

TENDING
BY
JOHN "JAKE" OXNARD
Visual Arts

Chairperson: Matthew Burke

Jon Keith Swindell

Michael Krueger

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JOHN "JAKE" OXNARD

TENDING

Matthew Burke

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Abstract. Tending, a Masters of Fine Art Exhibition, is an exhibition that highlights the importance of trees and plants in the art and craft of my everyday life. The manifestation of this idea became an installation of a sculptural landscape that evoked in the audience a sense of awe and confusion, followed by clarity, and tranquility. The exhibition is comprised of sod-grass, bamboo, plants in pots, bonsai trees, a repurposed compressor tank, a shoddily put together table and a stucco alcove. The intention for this show is to reconnect with nature through the growing and nurturing of plants and trees. In expressing my passion for growing these plants, I hope to communicate to my audience the importance of nurturing the relationship we have with nature and the significance of self-reflection in art and in life.

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Thesis Overview:

Tending, my MFA thesis exhibition is composed of three sculptural elements that suggest the site of my yard. The yard acts as my sanctuary; in it I lose all sense of time as I garden and re-connect with the land. In this space I practice the art of bonsai, and garden for the purpose of food, medicinal, and aesthetic reasons. The three sculptural elements composing the exhibition are: *The Worktable*, *The Watering Tank*, and *The Tokonoma*. These elements all have significant intent and express my beliefs in the importance of nurturing plants and the land.

The thesis exhibition is based on my love for and relationship with my plants. Collecting, nurturing, and sharing these living organisms tells a history of generations and highlights what is often overlooked. I have grown up exposed to the outdoors and have gained an appreciation for and a love of nature.

Exhibition Description:

Upon entering the gallery, clean air and greenery overcome the senses. Trickling water, growing sod-grass landscapes and bamboo stretching more than 20 feet above the viewer are the immediate spectacles. As the viewer looks closer, a sense of compulsive plant collecting comes into view. All and all, tranquility sets in.

Three distinctly different parts of the gallery space are separated by a charcoal colored linoleum floor. From the gallery entrance, the viewer first encounters a large white metal reservoir surrounded by a sod landscape and various plants placed randomly about. On top of the tank are bonsai trees and well-manicured plants in pots; these plants shroud the start of a white pipe that extends up a 30 degree angle and is supported by a forked tree branch. This pipe connects to a

small tank where a gutter from the gallery ceiling drops down and water steadily flows into the small tank which leads back down to the reservoir. There is a large ceramic pot filling with water from the reservoir; goldfish swim among water lilies.

Adjacent to the source of water is a chaotic, seemingly disorganized mess of numerous plants in various containers ranging from plastic yogurt dishes to wooden boxes and standard nursery pots. A table of make-shift construction with planters on top occupies the area. In the planters are more pots containing plants. On the table, shears and gardening tools are interspersed; plants out of their pots and foliage clippings lay around. The table appears as if someone abruptly stopped working. Underneath, bins are filled with different types of potting mediums. Also around the table are patches of landscape with daffodils blooming and lots of empty ceramic bonsai pots.

Across the gallery floor is the largest landscape of grass. It wraps around a concrete-like alcove, which has a miniature tree placed inside, covered in nothing but yellow flowers. The bonsai tree is elevated by a little polished table, and is grows in an earthy red colored pot. It is positioned about one third of the way from the left wall of the recessed space. Next to the flowering tree is a smaller pot with tiny deep green blades of grass growing from it. Its pot rests on a little mat. Under both the mat and highly finished table is a dark polished wooden floor. A little off center of the tree and the grass, a narrow hanging scroll occupies the back wall of the alcove. The concrete-like structure sits two feet off the ground, so to really view the interior of the niche, where the plants and scroll are, one would need to kneel down on a mat placed in the grass. The grass landscape sweeps its way up the sides of the structure, reaching six feet in the air. Out of the grass grows bamboo shoots; these also stretch around the alcove almost completely concealing it at times.

