



CAROLINE LATHAN-STIEFFEL
GREENHOUSE MIX

Greenhouse “Re-Mix”: Cuttings, Grafting and Propagation

Susan Spaid

Cuttings

Rarely does one get to follow an artist's activities as closely as I have, since Caroline Lathan-Stiefel and I first worked together in 2008. It's even rarer to begin a professional relationship with a misunderstanding. She had submitted a proposal for an outdoor sculpture, but given her work's apparent fragility, I

presumed that she was applying for one of eight solo-show slots at the Abington Art Center and Sculpture Park. It was only after we offered her a solo show did I carefully re-read her letter and realize my mistake! Luckily, our 2008 outdoor exhibition “Hovering Above” featured artworks that required viewers to look up, so we readily accepted her proposal to suspend a sculpture from several of our trees. With its black pipe-cleaner canopy covering a transparent enclosure laced in blue pipe-cleaner lattices,

Madder Bloom supports rose and blue plastic seed tags dispersed in a manner that illustrates the growth patterns of self-propagating fungi. Since everyone fully expected it to disintegrate within a matter of months, we were surprised when she returned to append it to three nearby trees enveloped in an orange and pink haphazard screen. Six years later, *Madder Bloom* has become a park classic, exemplifying the way changing outdoor artworks mark time!¹ Not only did this string of events launch Caroline's public-art career, but it led to her participation in three Abington Art Center exhibitions in the space of three months the third being the indoor version of “Hovering Above” (for people to visit when rain precludes park walks). The precocious *Madder Bloom* even served as a geocaching location during its earlier years.

Since then, remnants from Caroline's multi-colored “afghan,”

which once adorned my Honda hatchback (woven with hopes of its starring in an art-car parade), have seeped into five consecutive installations including *Cohosh* (“Microfibers,” 2009, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA), *Hinterland* (2010, Tiger Meets Asteroid, Philadelphia, PA) and *Ocean* (2011-



Art-car installation for “Roam” project, January 2010, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

2012, Brown-Hayes Department Store Building, Atlanta, GA).² She even inserted several of its yellow petals into part of the giant black and white web comprising *Acanthus Rising* (“The Lime Unleashed,” 2012, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI), *Cohosh* (2009/2010/2011/2014), whose title and leafy shapes refer to a hot-flash reducing herbal supplement known as black cohosh, “grows” in this exhibition's hothouse. She considers *Cohosh* finally finished, so it is dated 2009-2014, yet its past lives inform its present one.

Some may recognize the numerous multi-colored discs comprising *Lagan* (2011-2014) from photographs of *Ocean*, her assembly of nearly a dozen large-scale sculptures affixed to an Atlanta building for ten months. Since *lagan* is a nautical term for submerged items, whose buoy markings ease recovery, *Lagan* also conveys her lifting and refitting these circles that once drifted, tethered to a brick wall as part of *Ocean*. Suspended in the “Greenhouse” gallery's window opposite *Lagan* is *Holdfast* (2012), which in this context conveys a hanging houseplant, but it too once floated in *Ocean*. Serving as the “Greenhouse” gallery's spring is *Towards the Reservoir II*, which first appeared wrapped around an abandoned gas station sign before she transformed it into *Towards the Reservoir* (2005-2011), a window installation (2011 Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, MD) incorporating remnants from *Whorl* (2004-2006, Galerie Articule, Montreal, CA).

1. Incidentally, Caroline's decision to expand *Madder Bloom* was initially inspired by the park's 2008 exhibition “Entrance: Visualizing Time.” She wanted her sculpture to grow like plants.
2. Interviewed around the time her 2010 curated exhibition “Seepage” opened, she recalled, “The concept of ‘seepage’ (an oozing or a passage of a substance from one place to another) is something I have been thinking about in regards to my work for at least 10 years. The word ‘seepage’ can imply a system break down, as well as a flow that breaks up a clog. For this show, I was also thinking about ‘seepage’ in terms of the way that urban, suburban and natural realms connect and seep into each other in our current culture and time.” I thus find the verb “seep” particularly appropriate in this context, since her artworks “connect and seep” into one another.



