

gardens of delight and power



images by carol hoorn fraser

Gardens of Delight and Power

Images by
CAROL HOORN FRASER

Edited by
John Fraser and Barbara Bickle

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Gardens of Delight and Power is for Joyce and Rob Stevenson.

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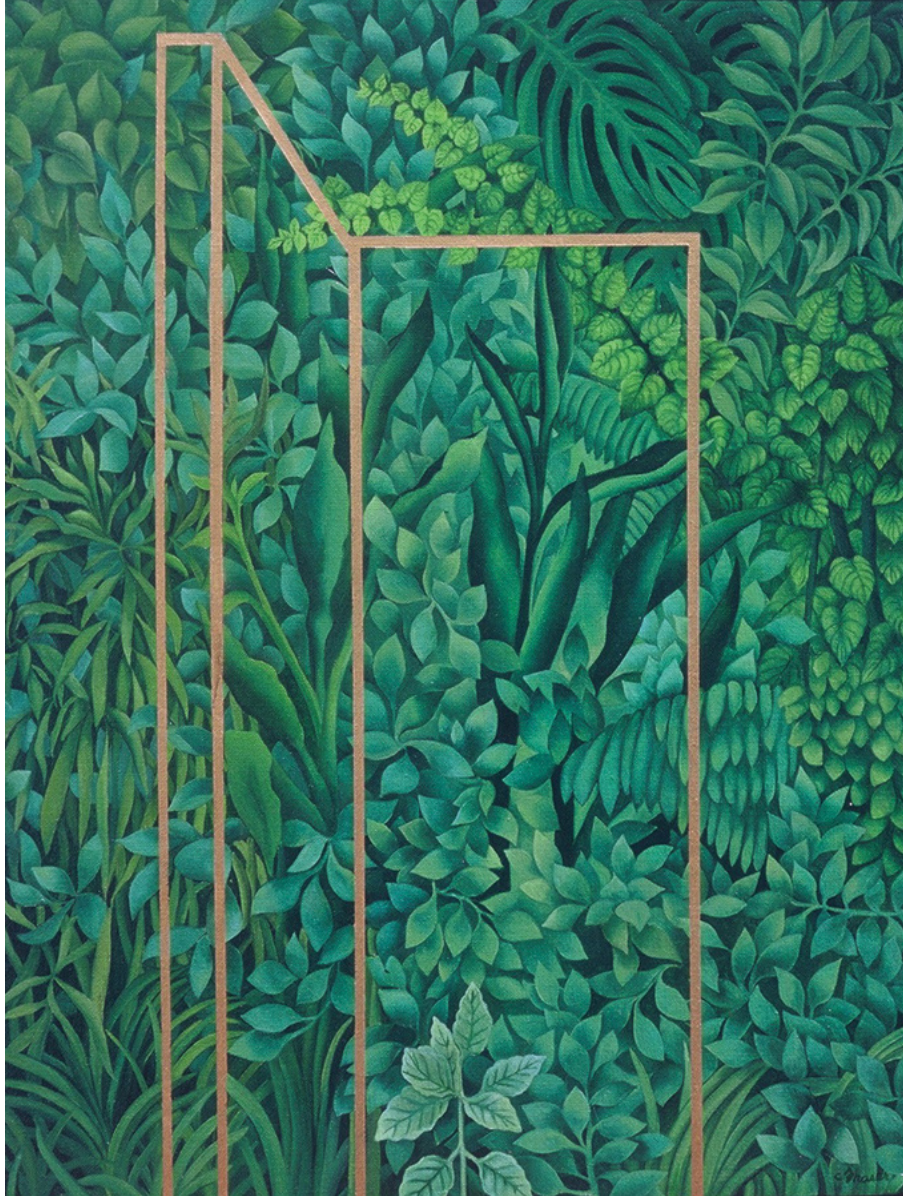
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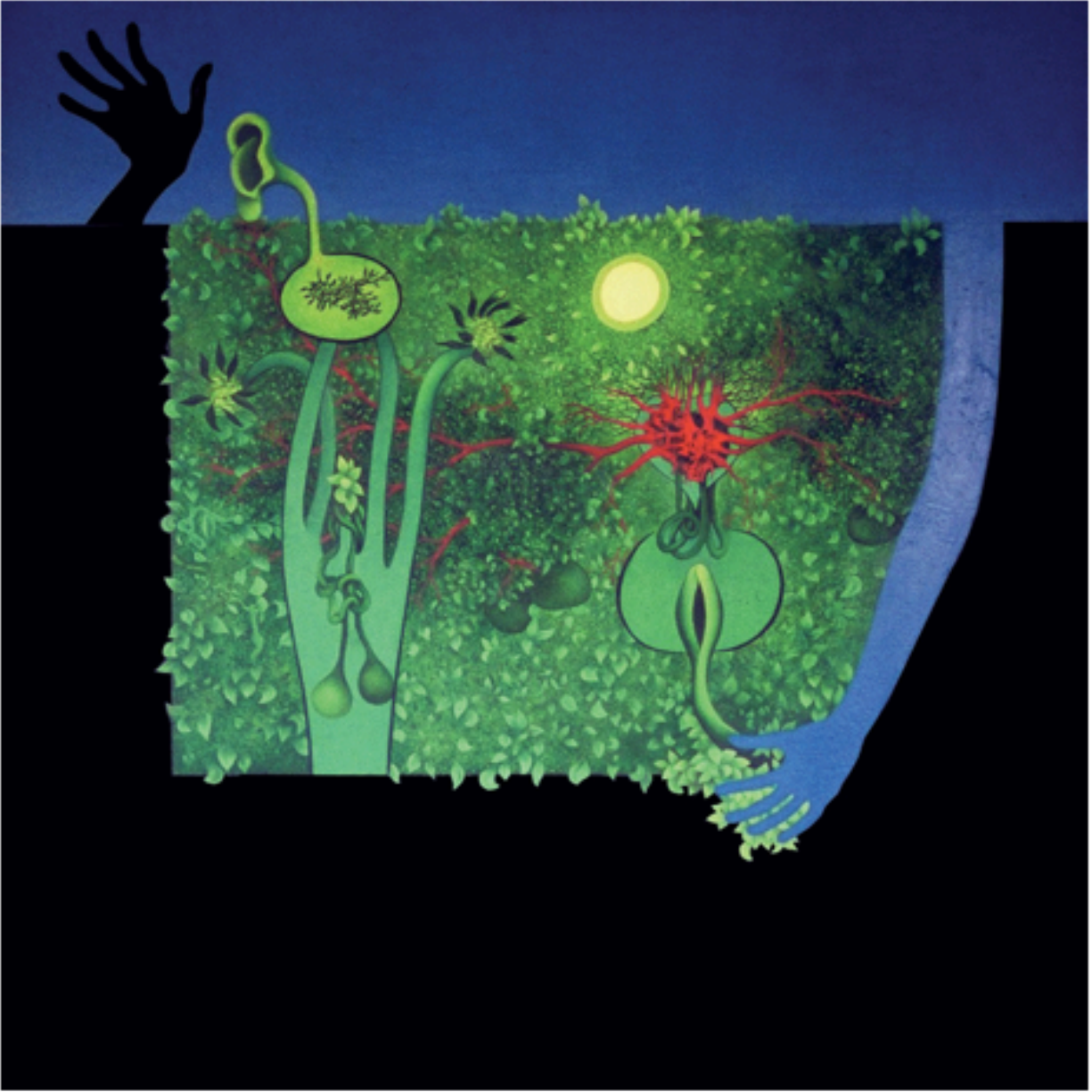