Artist Interruption:

The Worktable

The artist's studio is, in essence, the worktable and the action that transpires around it. The refuge that is my yard also acts as my studio and the worktable is the center of this space. In the gallery, *The Worktable* is presented in a way that resembles the same state of being as the worktable in my yard. It is in flux between messy and neat, between plant materials transitioning into bonsai.

At the table I am mixing custom soils for my plants' individual needs, by using compost generated from the last three years of living in Kansas, clay based drainage medium, chicken grit, Kansas earth and peat moss. All these components are specifically mixed in varying ratios for certain species. At the start of the bonsai process I plant them in shallow wooden boxes constructed specifically to restrain the tap root and encourage lateral roots to develop. Ideally, my trees find their places in handmade ceramic vessels that complement each other. Some of the vessels are traditional bonsai design while others are more experimental.

At the worktable, the studying, accepting, and envisioning of each tree's potential is undertaken. Though this potential usually takes a couple years to develop, and several more years to unfold, it takes decades to refine.

Studying the tree allows me to see what the tree has to offer: its branch and root structures, its vigor and ability to grow new healthy shoots, and its natural growth patterns. My acceptance of the tree involves seeing what the tree cannot be and accepting it for exactly what it is and where it is at an exact moment in time. The envisioning is the exciting part; this is where I imagine the future, where the tree becomes what it is intended and the sculpting occurs. This envisioning takes

patience to foresee, time to develop, and appreciation in just keeping the tree alive. Steps taken during this time usually consists of pruning and wiring. Some more drastic measures might entail trunk chopping and grafting. As years pass, the trees will be re-potted in new soils, pruned multiple times throughout the seasons, wired and rewired, and fed additional nutrients. All of this starts at *The Worktable* and it is therefore presented in the gallery as a main element elevating the artist's studio practice to Art itself. Throughout the duration of the thesis exhibition I worked my plants, by repotting, watering, pruning, and wiring so as to prepare for the spring and summer growing seasons.

The Watering Tank

With 7,159,910,899 people on the earth, water has become a precious resource. Pollution and contamination limit our drinkable water; wasteful farming techniques and climate change incur more droughts. We, as a culture, will need to re-evaluate our priorities. Clean water should be one of those. The respect and appreciation of plants and trees for life-sustaining properties should be another. Plants exchange clean air for the carbon dioxide omitted from our lungs and carbon monoxide omitted from our smoke stacks, both of which are poisonous to us. Their roots' filtering capabilities clean toxins out of water and soil. The entire basis of our food economy is built off the fibers of plants; on a softer note the visual, audio, and scent stimuli provided by their foliage, flowers, and structures make where we live beautiful.

Plants, like all living things, need water to survive. *The Watering Tank* was vital for my plants in the exhibition. It encourages restoration, repurposing and recycling, most of all water conservation. The intent is need to encourage viewers to think about being more sustainable, aside from having a resource of water for the show. *The Watering Tank* is an old compressor retrofitted

to accept water run-off from a roof or downspout; this water collection allows me to water my plants and garden with water that isn't full of chloramine, chlorine, and other contaminants in the tap water that are hazardous to the plants and, really, to us.

Around and on the tank are my trees that are more refined and suitable for showcasing. On top of the tank I built a slatted redwood deck to display my plants and to utilize the otherwise empty space above the tank. Here the avocation of growing plants in buildings is suggested. Instead of growing crops out in the middle of America, grow crops up in urban settings. The redwood decking was repurposed from a job I executed last summer. Under *The Watering Tank* are large timbers that assist in adding height to promote hydrostatic pressure; these too were salvaged. Accompanying the tank is a large coil-built and hand-thrown ceramic water basin, specifically made to catch water from the tank.

