisite geometry and playfulness and expressed through parterres, follies, and optical illusions. The English, those clever inventors of the wild, country garden, thinly disguised the artificiality of the garden. The *ha-ha*, an 18<sup>th</sup> century English creation—a small sunken wall within a lawn extending from a country house—gave the illusion of an unbroken grassy view that joined the landscape beyond while keeping the sheep and cows at bay: one could enjoy lovely, wild nature without any of the attendant nastiness. The brilliance of New York City's Central Park lies in its pastoral presence smack in the middle of extreme urbanity; fact is, every element of the park—each body of water, planting, and view—is every bit as manufactured and meticulously designed as the hard architecture

that surrounds it. Not one of the rolling hills is 'natural' but is rather the result of a careful cut and fill program designed around equally orchestrated yet organic-seeming serpentine paths that lead from one 'nature' experience to another.

*"Gardens emphasized the contrast between two separate worlds: the outer one where nature remained awe-inspiringly in control and an inner artificially created sanctuary, a refuge for man and plants from the burning desert, where shade trees and cool canals refreshed the spirit and ensured growth."*<sup>2</sup>

Susy Oliveira's recent body of photo-sculptural work, *Your face, like a lone nocturnal garden in Worlds where Suns spin round!*, is described by the artist as a simulated or fictitious garden through which she explores the human impulse to replace nature with replications of it. While this is often imagined to be a contemporary preoccupation attributed especially to digital technology, it is clear from garden history that artifice has always been a central element of the garden. A garden, as a thing, is *complete* artifice even if its elements are not. Oliveira has taken the contrivance a step further; the plants no longer grow, disperse seeds and die, neither do they fill the air with scent or nod in the breeze; there is the suggestion of water but no wetness. It seems that all the elements of what traditionally made a garden desirable are removed, particularly those that ensure growth.

*"Natural landscapes are not yet gardens; it is only through the selection and composition of their elements and materials that gardens are made. To compose is to adjust the balances and tensions of yin and yang—water and mountain, human order and the Tao of nature, sun and shadow, breeze and stillness, sound and silence—to create new relations that carry meaning for us."*<sup>3</sup>

It is the paradox of the garden that it exists to offer an experience of nature but only through fixed human control. It is a carefully mediated experience that promises solace and quiet contemplation. In reality nature is often dirty, unpredictable, even dangerous. The garden is a delicate balance.

*"The beautiful was characterized by its smallness, smoothness, and gradual variation, and it was exemplified in the gentle, rolling landscapes designed by*

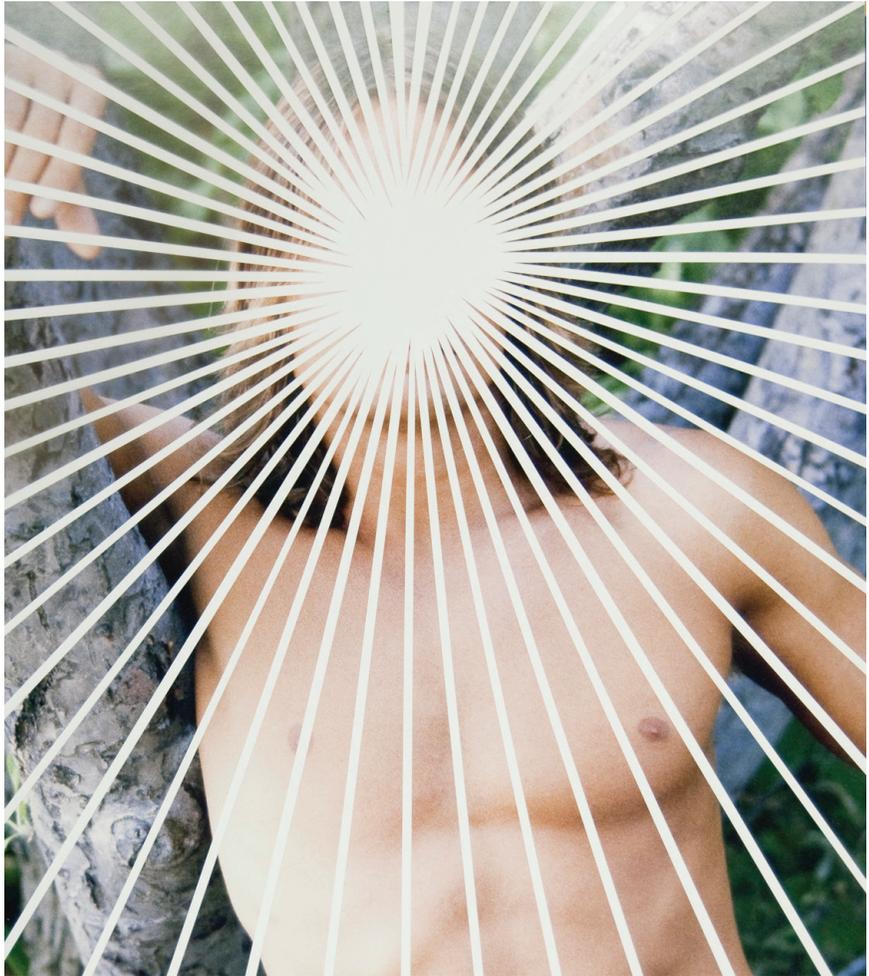
*Capability Brown...the beautiful contrasts with the sublime, characterized as the awful, the rugged, and the wild—mountains, chasms, and ferocious beasts."*<sup>4</sup>

