

Jonathan Baldock: A Transfigured Landscape

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The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer.

—Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 1992¹

Jonathan Baldock has transformed the spaces at Stephen Friedman Gallery into a landscape populated by anthropomorphic flower sculptures, which tenderly incorporate his own as well as his mother's body parts. The exhibition is a love letter to her and a rumination on cherished relationships, the garden as an environment of transfiguration and our collective place on earth.

The matriarchs in Baldock's life have long had meaningful roles in his practice. As a child, he was initially taught knitting, sewing and crocheting by his grandmother while his mother was at work, and subsequently his mother continued to pass on her own knowledge to him. Despite not being from an artistic background, she had acquired various craft skills at school that she later shared with Baldock, including helping with his early work. In his exhibition 'My biggest fear is that someone will crawl into it' at Space Studios in Hackney in 2017, the artist invited visitors to enter the building through a doorway refashioned as a gaping mouth and then into a nest-like king-sized bed surrounded by stitched drapes, within which his mother's voice could be heard reciting her own journals in a hushed whisper. She had written these texts specifically for her children, informed by her regret at not asking her own mother to share her stories. This interest in genealogy and shared narratives extends into 'we are flowers of one garden', in which Baldock takes his mother's garden in Kent as his source. This beloved site is an outlet of creativity and a space of pride for his mother, one which she has tended with the same deep care as a parent might nurture a child. This garden is a place of generative fantasy – where imagination can literally take root through planting – as well as a site of respite and restoration.

Baldock's sculptural flowers continue this fantasy even further. Each creation features a ceramic centre – also known as the pistil, the central female organ of a flower – framed by fabric petals. From each of these fertile sites emerges a human form: a vibrant orange glazed face with a pink serpentine tongue escaping from its mouth, a single ear framed by two clasping hands, a plaster pink face with rose-like petals for eyes. The body parts that animate these forms are derived from Baldock and his mother – for example, their hands reach out together from the centre of one of the flower sculptures. This series marks the first time that the artist has incorporated elements of a

body other than his own. These humanoid plant beings bring to mind Salvador Dalí's Surrealist Flowers lithographs from 1972 and his FlorDalí series of embellished botanical engravings, in which the roots of a tiger lily metamorphose into plump lips, pointing fingers spring forth from the petals of a dahlia, and a sprig of cherries sprout an ear. Baldock describes how he enjoys transgressing the rules of contemporary art, embracing what he has observed as taboo elements – including bold colour and a love for all things kitsch – as tactics of radical joy.² He finds power in reclaiming things that have been little-seen or less-recognised, including his deliberate foregrounding of craft-centred media and techniques, such as ceramics and textiles, historically marginalised as inferior to fine art. These materials have instead given him autonomy and licence to experiment.

In the first gallery space, the anthropomorphic flowers are arranged in a dance-like formation, lining the walls and circling a series of ceramic vases placed at their centre, as if presenting the plucked fruits of the gardener's labour. Choreographic staging is characteristic of Baldock's installations, often creating immersive worlds and placing his sculptures in theatrical tableaux, implying a performative act that may have just taken place, or one that is about to unfold. Some previous shows have been activated by performances, complete with costumes designed by the artist. His sculptures explore shapeshifting bodies. Rather than inanimate objects, Baldock sees them as characters who populate the worlds that he creates. A recent work, titled Eating feelings (a conversation) (2020), stages a dialogue between two marionette figures, both bestowed with some of Baldock's cast body parts. One stands upright, suspended by puppet strings that suggest imminent action, and featuring a swelling pregnant stomach along with Baldock's ears, hands and feet. In 'we are flowers of one garden', the flowers intermingle Baldock's and his mother's body parts, making it impossible to distinguish which body or face is whose; the resulting characters refuse gender binaries. One can imagine the circle of androgynous flowers in the gallery springing into motion and circling the viewers, implicating us in a dance or spiritual ceremony. As Baldock has previously reflected: 'Pagan rituals are an obvious draw for me because it's an imagining of a world where I am included.'³

Baldock began conceiving this series of works after experiencing loss for the first time, when a close friend passed away, prompting him to reflect on the precarity and potential brevity of life. The artist describes the exhibition partly as a way of keeping hold of his mother. He finds comfort in the cyclical nature of plants, how they return year after year, and solace in the idea that humans return to the earth, contribute to its fertility, and come back to life through the plants that grow from their remains. Humans and plants are interconnected in numerous, mutually supportive ways, most notably in the former's reliance on the oxygen produced by photosynthesis, enabling us to breathe. Like humans, plants are genetically complex beings, with sensory systems. Baldock is interested in things that we share rather than those that divide us, which extends to nature and our symbiotic relationship with plants.⁴ Even the materials that Baldock uses insist on a close proximity to the

natural world: each of the flowers' petals are stitched together with hessian and linen – natural, plant-based fabrics – while clay – a material derived from the earth itself – forms each of the flowers' centre and emergent body parts, further uniting the human and organic.