"Room" project, 2010

re-workings supersede earlier artworks, but leave her always "always ready" for her next show. Unlike Maurizio Cattelan's career survey "All" (2011), a mobile

suspended from the ceiling of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that balanced all of his earlier artworks as a single unit, Caroline's suspended installations routinely double as career surveys.

Grafting

Not surprisingly, Caroline found inspiration for "Greenhouse Mix" in *The Brother Gardeners*, Andrea Wulf's 2008 book that describes the extreme efforts made by pioneering gardeners who not only distributed hundreds of America plant species to England and eventually across Europe, but transformed a barren wasteland into a Botanical empire.³ Given today's lush English parks and gardens, it's hard to imagine an England populated by so few trees, shrubs and flowers that English gardens were once mainly comprised of medicinal herbs, annuals, perennials and border plants. Wulf describes English 18th Century gardeners as decades behind France's Baroque garden designers and Holland's horticultural capabilities.⁴ Between 1734 and 1768, Philadelphia farmer John Bartram sent annual shipments of boxes filled with cuttings, seeds, saplings and dried specimens to London merchant (and "fellow-Quaker") Peter Collinson.



Towards the Reservoir (2011), Contemporary Museum, Baltimore.

Between 1737 and 1756, Bartram conducted seed-hunting expeditions, leaving his family to manage his farm, while he trekked through Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia, Maryland, Carolina and Georgia wilderness.⁵ The French and Indian War made passage through Indian lands too dangerous, suspending plant expeditions until 1761. In 1765, he toured Florida for nine months as the newly appointed Royal Botanist.⁶

Unlike Bartram, who readily adopted Carl Linnaeus' binomial nomenclature (*Species Plantarum*, 1753), most English gardeners stuck to long-winded names cited in Philip Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary* (1731). English gardeners literally grafted the American landscape onto theirs. I next describe how Caroline's "Greenhouse Mix" grafts these pioneer gardeners' stories onto her artworks and highlights her horticultural-like studio practice.

Caroline's "Greenhouse" and "Hothouse" galleries, briefly mentioned above, recall 18th Century technology that enabled horticulturists to grow saplings and exotics (such as fruit trees) with prolonged sunlight in warm environments. William III and Mary of Orange, who came from Holland in 1689 to reign over England and Ireland, introduced glass houses and hotbeds lined with fermenting tanning bark instead of horse manure. By distributing heat in flues attached to chimneys, English hothouses improved upon the smokier Dutch green houses.⁷ "Greenhouse Mix" juxtaposes an American greenhouse nursing native plants with the British hothouse, sprouting exotics from a warmer climate.

With its panels depicting seven carved stones, Caroline's *green-house*, suspended across from the doorway, directly references a wall from Bartram's heated greenhouse, whose stones he quarried, set and carved. Facing *green-house* are five little paintings, including two (*Tulipera* and *Linaria*) with imagery lifted from Bartram's greenhouse motifs and others resembling a thicker, climbing plants and lichens. Like garden ponds, the watery *Lagan* and *Towards the Reservoir II* bracket *green-house*, whose sewn panels signal Caroline's move away from prickly pins. Facing *green-house* is *green-house II*, a dangly screen comprised of the outlines of stones to emphasize hand-carving, draped above a bottle-cap carpet that

³. Andrea Wulf "The Brother Gardeners: Botany, Empire and the Birth of an Obsession," (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 90. In this fascinating book, Wulf reweaves a horticultural tale recounting roles played by Philadelphia Farmer/Seed Saver/ger John Bartram (1699-1778), London textile trader (Pennsylvania-specialist) Peter Collinson (1694-1768), English plant hunter Mark Catesby (1682-1749), Chelsea Physic Garden Superintendent Philip Miller (1691-1771), and Robert James Petre (1713-1742), the eighth Baron Petre and "a universal Lover of plants." Petre described his relationship with the men who loved horticulture as "my brother Gardeners."

⁴ Wulf, p. 8.

⁵ Wulf, p. 66.

⁶ Wulf, p. 163.

