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Timothy Laurin's Garden Sculptures

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DENIS LONGCHAMPS

There is something to be said about the interconnectedness of sculptures and gardens. In fact, the inclusion of one into the other is to be fairly expected since both deal with the control of a creative force. On one hand, a sculpture is the physical rendition of the artist's creative drive and results from the interaction of the artist with an inert matter (clay or plaster, for example) in order to create a form. On the other hand, a garden is the organization of the creative force of nature into an artistic visual balance of colours, shapes and sizes within an arrangement of bushes, rows, walking paths, benches, and fountains (in the case of an elaborate garden). Indeed, from quite early on, sculptures have played an integral part in European garden settings, be it regal, private, or public. At the beginning of the 17th century, the art of gardening was discussed in an academic treatise,[1] and the inclusion of works of art can still be witnessed in many royal gardens such as those at Versailles, in France.

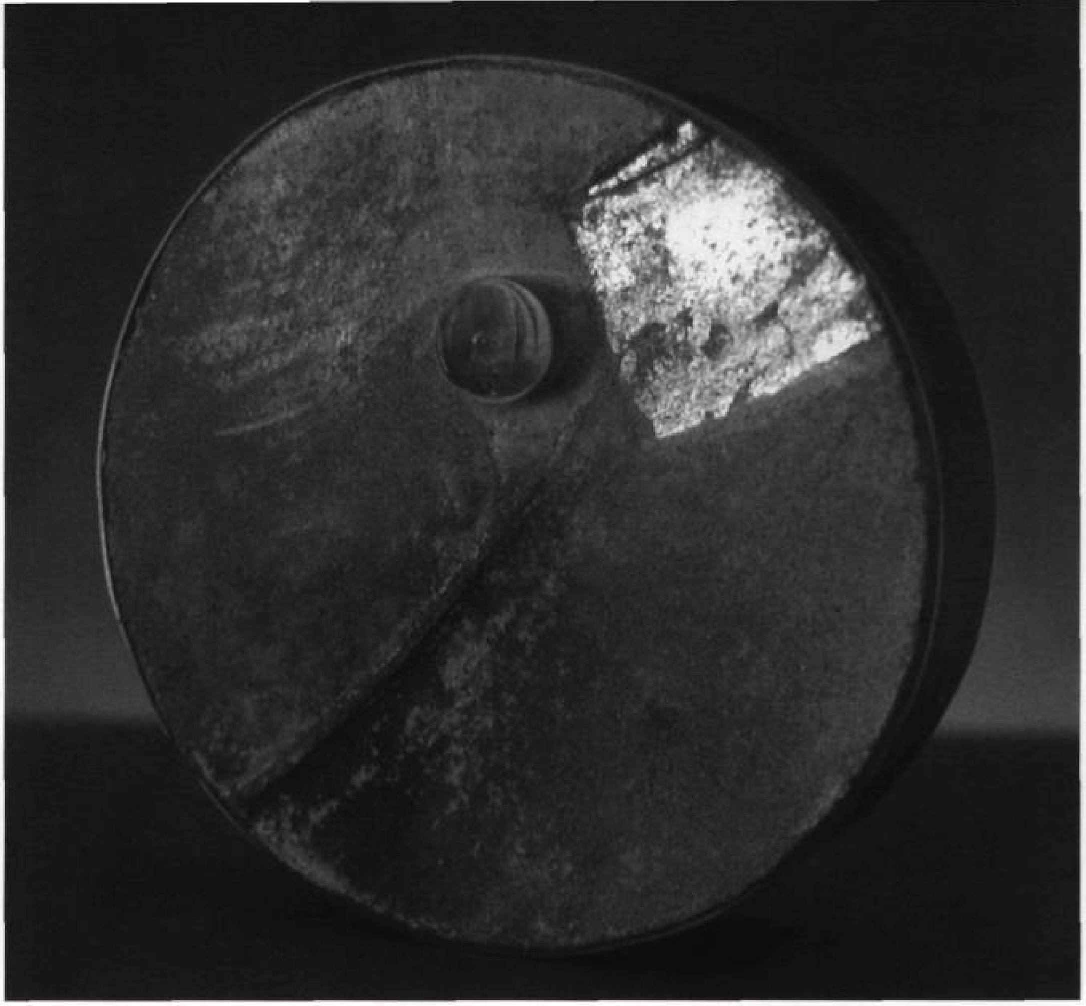
Thus, it is neither a coincidence nor a surprise to encounter the sculptures of Timothy Laurin[2] in a garden. During the summer of 2004, in an event called *Paths, Patterns, Places*, held in Barrie, Ontario, a garden tour brought together these likely companions — artists and gardeners. In one such Eden, among various colourful blooming plants, Laurin presented his new series of works, the result of his research on creating contemporary scarecrows.[3] His creations juxtapose this popular figure with fine art sculpture, traditional craft, and contemporary conceptual works, beauty and destruction within a discussion on the dichotomy of nature versus culture. Confrontations between the self and the other have been among my preoccupations and preferred territories of analysis as an art historian — one defining the other in its opposition, its contrary or its negation, as in the case of the aforementioned concepts. Yet, in Laurin's sculptures, such oppositions are brought together to reinforce each other and to blur the boundaries of their reciprocal definition. The tension created forces the viewer to reconsider and to revisit some preconceived ideas and concepts in a particularly comfortable and contemplative context — the garden.

