

Curatorial Essay

The Artist's Garden Project

Kyle Zsombor: A Green Desire

By Liz Wylie

Gardening is not a rational act.

– Margaret Atwood

Nothing is more the child of art than a garden.

– Sir Walter Scott



One thing that sets humans apart from animals is our practice of both agriculture and gardening. (There may be the odd actual exception to this – I think I recall seeing some footage in a nature show once of a bird that seemed to be arranging plants within its living area.) The history of our efforts at planting things, either for food or pleasure, or both, goes back thousands of years, and has varied widely in approach in different parts of the world. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of travel is observing and appreciating the farms and gardens of other places: terraced rice paddies in South East Asia, potted oleanders in Italy, the temple gardens of Japan. The crops and ornamental plants grown in a place form a part of how we may

later mentally conjure up that locale.



*The Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon,
engraving by Martin Heemskerck.*

In considering a new contemporary art project for our outdoor courtyard space at the Kelowna Art Gallery, the idea of creating a series of artist's garden commissions seemed appropriate. Not only will a planted garden of some kind give visitors pleasure and a place to relax and connect with the natural world, but it also nudges gallery goers to consider the history of gardens as they have evolved, linked as they have been to both their specific place and to the prevailing philosophy of their age. The notion of the commissioned garden is ages old. How will artists in the Okanagan respond to such an opportunity and what contemporary twist(s) will they bring to our courtyard space? Each artist will have an entire year to work with, so that all four seasons are available for each commission. Each will begin in the spring, with the advent of the growing season in the Okanagan.



Gardens have been around for a long time. We have surviving evidence in tomb paintings that the ancient Egyptians had ornamental plantings around ponds, and gardens in the interior courtyards of houses are depicted in murals in Pompeii. China and Japan both have garden traditions that go back for centuries. The links between the values and attitudes of a culture are embodied (one might say planted) in their gardening styles. This is the most fascinating aspect of the history of garden design – how a garden embodies and reflects the philosophies and metaphysics of its time and culture.



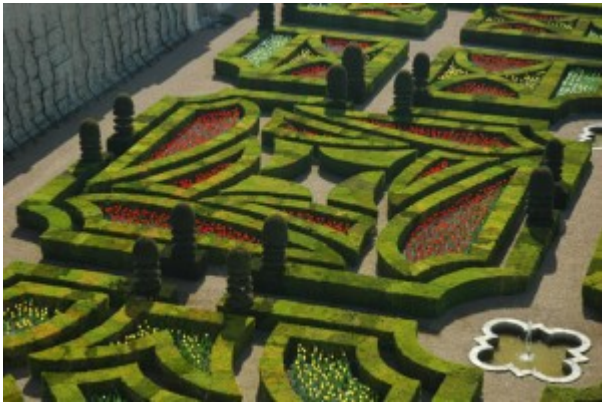
*Pond in a Garden (fresco from the Tomb of
Nebamun), ancient Egypt.*

The only gardens we know about from medieval Europe were those planted within fortified castle walls or protected monasteries. These early models, which were often plainly set out rows and squares of herbs and vegetables, led to



increasingly elaborate ornamental and decorative gardens in the times of the Renaissance and after. With the age of reason, the botanical garden developed in Europe and were set out by classification, not with the aim of beauty, but for knowledge. In the 17th and 18th centuries, France was the leader in ornamental gardens, and all wildness in the plants was bent to the human will, with the gardens' parterres, topiaries, precise gravel paths, and complex yet symmetrical patterns of flower beds. It was an exciting discovery that gardens could communicate power, and in some notable cases, huge, expensive construction projects and plantings made sure that

this was so.



At her Chateau Malmaison, outside of Paris, Napoleon's Josephine apparently aimed to have examples of every known species of roses in the world. She was also keen on plants that had never before been grown in France, and exotic animals from far-away lands that were allowed to roam free on the estate. The trait of human acquisitiveness has come out in gardens as much as anywhere else.



The Palladian Bridge, Stowe Landscape Gardens, Buckinghamshire. Credit: Peter Dean



Central Park, New York, designed by F.L. Olmsted.

With the flowering of the European Romantic movement in art, music, and literature, gardens burst their restraining borders and became more natural, seeming like wild parklands, dotted with statuary and fake ruins called follies. From a former tyranny, there was a move to light-hearted informality. This new style caught on everywhere and was called the English Garden. The late 19th- to early-twentieth-century landscape designer F.L. Olmsted took this notion or approach and extended it into park design. No effort was spared in order to have the various elements look natural, although Olmsted's parks were meticulously planned. In the twentieth century, garden design became widely varied, and drew from all these past ideas.

The invention of the vertical garden, or living wall, is generally credited to the French botanist and garden designer Patrick Blanc, in the 1980s. One of his most famous of these is that on the outside of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. It was this phenomenon that captured the imagination of local artist Kyle Zsombor for his commission in our courtyard space. The vertical garden does not depend on soil, but on a hydroponics-based system of plant nourishment. Zsombor has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of British Columbia Okanagan. His artistic practice has generally encompassed socio-political critique, using sculpture/installation or montage. He has an avid interest in gardening and has taken the opportunity to add this year-long project to his studio practice. For his commission to produce an artist's garden, Zsombor has planned a two-pronged installation. One component is to be a vertical garden on the north-facing wall of the courtyard. The other element will be a planted arbor of clustered pillars in the centre of the space.