⁷ Wulf, pp. 41-42.

implies a gravel path, while chenille and actual leaf pinned to the wall recall specimen collections. Several fabric panels are embroidered with quotes from Bartram's letters. One of this gallery's most alluring artworks is *Waldglas* (Forest Glass), so-named because forests were depleted in the process of making the crude greenish-yellow glass utilized in everyday objects and stained-glass windows. England's embargo against glass houses in the 16th Century paved the way for the 18th Century's attention to forest re-growth.

Hothouse. In contrast to Bartram's enormous, seemingly endless, unexplored plant supply, English gardeners feverishly competed: to gain access to rare seeds, to germinate seeds, to get plants to flower, and most of all, to get them to bear fruit, whose seeds could be collected, sold and sown elsewhere. As mentioned above, Collinson originally solicited subscriptions for Bartram's cache, but as demand grew, Bartram corresponded directly with nurseries, merchants such as John Ellis, botanists like Linnaeus and Daniel Solander (Assistant Keeper at the British Museum), plant-collectors like King George III, landed gentry and influential gardeners like Miller. Despite his independence, Collinson's death in 1768 at age 72 permanently suspended Bartram's business. If "Hothouse" captures the fervent gardening fever occurring on one side of the pond, her stripe painting *Glint* suggests a westbound sailboat about to freeze in its wake.

Although both galleries have fireplaces, *Towards the Reservoir II* disguises its fireplace, while *Bracken Ablaze* highlights the fireplace ensconced in its midst. According to Caroline, 17th Century Europeans thought that setting fire to bracken ferns would produce rain. A gorgeous screen, *Bracken Ablaze* emulates a bird-wing motif in an Art-Deco sensibility. Flaming the fireplace all the more is Van Stiefl's 2014 sound piece *Playing with Fire*, a blend of cracking fire noises and samples from Paraguayan guitar maestro Agustín Barrios Mangoré. This is not the first time that Caroline has gained inspiration from fire. Her 2009 installation *Lager City* featured shooting flames toppling skyscrapers, an oblique reference to the recent surge in skyscraper fires.

One of her most elegant "Hothouse" specimens is *Asplenium*, a grouping of green, yellow and white snap-pea-like shapes hanging in the window, whose title references the genus for about 700 fern species. Nearby, scores of potted ferns bask in colorful handmade ceramic pots adjacent several of her smaller sculptures. By the 19th Century, the British botany obsession had evolved into the desire for "jungles in the salon," which no doubt

inspired 1970s-era "fern bars." While *Colash* cools the air, *Drop*, a painting of a translucent water droplet melting from snow and seeping through strata, moistens plant roots. Turning the heat up a notch is a yellow and red collage, whose imagery conveys glowing, pulsating activities, however microscopic.⁸ (*Ram/Tree* presents red marks etched over a photo of an over-sized, once-white "cocoon thicket." Originally the grid for a work, it dangled from a branch in her backyard for a month before returning indoors in *Hinterland* and then inhabiting a street window during *Towards a Reservoir*.)

Propagation

I began this essay with a brief description of the way Caroline takes cuttings from past projects, which she grafts onto current ones to propagate future artworks. Although this is the root of her artistic practice, she only recently realized her practice's connection to horticultural practices. This is the first time that she has specifically directed her artwork's content towards gardeners' stories and plant motifs, though she has always found inspiration in nature's patterns. The diverse sources of her pipe-cleaner lattices range from photographs of cells, microscopic imagery and drawings of plant's vascular structures. *Fracturing*, a gorgeous pipe-cleaner drawing overlaying the stained-glass window gracing the Wetherill Mansion's staircase, is her another site-specific installation in an historic Philadelphia mansion. In addition to exhibiting floral motifs familiar to stained-glass practices, *Fracturing* features charming oil derricks, which pay homage to Pennsylvania industrial history. The Wetherill Mansion was built by the great-great grandson in a line of Quaker scientists, inventors and industrialists

Since propagation basically concerns growing more with less, discussions of propagation parallel those of sustainability, which concerns doing more with less. Several vectors constrain sustainability: non-renewable resources, energy and time.