The sculptures presented in *Paths, Patterns, Place* were not Laurin's first to tackle such issues; to the contrary, this research journey started in 2001 with a group of sculptures called *Head Studies*. Akin to the scarecrows, these works illustrate his interest in the human form, both by their titles and by the metaphoric symbols of their various components. They are made of cement held in place by a square or round steel frame and each has a piece of glass embedded in the concrete surface, which is decorated with gold leaf. The different materials utilized are intriguing for the contrasts they hold and present. Soft and hard, strong and fragile, common and precious, they are part of our urban landscape. The impenetrability of the cement is a metaphor for the human mind, the grey matter, and the glass symbolizes the eye that is a window into one's emotions. The artist describes the steel as the skeleton that holds and keeps it together; gold is then a metaphor for the enlightenment one strives for. Here, the themes presented were meant to address globally our

Timothy LAURIN, *Bullet Pod*, 2004. Concrete, glass, steel. Photo : Timothy Laurin.

collective vision of the modern human in its surroundings.

In the subsequent works, the artist proposes a journey of personal discovery while addressing universal issues. His sources of inspiration are as diversified as the multiple layers of reading his creations propose. His new production incorporates glass vessels with cement objects that are as complex as they are beautiful. In the same instance, the artist plays on the meanings of the word vessel: a container, a mode of transport, a life-supporting canal (as in blood vessel) that is in opposition to the symbol of destruction and weaponry also present in his work. Without necessarily addressing precise issues of war or conflict, Laurin chooses rather to consider weaponry for its formal qualities. The artistic preoccupation with dialogue between and combination of forms and mediums tries to resolve these same contradictions. The various voices that inform his work bring us to consider, to interrogate, and to challenge the social constructs that oppose these concepts in the first place.



Timothy LAURIN, *Head Study I*, 2002. Concrete, glass, gold, steel, pigment. Photo: Timothy Laurin.

One social construct Laurin challenges is "primitive" art, which he explored for his graduating thesis — an art, he considers very close to his own understanding of life, spirituality, and the surrounding world. His artistic goals are linked to the desire for an understanding of our place in the universe,[4] to find our place within the universe, in communion with nature. He consistently seeks to tap into a universal sharing of images that touches all of us on a primal level — to live, to survive, to defend and to protect. The scarecrow found in various agricultural gardens as protector of one's crop, one's necessary food source, becomes in Laurin's works the starting point, the metaphoric emblem for his artistic journey. Combined with other symbols, multiple dialogues collide with our own perception of each.

