

Jutta Koether

How goes it?

28 August - 2 October 2021

18 July 2021

Dear Jutta,

Following your invitation, I visited your studio-apartment at the end of May – as I have so many times in recent years – to view your new paintings, which were and are still in production. During my last visit, at the end of June, you told me that you see the 5 Gardens you are currently working on as spaces. This immediately reminded me of an account by Lucy R. Lippard, describing the motives behind the post-formalists' move away from the image and into three-dimensional space in the 1960s and '70s – the point, she claimed, was to produce “truly moving experiences.” Even if your works are not three-dimensional, they still define (themselves as) places in a literal sense, since they ask to be viewed spatiotemporally. The 5 Gardens hung in a row on the walls of your studio; thinking of this arrangement, and imagining them installed in the gallery in Cologne, they strike me as distinct habitats that nonetheless diffuse into one another. As such, they recall the “hortus conclusus” of the Middle Ages – a topos that is most often associated with the iconography of the Virgin Mary, and which has experienced numerous interpretations over time, including in Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia ego* (1638-40). His landscapes emerged in your earlier works as a model of the stage intrinsic within the image; now, in the 5 Gardens, they dissolve into a web of bright pastel lines, curves, loops, flourishes, hearts, and streaks. Such as in that garden of yours where Yvonne Rainer recreates the lascivious pose of the *Barberini Faun*, which was found badly damaged in the moat of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome back in the 17th century, after which it was restored and baroquified by the Bernini workshop. Correspondingly, I read your pixelated neo-pointillist plant abstractions as reworkings and revisions of those basic forms (and formulas) of painting that you have tested out, performed, and further developed over the decades. The homologies of shape and motif that are so characteristic of your repertoire – dots and circles appear as spheres, pearls, grapes, apples, eyes, smileys, breasts, nipples – now find their continuation as flowers, plants, grasses, and weeds. It's as if they were perpetuating that “theoretical schema between eye and object” that Louis Marin describes in relation to Paul Cézanne, and the repeated analogy he drew between the apple and the eyeball. Their motivic entanglement is explained by the art historian as an expression of Cézanne's basic principle of concentric observation.

23 July 2021

Dear Jutta,

I can't get the connection between Yvonne Rainer's faun pose and the nude figure in *Lucian David and Eli* (2014) out of my head, in part since you removed the dog from Lucian Freud's *David and Eli* (2003–04) and placed it next to Rainer, but now as a big cat. In addition, her gesture – painted by you from a photograph, but reinterpreted as a victory pose – creates a connection to another of Freud's works, *Nude with Leg Up (Leigh Bowery)* (1992). The homology of their extremities – Yvonne's slightly bent arm and round, half-closed fist; Leigh's leg, phallic and kinked like a switchblade – mean the scene can also be understood

as an experiment in choreographic techniques. Painterly body studies are linked with those of modern dance and queer performance, allowing the post-avant-garde aesthetic of the fragment to be read as an inextricable and rootlike system of imitation, variation, and montage. Spread across this and the other garden scenes are dots, circles, and lines whose colors bring to mind blossoms, leaves, and grass, branching out Cézanne's concentric apple-eye schema into a rhizomatic narrative. In this way, your 5 Gardens turn out to be the sites of non-linear or non-patrilinear networks – the painterly depiction of Rainer's parodic gesture not only recalls Bowery's own fawnlike pose, but also that of Freud's daughter Bella in *Naked Portrait on a Red Sofa* (1989-91). The way in which the images that served as your templates seem to have grown into the thicket of color – at times light, at others dense – reminds me, not least, of the performative “silhouettes” of the conceptual and land artist Ana Mendieta. Perhaps she was also one of the artists that inspired Lucy R. Lippard in her thinking. Borrowing from a definition of flora, your 5 Gardens appear as an inventory of the mixed environments of art, pop, and mass culture you have developed over the decades; of the “kinships” you have identified and cultivated during this time. It's as if the function of the new paintings consisted in the way they summarize and record processes that are intentional and steered, but which also take on a life of their own, and so are ultimately uncontrollable: appropriation and experimentation, system and contingency, careful cultivation and rampant proliferation, rejection and resumption. These processes find spatial and temporal resonance in the topos of the garden: on the one hand in relation to the progression of your work over time, and on the other with regard to cyclical patterns within it. For art and the art market, too, are subject to climatic conditions and their effects on temperature and light. In this, I recognize one possible reason for the paintings' changing rhythm, and for the abrupt breaks between their different zones of color, which range from vivid to faded to almost colorless: it's as if the gardens were composed of a series of accumulated microclimates.