Network
1981 – 82
oil

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Dawn
1981 - 83
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1973
oil



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1985
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Who Are Those People?
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Switch
n.d.
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Carol Hoorn Fraser

1968

Photo: JF

Gardens of Delight and Power: Afterword

...this eternal looking beyond appearances for the 'real,' on the part of people who have never even been conscious of appearances.

(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

What is decisive is ... a tremendous drive to bring out the main features so that the others disappear in the process. In this state one enriches everything out of one's own fullness; whatever one sees, whatever one wills, is seen swelled, taut, strong, overloaded with strength.

(Friedrich Nietzsche)

I

On a wall, seven lionesses are hunting, but not all in the same way— three younger ones are thrusting forward, low down, an older couple are pausing and assessing, another is at a full stop. Foreheads are so low that you wonder about brains. None look as though they had a sense of humour.

Do we know the lions' names and characters, the way we do with some of their cousins out on the Serengeti now? Sorry, no, the Disney crew didn't stop by the cave. Yes, this is a cave, quite a big one, in the side of a deep valley. Chauvet, in the South of France.

And the artist or artists? What about *their* characters?

But do we really need or want more information than those lines and shadings on the wall?

We feel, surely, the artist(s) watching individual lions hunting in the hot valley, entering into their taut bodies, empathizing with them (the

presentation isn't hostile), fixing them in the mind's eye as with a camera, enacting them back into muscular life on the wall, with individuatings like those I've described, and enjoying the craftsman's sense of getting things right.

II

The artists, if we knew more about them, might be selfish, vain, cowardly opportunists. Do we really want to know if we would have liked, personally, the speaker in "O Western Wind" or want to know if he was being sincere?

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

An attempted mindtrip back back back is a shadow dance of uncertainties, and taking your choice of fictions about the "real" minds of the artists won't get you from postulated shaman trances and Otherworld visitings to the wall particulars.

And these, so marvellously there and in motion, aren't thirty-thousand-year-old lions. They are just what the Disney crews have been photographing in Africa now.

And if how they look isn't radically different—no huge symbolic fangs, or enormous hooked claws—then the act of seeing back then wasn't radically different either. If it had just been a matter of symbols, stick lions ("LION") would have done just as well.

The drama of the whole brilliant mural, the surging forward lions, the different bodily energies of the other creatures, wasn't—surely? surely?—

just accidental. The rhino's synchronized high curved horns weren't multiple because the artist couldn't make up his mind. Where else would one go in Western art before the Futurists for a comparable evocation of motion?

