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It seems that neither the frontiers between the wild and the cultivated, nor those that lie between the past and the present, are so ea. ily fixed. Our...sensibilities carry a backpack of myth and recollection.

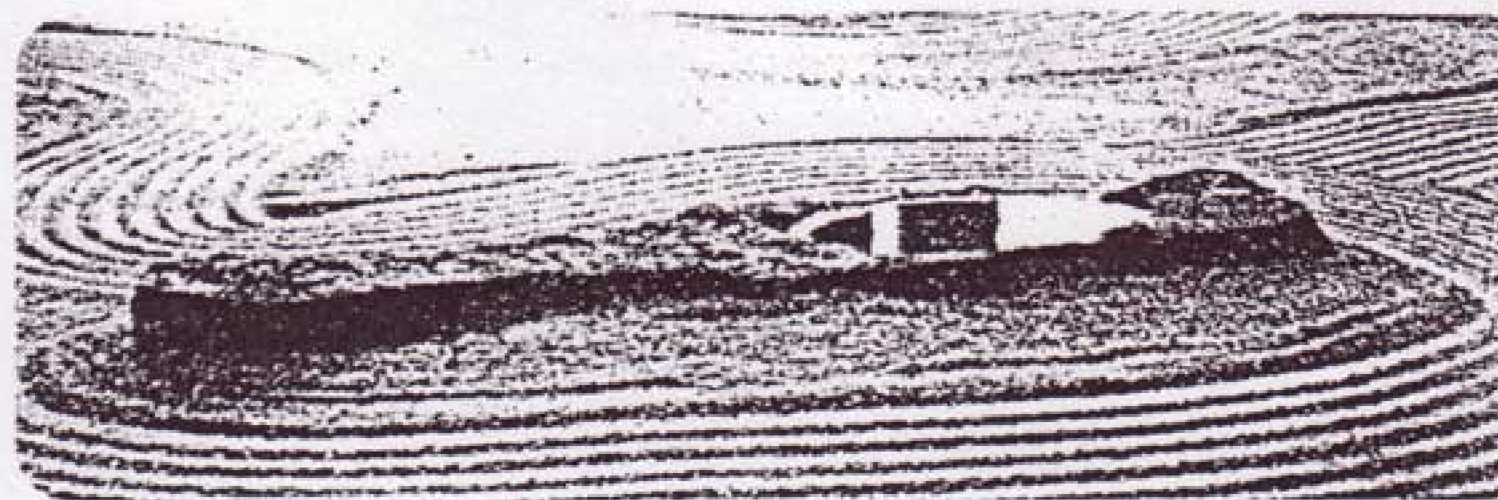
Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