24 July 2021

Dear Jutta,

I'm writing you this third postcard after spending several days with a friend in our shared garden in the Uckermark, where we harvested those fruits and vegetables that the slugs and starlings left for us. As we worked, we received worrying messages from the flooded west, including the area around Cologne, where you lived for a long time and where your pictures will soon be exhibited at Galerie Buchholz. The notorious debates around the possibility of natural disaster have now given way to the certainty of irreversible climate change. The latent apocalyptic mood lends the garden new meaning, as the site of sensitive habitats that will need to be adapted to the changing climate with more resistant tree and plant species – among other things, this points to the parallels between botany and colonial and migratory histories. In this sense, the quote I came across while walking today, which claims that “the nicest path is through the garden,” can equally be thought of in political terms, and applied to your new series of works. Understood as an open passage, the garden no longer serves as a line demarcating the border between the private and the public – as a hellish (or purgatorial) space representing the capitalist logic of property ownership. In this context, I am reminded of the path that leads to your studio-apartment in Berlin. Anyone who enters or leaves this long and narrow space – light at its front side and dark at its rear – must traverse a short footpath through a tiny, overgrown garden. This garden, then, belongs to your immediate field of view, it is part of your daily life. This reminds me of the impressionist painter Berthe Morisot, who you have quoted in your work in the past. Linda Nochlin claims that it was Morisot, along with Mary Cassat, who introduced the idea of the garden as a gender and class-specific site, problematizing it from the perspective of a female producer. That women only had limited access to public space can be seen in the ambivalent portrayal of the domestic garden as both a social “space of enclosure” (Foucault) and an extended plein air studio. As with Morisot and Cassat, in your work, too, it is women who set the tone. And as in Morisot's own gardens, the focus of your adaptations is on the fluctuating relationships between their different colors, which at times appear organic and saturated, at others broken and tentative. In the same way that Morisot's gardens serve as passages between impressionism and expressionism, the quasi-pointillist pastiche of your grape motif produces spaces of resonance between painterly technique and digital technology – spaces that speak of aesthetic and social upheavals.

25 July 2021

Dear Jutta,

The painter Joan Mitchell, who you have written on in the past, tellingly made the garden the central topos of her work, distinguishing it from what she considered to be “dirty” nature. Discussing Mitchell’s 1971–72 work *Wet Orange*, Lucy R. Lippard talks of the contrast between the painting’s lower and upper sections: while the former contains dark, earthy green and red tones and brown lines, the latter opens up into bright, airy patches of apple green, blue, and yellow, creating fields of pure colored light. The various shades of paint are applied in such a way that their visual weight also varies, which Lippard sees as a disintegration of one of the painting’s basic underlying structures. This structure then returns, but with its pace now varied, in order that the act of painting is played out anew. I myself recognize the motif of disintegration in the way in which the classical tension between figure and ground is translated in your 5 Gardens into multiple structural meshes that are at times opaque, at others lucid. It’s as if the quasi-automated application of paint engenders the shift in weight and tempo that Lippard describes, making it almost impossible to discern the works’ internal logic according to the usual oppositions between methodical structure and spontaneous expression, systematic function and contingent effect, fluid gesture and considered form, visual lucidity and material opacity. Your retrospective *Tour de Madame* ran first at the Museum Brandhorst in Munich (2018), then at Mudam in Luxembourg (2019), before continuing as *Libertine* at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (2019–20). Following this tour, the garden now appears as a meta-genre whose function is not only to depict, but also to recall details. Here I am thinking, for example, of the return of the giant blue ribbons from *Encore* and *Neue Frau* (both 2019) – these now appear as one element of your gardens, which were inspired by Lucian Freud’s *Herbarium* works. And not to forget the plastic palm leaf – a copy of a readymade decorative utensil – that found its way from your *Tour de Madame* paintings into one of the gardens. The fact that it is now changing tones of purple and blue, yellow and green that dominate, in addition to your signature red, leaves me searching for a biochemical metaphor. Similar to photosynthesis, your 5 Gardens seem to be sites where the transformation of (painted) matter by climate and light is staged and examined.

27 July 2021

Dear Sabeth,

How Goes It? This will be the title of the exhibition. The 5 Gardens were collected yesterday. I carried on working on them right up until the final moment and wanted to let you know what their overarching title is, and what has happened since your last visit.

There are many new constellations of color, paint, and metallics, and our conversation about Joan Mitchell’s *Wet Orange* definitely left its mark. But the figures, too, have edged their way into the gardens and are now wildly entangled within them – they seem to act as objects or torn symbols that summon lines of varying diction into their surroundings, both conscious and unconscious. I want to be an orchestra. Or a garden. Of wild precision. I often lost myself in my work during this period. There were times when my sole communication was with the decorative plastic leaf you mentioned, sometimes for days on end. Otherwise I just painted what I perceived and remembered.

Fragments of these memories are voiced in every gesture I painted, in every dab of color. And there is resonance: universal sound, where new growth/chatter/thoughts repeatedly break through the ether, as long as you’re prepared to listen.

I grew up in a garden. And I have always visited gardens, in order that I can contribute to shape them.

“Breed your own models.” Yvonne Rainer has accompanied me throughout my life as an artist, and still does. And so I would also like to term my time at the Whitney ISP, in New York in ’92 and ’93, as a sort of garden, in the sense in which you describe it. It was there that I experienced Rainer first-hand, as someone who criticized and questioned me and my painting.

In the previous weeks and months of this year, 2021, I have become aware of where the pictures are leading me, concretely and at this particular moment. My non-cultivations and strange creatures, activated with ribbons; *Pink Ladies*; vulva diagrams and gamete forms; triangles, leaves, palm branches. My *Empire of Flora*, following Poussin and Twombly, or my jungle landscapes, following Henri Rosseau, are worlds of “perpetual un-doing.” A thing that always conducts itself meta-representationally and across media. Like the body itself. And such a body learns from other bodies. A picture learns from other pictures.

“Portraits of a garden.” I consider the 5 Gardens to be portraits, which now relinquish even this genre description. They are all titled *Unphotographable*. Rather than give them special titles or numbers, they are distinguished instead by small changes in their orthography:

UnphOtographable
UnphotographAble
UnphoTographable
UnphotogRaphable
UnpHotographable

I took the term “unphotographable” from the lyrics to *My Funny Valentine*. The desire that cannot be described in one take, or ever be ideally fulfilled.

You make me smile
with my heart.