The first series of scarecrows were of smaller proportions (approximately 18 inches tall). Created in 2002 in various combinations of copper wire, steel, cement, gold leaf, and glass, they borrow formal elements of an actual scarecrow, such as a bundle of branches or straws tied together, but rendered here in metal, and juxtaposed with abstract jewel-like glass shapes that are enclosed in a light steel frame. Beautiful and far from being scary, the sculptures question the frailty (the glass) of life within a created protective environment (the steel frame). However, the sculptures were not engaging with nature itself. Even if installed in a garden environment, their size would not initiate such a dialogue. For this type of discourse, larger scale sculptures were needed.

For the 2004 artists-gardens event mentioned earlier, Laurin presented a new *Scarecrow* of the size normally expected for a cultivated garden setting. Standing tall, it combined cement and aluminum cable and part of a tree trunk. Attached to the cement, which served as a base for the work, the striated cable[5] was splayed to invoke the straw arm of the scarecrow that rises to the sky in a fine conical shape reminiscent of fountain water spray. The work is connected to its environment and creates a dialogue with its surroundings. The subject is part of human culture and the artist chose to present it within a highly organized form of nature. The tension and similarities between the two invites us to reconsider our relationship with each element artistically, literally and metaphorically: after all, the scarecrow is the effigy of a human form.

Placed in that same garden is the work *Bullet Pod* (2004), which combines the representation of a bullet/seed in a cement shape supported by a steel structure and surmounted by two glass vessels, sitting side by side at one end and resembling open blooms. One may say that the phallic bullet shape addresses the destructive power of some patriarchal societies in their exploitation of natural resources. Conversely, it could also be seen as a gigantic seed, bearing the potential for the beginning of life, and its replenishment. This unification of destruction and regeneration is crowned by two glass flower forms containing the possibility of other lives, since the bloom is only a few steps ahead of the seed in the cycle of life. These organic glass vessels collect the rainwater and, as such, participate in the life-cycle by supplying drinking water to birds and other garden creatures. Yet, the quality of the material reminds us of the fragility of life. In another work, *Sceptre* (2004), the artist has combined precious metal with common hard cement and delicate glass; thus, the contrasts of materials heighten the integrity of each while balancing the other.

In a different discourse, one could consider the juxtaposition of blown glass and cement as a middle position between fine arts and fine crafts. However, this is not an undecided in-between position. To the contrary, it is a well thought-out, well assumed position resulting from the artist's creative process, which brings the observer into a world where seemingly opposing views inform each other as complements. In organizing gardens, we loose a part of nature's own creative performance, which we replace by human-made artistic renditions. It is in these tensions between the wild and the regulated, between nature and culture, that Laurin hopes to find a balance, and that we, as viewers, find our in-between place in the universe. ←

Denis Longchamps is a PhD candidate at Concordia University in Montreal where he received his Master degree in 2001. His present research looks at notions of travel and souvenirs as they are expressed in contemporary and historical art.

NOTES

1. Jacques de Menours, *Traité de jardinage selon les raisons de la nature et de l'art*, first published in 1638.
2. Timothy Laurin lives and works in Midland, Ontario. He studied glass art at the Sheridan College School of Design where he graduated with high honours in 1985. He has also studied painting and printmaking at Georgian College. He has participated in many solo and group exhibitions and his works are found in private and public collections, including the Corning Museum of Glass, in Corning, New York, and the Royal Ontario Museum, in Toronto, Ontario.
3. Timothy Laurin, "Artist statement," *Paths, Patterns, Places: a Tour of Gardens and Artists*, 2004.
4. From conversations and e-mail exchanges with the artist.
5. These aluminum cables are used to support large power line girders, which, incidentally, look like scarecrow or marching soldiers.