Genius Loci: The Garden

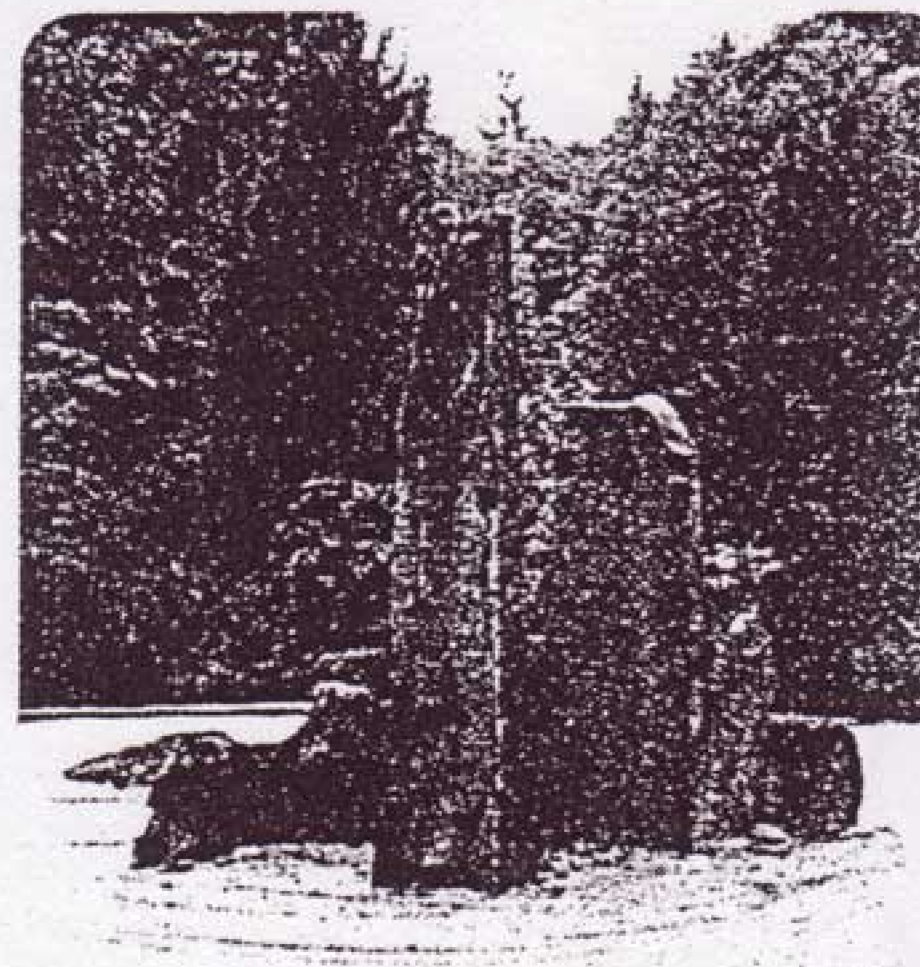
Ben Mitchell

In the "The White Bird," John Berger describes a common folk toy found throughout Europe, a hand carved wooden dove that floats on a thread in the warm air currents rising from the family stove. Though he says that it is absurd to compare this simple folk carving to, say, a Van Gogh, he nonetheless observes these things about the carving: It is a figurative representation; we recognize it. The work has a subject, it is flying. It is made carefully and lovingly from raw material. In its construction and display there is formal unity and economy. And this hand-crafted object evokes, in his words, a kind of astonishment. In "The White Bird" Berger is trying to sort out and understand the aesthetic emotion. In this, he is trying to understand the deeply complex and ultimately ineffable relationship between art and nature, between human culture and, though he would probably never use the term, wildness. "What," Berger asks, "is astonishment?"

In the early autumn of 1975, Terry Welch and his father walked through the brush on a few acres in the Cascade foothills forest east of Woodinville, a place reduced to tangled vine maple and alder scrub through successive clear cutting. They walked up a ridge between two slash-choked ponds and looked back over their shoulders over the thirty or so acres rolling below them. At that moment a blue heron flew over them. They bought the land. Today, the series of gardens that Terry Welch is creating on those few acres comprise a moving and significant work of art. What was an exploited, ravaged, discarded piece of land—a place bullied, a piece of land used like a strip mine, like a whore—has become, through Welch's vision, through the decades-long application of his aesthetic and imaginative skills, a living sculpture, a vital work of art. And it is a garden.



There are five distinct gardens that comprise the whole. The enclosed bonsai garden with koi pools and clustered azalea. One of the largest Zen gardens outside Japan. A complex patterning and shaping of traditional British-style large-scale landscaping—Welch was very early influenced by Capability Brown's 18th Century work in England with native trees and large, open vistas—incorporating rolling, open spaces with native and exotic conifer and deciduous trees and delicate understory plantings. A native Northwest mixed woodland where a path through thousand year-old cedar and fir stumps, nurse logs now for young trees, is overhung with vine maple and the path is lushly bordered, naturally, with sword fern, bracken, mahonia, salal, and huckleberry. And last, the two ponds reclaimed from the slash edged with carefully sculpted conifers and deciduous trees as well as an extensive untouched area of native species—the entire west end of the garden is a wetlands preserve. It is the water as much as the plantings which knits the whole together. And this garden is also so much more. The moon viewing pavilion sitting on the edge of one pond like an elegant, moored vessel. An island covered with Hinoki cypresses. Beaver lodges. Japanese Cedar. Tibetan cherry. Dawn redwoods, that ancient deciduous tree we believed extinct until a small, remnant grove was found in China. Hundreds of Japanese Red Pine and maples. Dogwood. Cascade granite rock placed throughout. The falls and swimming hole yet to be constructed. And all the animals who once lived there, returned now: heron, otter, swallow, deer, bear, thrush.