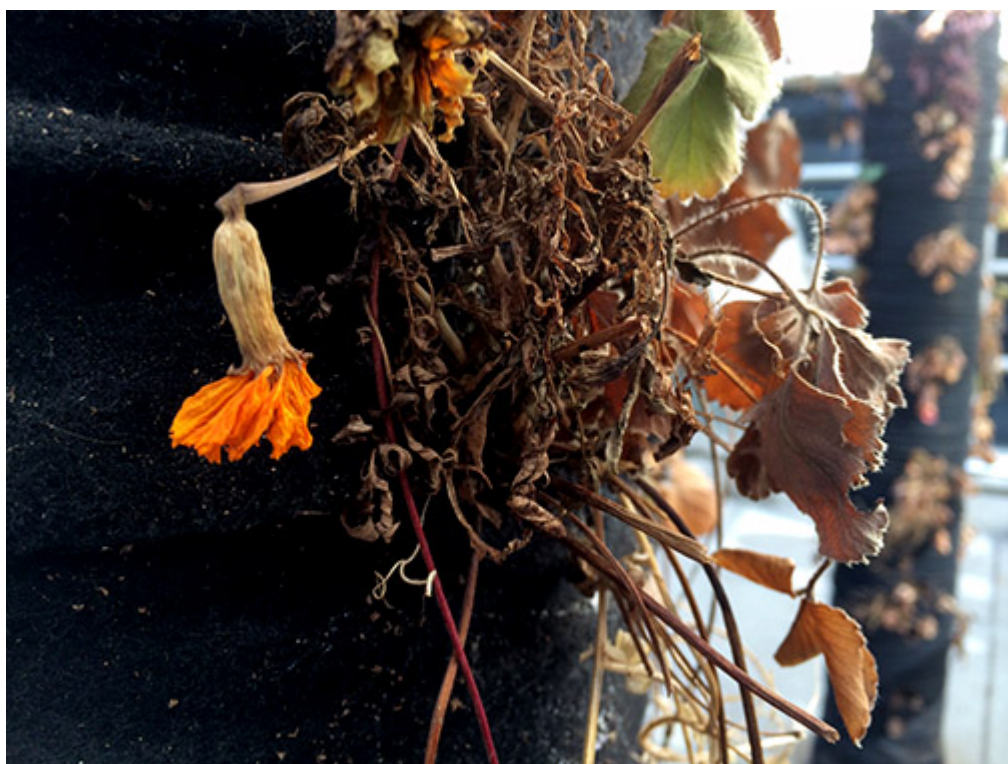
Because plants are alive and so individual, as garden visitors we can sometimes focus in on them and pay less attention to the garden's overall design and planning. For example, how has the terrain been sculpted to form hills or graded to become flat? All the while the garden has been inviting, intimidating, impressing the visitor, leading us on an orchestrated route, according to the aim of the designer. This inattention to the structure of a garden may well end up being the case with the elements designed by Zsombor in his installation. No matter. Throughout the centuries, one constant underlying theme or reference in any garden has been the notion of the garden as a microcosm of the universe, and as a contained earthly paradise or Eden. We hope for nothing less from this project.

Liz Wylie is Curator of the [Kelowna Art Gallery](#).

Installation Images

Scroll down to view the installation at different times of the year.

March 10, 2014





January 7, 2014





December 2, 2013





September 15, 2013









July 24, 2013







June 14, 2013







Artist's Biography

Kyle Zsombor

Born

1979, Kelowna, BC

Education

2008 Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, Kelowna, BC

2002 Bachelor of Arts, Okanagan University College, Kelowna, BC

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2009 *Kyle Zsombor: Fantasy League*, Vernon Public Art Gallery, Vernon, BC

Selected Group Exhibitions

2013 untitled sculptural installation, *Ecotone* art and music event, Rotary Centre for the Arts, Kelowna, BC

2012 untitled sculptural installation, *Ecotone* art and music event, Rotary Centre for the Arts, Kelowna, BC

2011 untitled sculptural installation, *Ecotone* art and music event, Rotary Centre for the Arts, Kelowna, BC

2010 untitled sculptural installation, *Ecotone* art and music event, Rotary Centre for the Arts, Kelowna, BC

2009 untitled sculptural installation, *Barnival* art and music event, Black Box Theatre, Kelowna, BC

Orinthaller and the apnea of speech, Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, BC

2008 untitled sculptural installation, *Cakewalk* event, Laurel Building, Kelowna, BC

OUC Travelling Exhibition, travelled to the Art Gallery of the South Okanagan, Penticton, BC, the Vernon Art Gallery, Vernon, BC, and the Shuswap Art Gallery, Salmon Arm, BC

2007 untitled installation, *Duotone 07* art and music event, Kelowna, BC

2006 untitled performance, *Duotone 06* art and music event, former CN Rail Station, Kelowna, BC

2005 untitled mural, *Duotone 05* art and music event, Kelowna, BC

Image is God, Lift Gallery, Montreal

Board of Directors Show, Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, BC

The Canadians are Coming!, SKAM Gallery, Hamburg, Germany

2004 interactive installation, *Duotone 04* art and music event, Habitat, Kelowna, BC

2003 untitled installation, *Duotone 03* art and music event, Renaissance Building (now destroyed), Kelowna, BC

2002 *Blue Show*, Gallery Vertigo, Vernon, BC

Selected Bibliography

Blue: North Okanagan Artists Alternative Exhibition. Vernon, BC: Gallery Vertigo, 2002.

Horizon: twenty-five contemporary artists from the Okanagan. Vancouver: Art Horse, 2012.

Collections

Kyle Zsombor's work is contained in several private collections in western Canada.