Caroline's studio practice overcomes all three. Although Caroline uses mostly non-renewable, manmade materials, the fact that most of her art materials are upcycled fragments, and all of her past works are repurposed, grant her studio practice far more than mere metaphorical consequences. Her practice offers a model rarely encouraged by art schools, which still privilege consumption over resourcefulness. *Madder Bloom* proves the durability of yesteryear's castoffs, offering spectators the opportunity to grasp decay's delay. By working in incremental bits, Caroline's grafting skills enable her to propagate large-scale

8. This chain is more metaphorical than factual since Caroline does not recall this drawing's source imagery.

9. As part of the Landmarks Contemporary Art Projects, she installed "Keeping it Under Wraps" (2008), a series of in situ artworks addressing the Powell House. A massive black spider-web-like widow's veil flowed from a closet, while the bed's canopy was enclosed in several colorful mashinabiya, whose patterns were inspired by Martha Powell's tiny taiting hanging on a nearby wall.

projects despite her busy personal life. By employing known brands like H&M or Urban Outfitters, her artworks double as “time-capsules” for a time already past. The improvisational nature of Caroline’s practice means that she can work anywhere with anything, a strategy that I imagine is at the heart of the burgeoning art movement known as “sustainable art practices.”

In the 2010 essay I wrote to accompany her “Hinterland” exhibition, I asked the question, “When is an artwork finished?” This has since become a huge topic in Aesthetics. Caroline’s studio practice would throw most Aestheticians for a loop! While few would disagree that the recently propagated artwork is a new work, and separate from those of its pre-grafted past, there would be widespread disagreement regarding how to consider her cuttings, older artworks comingled inside newer ones. Do we consider *Cohosh* five artworks in one or just one with four prior contexts? Here is the philosophical problem. If Caroline can just graft cuttings to propagate newer artworks, what exactly is the status of cuttings from earlier installations stored in her studio, “not in play”? Are those artworks or raw material for future artworks? If they are art, are there just a few or many? Do we count each wrapped cutting as a separate artwork or do we count each

new context separately, since each new context augments each cutting’s content?

In the brief space of this essay, I cannot begin to address philosophers’ numerous concerns, though it’s clear that I must do so one day. I do claim, however, that the answer really is quite simple, though it still eludes philosophers who view artworks as “finished” and having artist-dependent contents. Artworks have always had long lives, appearing and reappearing in many new contexts, or being reworked by artists and conservators. Some have even been fabricated by posthumous representatives. The truth is that every artwork has a presentational history that begins on the first day it meets its public. When Caroline re-grafts cuttings from prior artworks, she modifies earlier artworks and begins new ones, but their presentational histories continue, which is why the backstories matter. Wrapped cuttings from earlier artworks, stored in her studio and awaiting propagation are no less artworks than those presented in “Greenhouse Mix,” since their presentational history has already been set into motion. Just like a plant cutting, to be an artwork cutting requires that it is already an artwork.

Sue Spaid, Ph. D., has been active in the artworld as a collector, curator, art writer, university lecturer and museum director since 1984. Her traveling exhibition “Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses, and Abandoned Lots,” funded by an Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award, recently concluded its tour. While Executive Director at the Contemporary Museum, Spaid co-launched “Baltimore Liste,” in support of younger artists and galleries, and wrote *A Field Guide to Patricia Johanson’s Works: Proposed, Built, Published and Collected* to accompany a touring retrospective.

A current contributor to *H+Ar*, she is a former member of the *artUS* Contributors Board. Between 1997 and 2010, she published 54 articles in this L.A. art publication and 12 in its predecessor *Art7erz*. While Curator at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (1999-2002), she authored the book *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* that accompanied the 2002 exhibition she co-curated with Amy Lipton. In addition to having written three books on eco-art, she has published over 60 essays in exhibition catalogs or take-away brochures. As an independent curator, she has organized well over 30 exhibitions.



Installation View, *Cohosh*, 2011; fabric, plastic, pipe cleaners, pins, fishing weights, thread, wire, plants and mixed media on stand, and *Asplenium*, 2014; fabric, plastic, pipe cleaners, thread, string