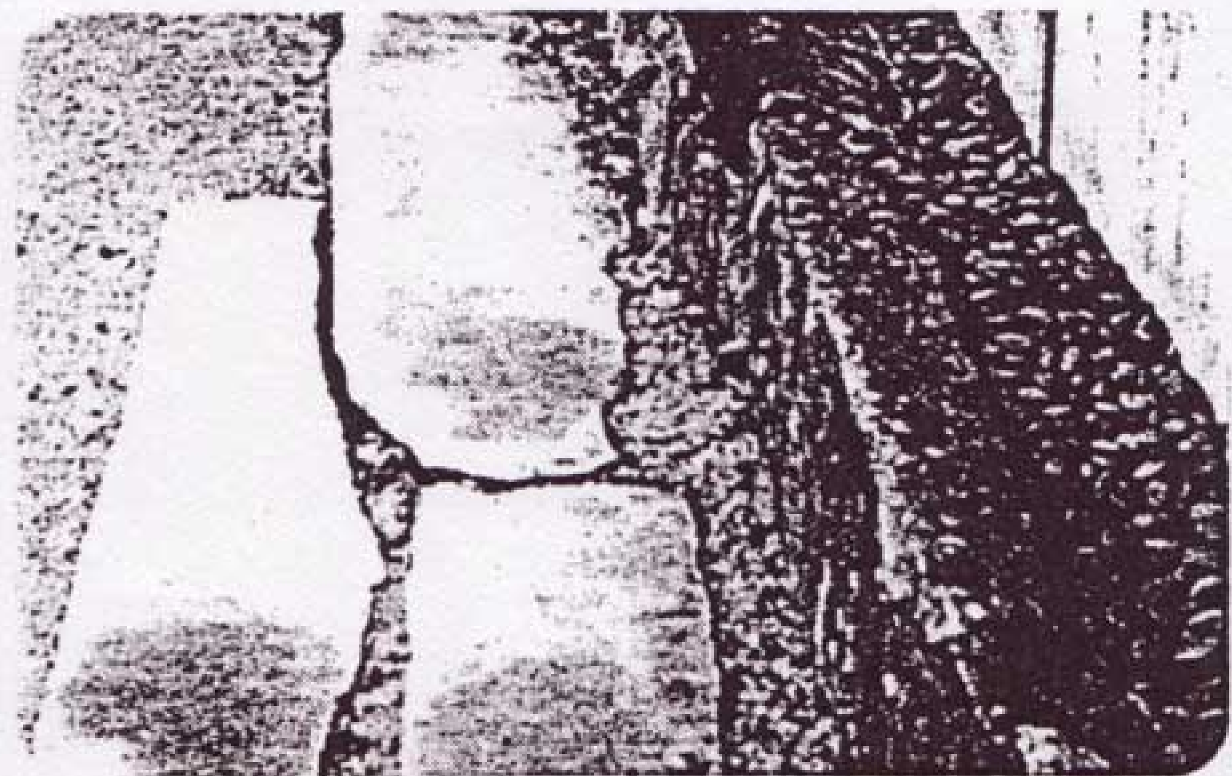


When he was just eight, Welch's mother, a Montana ranch girl, took him to see Fujitaro Kubota's Rainier Beach garden (open to the public now at 55th and Renton) which remains a deep and abiding influence on Welch's work today. Later he visited the Butchart Gardens in Victoria and Wenatchee's Ohme Gardens, returning again and again. He studied Japanese at the University of Washington and then traveled in Japan after finishing his degree. His grandfather was Superintendent of King County Parks. Welch knows the ways of the Snoqualmie, the people who lived on the land before him, and he knows their stories. In a very real sense Welch is now adding to the Snoqualmie's story cycle, making a home for the beaver and fox, the heron and swallow, and by doing so, making a home for us. Seven miles east of Woodinville, in a place where the timber companies first ransacked the land and now developers sift through the ruins making their millions in a feeding frenzy of unimaginable greed leaving behind an unbearable suburban ugliness of cheap, tawdry structures, wide ribbons of road, and strip malls—are there no political or corporate leaders in King and Kitsap and Snohomish Counties brave enough or smart enough to stop the ruin of Puget Sound? There, Welch has created a simple garden, a sanctuary, an art, a life that fully integrates craft, skill, imagination, formal aesthetics, art history, and a depth of spirituality that is all but dried up and blown away from contemporary art.

When Welch is through with his work—not the garden though, for gardens, like forests and wetlands, and meadows, are never finished—the garden and the land will be deeded back to the Snoqualmie.

The other day I was walking out to my mailbox and a little red car slowed down to stop in the road. Common enough, some day tourist needing directions—I live more than two hundred miles from Welch's garden on a tributary of the Columbia River near the end of a dead-end road. The driver was young, handsome after the current urban fashions: closecut hair shaped and sculpted, collarless shirt rumpled from a long drive, hideous

sunglasses in a color some catalog might call "Whidbey Island Sunset" that wrapped around his temples all odd shapes and angles like something out of The Jetsons. He was a nice man, momentarily lost and looking for the site of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla fish hatchery that's going up this summer. The reservation is south of us over in the next drainage but the Confederated Tribes has treaty rights to fish management on the stream. (I didn't know the government honored any of those treaties, did you?) He'd overshot the site by only a couple of miles. "It's the ungrazed pasture on the down river side of the green double-wide," I said, "just three places back, you can't miss it". "Down river side?" he asked me, "which way is the river flowing?" He'd been driving up the river for twelve miles, driving deeper into the mountains, gaining elevation with the river flowing against him all the way. The road follows the river from town, awful common in western topography. He'd crossed three bridges; and for the last four miles the river was just off his right shoulder in some places, only twenty yards from the road, flowing high and loud with late spring run-off. "Which way is the river flowing?" So I asked, as casual as I could muster, "Why are you interested in the hatchery?" "I'm a Bonneville Power engineer," he says, "we're funding the Indian hatchery. Which way is the river flowing?"