Susy Oliveira's work embraces the tension between the sublime and the beautiful and between what is considered natural or not. Her plants are hard edged and dry, her sculptural grass more spiky armour than dewy carpet. The light depicted in the nocturnal garden photos is soft and inviting, emanating from cuts made in the original photo, giving the effect of sun filtering through trees. It seems she is looking for a negotiation in these interface areas—nothing is ever entirely scary or serene, settled or wild, alone or populated, real or fake.

*"The experience of the Sublime is, almost by definition, one that subverts order, coherence, a structured organization...it bypasses the rational mind and concentrates its force directly on the emotions."*<sup>5</sup>

The title of the exhibition seems wildly romantic, presented in what appears to be an antiquated exclamatory style with capitalized *Worlds* and *Suns*! It seems cheerful enough, but on closer inspection "a lone nocturnal garden" in a world of suns is actually about something much darker. The line comes from Jean Genet's novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* first published in 1943. Genet, a 20<sup>th</sup> century French writer, celebrated the rawer side of life; as a former vagabond and criminal who sold sex to survive on the street, he was not a distant observer of this life but an active participant. He saw beauty in evil and a poetic truth in obscenity. His subversiveness endeared him to intellectuals and artists of his time including Sartre and Cocteau. But though they celebrated and defended him (including literally, in the courts) Genet was also offended by Sartre's analytical dissection of his life.

Susy Oliveira explained why she chose this quote: "I became interested in it because of all of its romantic allusions. The novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* is written at times in the first person. It takes place while Jean Genet is in prison and jumps from his experiences in his cell to the fictional story that he is writing while incarcerated. The quote is from one of the moments where Genet himself is daydreaming about a fictional lover (a criminal whose photo he has ripped out of a newspaper)...he fictionalizes



a relationship that seems to draw up emotions that are as intense if not more intense than if the relationship was actual.”

Genet, like Oliveira, like all garden creators, is fabricating an existence, dreaming desires into being. The importance of what is real falls away and everything bumps into everything else. Dichotomies are the real fiction.

*“Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame*

*contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.”<sup>6</sup>*

[ Tricia Wasney ]

1. Andrews, Malcolm. *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford University Press, 1999). p.1 2. Hobhouse, Penelope. *Plants in Garden History: An Illustrated History of Plants and Their Influence on Garden Styles from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (Pavilion Books, 1997). p.11 3. Moore, Charles W., Mitchell, William J., and Turnbull, William Jr. *The Poetics of Gardens* (MIT Press, 1995). p.13 4. *Ibid.* p.43 5. Andrews. p. 132 6. Mitchell, W.J.T., 'Imperial Landscape', in W.J.T. Mitchell's (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). p. 5

**Susy Oliveira** is an artist living in Toronto. She received an MFA from the University of Waterloo in 2006 and is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her work is represented by Peak Gallery in Toronto. <[www.susyoliveira.ca](http://www.susyoliveira.ca)>

**Tricia Wasney** has a background in art, film, and landscape architecture. She manages the public art program at the Winnipeg Arts Council.

#### WORKS EXHIBITED

*The sun also shines on a pile of twigs*  
2009, 25 x 22 x 5 inches,  
c-prints on archival card and foamcore

*Breeding violets*  
2009, 36 x 24 x 14 inches, c-prints on archival card  
and foamcore with flocking on panel

*To the onanist*  
2009, 36 x 24 x 10 inches,  
c-prints on archival card and foamcore on panel

*Centre of your world*  
2009, 36 x 24 x 4 inches,  
c-prints on archival card and foamcore on panel

*Time keeps*  
2009, 24 x 24 x 14 inches,  
c-prints on archival card and foamcore on panel

*Your face, like a lone nocturnal garden  
in Worlds where Suns spin round!*  
2009, collage, 24 x 18 inches

*Nocturnal Garden*  
2009, edition of 5, chromira print, 24 x 16 inches

*Nocturnal Garden*  
2009, edition of 5, chromira print, 24 x 16 inches

*Nocturnal Garden*  
2009, edition of 5, chromira print, 16 x 24 inches

#### EXHIBITION

12 March–24 April 2010

#### RECEPTION

7 PM, Friday, 12 March

#### ARTIST TALK

3 PM, Saturday, 13 March

#### GUERRILLA GARDENING 101

3 PM, Saturday, 10 April

PLATFORM gratefully acknowledges the ongoing financial support provided by Manitoba Arts Council, the Winnipeg Arts Council, and The Winnipeg Foundation. Assistance for this exhibition was also provided by Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, The Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Art Council. The Centre would also like to recognize the support of its members, board of directors, and staff.



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