The Tokonoma

A tokonoma is a traditional Japanese architectural element within a home, often associated with chanoyu or the tea ceremony. Within a tokonoma are displayed various elements, almost always including a hanging scroll that has a painted landscape or calligraphy. On the floor in the tokonoma, the host presents items of significance to show guests. In my case, within *The Tokonoma* I present my best bonsai that represents the current season: springtime. The bonsai is a forsythia in bloom, one that I collected from my childhood home in Lexington, Kentucky in the summer of 2011. *The Tokonoma* pays homage to the art of bonsai, because bonsai are traditionally presented within these recessed alcoves, accompanied by an accent plant and a hanging scroll. Therefore, within The Tokonoma and companioning the displayed forsythia I offer a composition that includes an accent plant collected on a trip to Virginia while visiting my sister

and her family. The scroll presented is made by my wife and the paper was made from compost from the past three years living in Kansas. Mixed within the compost paper pulp is discarded fabric cuttings that my wife used in making dress patterns, and the bark and fibrous tissues stripped from the cedar post from which I built *The Tokonoma*. The intention is to elevate nature to a place of greater appreciation and due respect. John Naka, the father of bonsai in America during mid-20th century, states that the purpose of displaying bonsai, “is to create nature’s greatness into a small space by using bonsai, plants, stones and other accessories.”

Background:

Bonsai in Japanese means “tree in pot”. Provided the plants are watered, given nutrients, change of soil and adequate sunlight, they are surprising fast growing and very healthy. Trees in pots require protection from the harsh elements and conditions of nature, and because there is little to no competition from other plants or animals invading their space, bonsai trees are in conditions that are more suitable than grown in their natural setting. Bonsai roots become a mass of fibrous nutrient pulling hair roots, there is no need for the tap root, which helps to anchor the tree down to the earth, because the tree is securely tied down to the pot. Pots are selected with species needs taken into consideration. For example, a wisteria desires a deeper pot because it is a flowering plant and requires plenty of water. Whereas a pot for a pine needs little room and prefers drier conditions. The pruning of the trees directs the plants energy to grow in specific areas. This encourages back-budding and pushes new growth out from hardwood further down the trunk or branch. This action can produce what is called branch ramification, where a single branch forks to two branches and then forks to four branches and so on.

My practice of bonsai started when I was 14 years old, in 1995. Being unable to fully comprehend the specifics of botany required in keeping them alive, I killed quite a few. Not until 2004 did I invest more time, patience and understanding into the practice of bonsai. This, coincidentally, was during a time in my life of reinventing who I was. I started a journey into the unknown, having to learn how to live life without the influence, security and comfort of drugs and alcohol; this was a greatest struggle I have ever experienced, although recovering from a hopeless state of mind and body is the best thing that could have happened to me.

In 2009, I graduated with a bachelor's of fine art in sculpture. Spiritual growth and struggle was the content of the work I created; bonsai was often referenced my work. After graduating in throw myself in my bonsai practice. I worked with a notable bonsai artist, Ryan Gugeler, during this time. In 2011, I moved to Lawrence, Kansas, to begin working towards my MFA in Sculpture at the University of Kansas. Here the confidence of tiling bonsai as a fine art had been questioned and for me the answer was, yes, I consider it a fine art. This art form is one that requires vast skills sets, patience, and vision to foresee a tree's high state of beauty as if it were grown in nature. The observation of nature is the heart of bonsai. One must see the world and observe the way trees and plants react and behave in response to the environments they are grown in, such as the climatic weather cycles, the type of soil conditions or the amount sunlight or available water. The appearance of an aged tree tells a story, tells the tree's life due to the elements it must live with. These conditions, I feel, make for beautiful trees, which no human has the power to create. A bonsai artist tries to capture these stories and creates new ones that are instilled and molded into the trees they work on.

The practice of sculpting these trees becomes a metaphor for mental, physical and spiritual growth. The techniques, patience and foresight required to develop and maintain bonsai can be applied to everyday living. Just as art acts as therapy, bonsai does too. I am editing the growth of

these plants and trees in accordance with how I envision they will best prosper. Self-reflection becomes an underlying theme in this work; in contemplating their growth patterns, I am also contemplating my own. I am changed through this reflective process; by continually choosing desirable traits for the plants, for my art, and for myself, I am culling out those characteristics which interfere with growing upright and true.

A lifelong practice of bonsai and plant cultivation will continue influencing my artistic voice. How this voice will manifest is for the future to tell. I can envision different landscape sculptures, developing new ceramic plant vessels that act more sculptural, and creating public spaces and forums that encourage and challenge sustainable practices.