photos: Terry Welch

Several views of Terry Welch's rock garden

In Frederick Law Olmstead's "Conception of the Plan," his proposal for New York's Central Park, he wrote, "The Park throughout is a single work of art, and as such subject to the primary law of every work of art, namely, that it shall be framed upon a single, noble motive." "Nobility" isn't a word we use much anymore; it feels a little precious, a little (go ahead, say it) old-fashioned, on the tongue. In Europe, Asia, and in North and South America we have been bringing the woods and streams and mountains into the cities, as abstractions, as gardens and parks and fountains (paying attention to which way the river flows), for centuries. The questions I want to ask here are these: How different, fundamentally, essentially, is a garden from a painting or carving? Does the myth of creativity—art for art's sake, we say—undermine our ability to perceive the garden as art? What do we believe today? Has Modernism and all its academic offspring driven a wedge between what it is we know—deeply, in our bones and our memories, about astonishment, beauty, sincerity—and what it is we believe? What role, after all, does art play in our lives today? "Issues about whether or not something is art have been part of the ongoing story of modernism all along. But the other tradition, the merging of art and life, has never really fit into the framework of aesthetics, and was often deplored by more 'serious' artists," Suzi Gablik reminds us. The 'other tradition.' Isn't a garden art, fine art, especially if the aesthetics out of which that garden is made comprise a spirit which ennobles us, which enriches us? Art and life? Which way is the river flowing? What stories are important to us anymore?

One of the most remarkable characters in the history and lore of Puget Sound's Indians is Old S'Beow. Originally an Arctic fox, he changed himself into a man. Ki-ki, the bluejay, was his grandmother. Ki-ki could change herself into any thing or animal she wished to. This is the origin myth of the Snoqualmies.

Snoqualm, the moon, the King of the heavens, commanded Spider to make a cedar bark rope and stretch it from sky to earth. Finding the rope, Old S'Beow's son, Si'Beow, told Ki-ki to climb up the rope with Old S'Beow and to drill a hole in the sky so Old S'Beow could pass into the other world. When Old S'Beow got through the hole he found a great lake. There he changed himself into Beaver and was caught in a dead-fall trap Snoqualm had set in the lake. The next morning Snoqualm, finding Beaver in his trap with his skull crushed, took Beaver back to his lodge, skinned him, and threw the carcass into the smokehouse. Snoqualm went to sleep; Old S'Beow materialized into Beaver once again and went out into the Sky world to explore. There he found a great forest, pulled up a handful of the trees and with his magic made them small and tucked them under one arm. Under his other arm he gathered up the tools for making daylight. He found fire and put ashes and leaves and bark around it and carried it in one hand. He found Sun hidden in a corner of Snoqualm's lodge and carried Sun away in his other hand. He swam through the lake, found the hole Ki-ki had made in the sky and climbed down the rope back to Earth. There he gave fire to the people. He stuck the trees in the ground and they became what was the once magnificent Cascade Mountains forest. He made daylight. And last, he set Sun in its place so there would be light and heat for the people. In so doing, he brought consciousness to his people.

"For me," Terry Welch writes, "living in this sanctuary has been akin to becoming Beaver. The Snoqualmie myth is what Joseph Campbell refers to as a metaphor for the hero's journey, the reaching out into the unknown in search of one's bliss...the great adventure that we all take as we experience life, seeking a place in the cosmos. The gardens are meant to celebrate nature: one's own nature, the planet's nature, and the spirit of the cosmos. In the gardens there is an underlying reverence for everything."

Like painting and sculpture, gardens are an abstraction from the natural world, an ordering of the wild. Although there are a growing number of artists who use the image of the garden for an increasingly activist art, only very little of this work is aesthetically and intellectually substantive: Helen and Newton Harrison's complex structures fusing the vocabularies of biology and poetry; Mel Chin's "revival gardens" for industrial waste; Lycia Trouton's architectural structures using logging and mining waste; Lynne Hull's delightfully minimal "Raptor Roosts"; Heather McGill and John Rolff's "Isla de Umunnum." These artists' work encompasses an understanding of the landscape's past traditions as a source of illumination for the present and future," in Simon Schama's words. In this way, their work is more enduring than the earlier, earthworks projects of Heizer, Smithson, Holt and others who used the land as mere backdrop, as setting or simply as raw material.

Terry Welch's gardens—like the gardens at Iztapalapa that Cortez cruelly burned over four hundred years ago, like Kyoto's extraordinary temple gardens, or Bernini's Versailles fountains—are exquisitely constructed from raw materials, are ordered and harmonic, are moving abstractions yet still fully figurative, and bring us, through all our senses, to question and explore our day-to-day lives, the enormous potential in the human imagination and spirit, the place of art in our lives. As a work, a life's work, of the spirit and the imagination, and as simple hard work with his hands, Terry Welch's gardens astonish us.

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