The history of gardening is one that is inextricable from the history of class, gender and sexuality. Gardens have long been sites for the imposition of social hierarchies as well as environments for resistance. They can be spaces that have been controlled and shaped by gendered land ownership, power, wealth and forced labour; they can be communal contexts of utopic dreams; they can be safe havens that offer peace and respite; they can provide shelter and refuge; they can be bases for guerrilla gatherings and urban interventions. For Baldock, the garden is also a place that can offer a space beyond gender and class, perhaps akin to how artist Derek Jarman approached his unusual garden at Dungeness – a blooming, sculptural landscape forged amid the unlikely context of Kent's desert-like shingle. Baldock visited Dungeness as a young boy during expeditions to tag birds with the Young Ornithologists' Club. However, it wasn't until later in life that he learned about Jarman's existence there. Jarman embraced a wild mix of planting – from cottage-garden classics such as lupins, to unruly self-seeding species like wild sweet peas, native ness plants including gorse, broom, blackthorn and valerian, coastal varieties of sea holly, sea campion and sea kale, as well as resilient plants often considered as weeds like mallow and woody nightshade. His garden at Prospect Cottage evolved into a radical space – not only contesting norms around gardening but also offering an escape from the politics of a Thatcherite Britain, complete with tyrannically oppressive attitudes towards queer experiences and the growing AIDS crisis. It was at Dungeness that he was canonised as Saint Derek of Dungeness by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1991. The salve of the 'transfigured' landscape of the garden that Jarman describes in his book *Modern Nature* is not dissimilar to the one that Baldock seeks to create – a space of liberation, of time without 'past or future, beginning or end', without societal boundaries and binaries.

A soundscape accompanies Baldock's sculptural garden: he worked with artist Luke Barton to produce a sonic collage that weaves together a recording of his farm labourer grandfather playing the accordion (with his grandmother audible laughing in the background), along with field recordings of plants that resound like heartbeats, and excerpts of both Baldock and his mother singing 'Wild Flowers' by Dolly Parton. As Parton reminds us:

When a flower grows wild
It can always survive
Wildflowers don't care where they grow.

For Baldock, the space of the garden is one of union, resilience and survival.

The senses are stimulated further as smells intermingle with the sounds that accompany us. Many of the sculptures have dried flowers or plants stuffed into their mouths – from chamomile to lavender to hibiscus. Baldock relishes in the sensory experience of making and he is fascinated by how scent can transport and trigger psychological associations. For his exhibition ‘I Am Still Learning’ at La Casa Encendida in Madrid in 2021, he invited artist Alex Margo Arden to produce a scent that mimicked the smells described by people who had encountered paranormal activity. Meanwhile, in ‘we are flowers of one garden’, one sculpture has hops pressed into it, its heady aroma summoning further layers of Baldock’s personal history by referencing his family’s experiences as hop harvesters.

The climax of the show is the presence of the Mother Flower, a monumental sculpture that presides over the gallery’s second space. Rather than featuring Baldock or his mother, the applique patterns adorning this deity-like being draw on folk art practices from the UK, the Netherlands, Poland, Germany and Romania that borrow from nature. Three smaller flowers turn to face this epic creature, whose huge fleshy root sprawls down the wall, snaking across the floor as if looking for fertile ground beyond the polished gallery floor. The padded roots of the flower opposite crawl out towards her, its tendrils seeking connection to this life-giving maternal force. Baldock and his chorus of flowers ask us to join them in their worship of this Mother, invite us to inhabit this transfigured landscape and share in their joy amidst the conflicted landscape of loss and oppressive power structures that persists outside the garden.

¹ Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 30.

² Conversation with the artist, 16 December 2022.

³ Jonathan Baldock in conversation with Rebecca Lewin, in ‘A then and a there: the performance of utopia in the work of Jonathan Baldock’, see <https://jonathan-baldock.com/texts/> (accessed 21 January 2023).

⁴ Conversation with the artist, 16 December 2022.