III

If an artist/photographer out on the Serengeti were to step through a time-portal with her portfolio, you can be sure that she/he and those cave artists would soon be in excited discourse about subjects, and media, and treatments, and difficulties experienced, speaking the universal language of pointing fingers, eye-questionings, smiles, emphatic nods of agreement. Photographs and cameras would have been fascinating. There would be lookings through viewfinders.

You can watch a "lost" jungle tribe being "found" on camera, and that quick-eyed smiling elder there, transported into a "civilized" gathering, would be unfazed and undeceived as he figured out the rules of the game and the motives of the players.

Watching lovely documentary series like *Orangutan Island* and *Escape to Chimpanzee Eden*, and looking at online photographs, you *know* without need of voiceovers what emotions you're seeing—compassion, anger, puzzlement, curiosity, contentment etc—just as you do with unverbaling humans.

It's what's in front of you that's the real reality, not fuzzy and inaccessible interiors that could have issued in "I'm-glad-you-asked-me-that" explanations, if they had verbal language on top of the perfectly sufficient languages of their powerful, hairy, beautiful bodies.

It's those wall paintings themselves that bring us together with the makers.

IV

Carol Hoorn Fraser kept no journals. She didn't, so far as we know, write to fellow artists about what she was trying to accomplish in a particular image. She didn't explain things to her husband, nor did he enquire. Which was as it should be. From time to time she'd ask him whether some work seemed finished. And he didn't ask her what she was trying to do, he simply said if some area in it didn't seem to fit yet.

Looking at the rich variety of her works, it may be natural to wonder which was the "real" Carol Hoorn Fraser. The answer, of course, is that, together, they all were. But they need to be kept apart and seen in their individuality, before they are seen together, so that their cumulative effect, what we choose to call the "mind" of the artist, can be perceived more accurately.

There's lots by and about her at www.jottings.ca.

But learning to look at art is partly learning to look at works as if they were anonymous.

V

The garden images here, like an abundance of others by her, are acts of the creative imagination, to be enjoyed for the boldness of her intensifications and metamorphoses, so that something is very garden, or very flower.

They are brilliant technically and have the fullness that Nietzsche speaks of in the epigraph. They are also ways of being-in-the-world in relation to organic nature. Which she *knew*.

Gerard Manley Hopkins introduced the terms "inscape" and "instress" in his jottings about what he aimed for in his poems. I was puzzled by them until I realized, when looking at his notebook descriptions of phenomena like

waves breaking, that he was into the differences between how a non-gardener like myself and a real gardener looked at gardens.

I myself see patches of earth, and greenery, and coloured things poking up —“tulip,” “snapdragon,” “daffodils,” so forth. I know a few names. But I have no sense of what used to be called the “vertu” of each plant and shrub, how it grows, what conditions of shade and sun and earth best nourish it, and how particular flowers come and go with the seasons, and help to define what one means by a season.

She was a total gardener, knowing all about such things, composing her own garden like a living work of art, and furious almost to tears when a storm or the clumsy boots of workmen flattened plants. She was as unamused as a hunting lioness if you said come ON, they’re only flowers.

I’m sure she knew the names of all the flowers in the paintings. And she loved looking at the gardens of others, and the different kinds of shaping and realizing of possibilities that went on in them. She gave a well- received illustrated talk in 1988 called “The Search for Paradise: Garden Painting in Western Art.”

VI

There is no arcane symbolism in these particular garden images of hers. There’s no “real” truth hidden behind the visible.

There are indeed “message” works elsewhere in her oeuvre. She was engagé about various values. She cared about the environment, and was in the working party running a campaign to protect our Victorian Public Gardens from overshadowing by a couple of highrises.

At times, in her weaker watercolours, the recurring chains, and ladders, and hearts become cliches. But she laughed when “Symbol Junkyard” was suggested to her (she’d asked) as a possible title for one of her drawings.

She adopted it, and it fitted.

VII

We’ve chosen the images from among numerous flowerworks by her for their free-standing inventiveness. In a sense, they’re “action” paintings, though not all to the same degree.

Just as we can *feel* Van Gogh (a particular favorite of hers) in front of all those Provence landscapes, so we can feel, here, Fraser remaking observed and meaning-charged ‘scapes.’ Unlike with Renaissance Nativities, she is in relationships with things actually seen by herself.

She is isolating, defining, enlarging, transforming aspects of them that already carry charges of meaning.

People across the centuries have loved flowers for more than just utility. In their various configurations they become what we call natural symbols. When they’re rendered accurately, one recognizes things that one’s already felt and enjoyed, as well as ones that surprise one. There is power as well as beauty there. Beauty *has* power.

Flowerpower. Flowerworks. Exploding, invading, taking possession. Beings in a world that’s more than just us.

VIII

The images aren't organized thematically into messages that can enable a viewer to relax and feel, oh, so that's what it's about, that's what she's trying to say. There's no grand narrative. It simply feels satisfying passing from one image to the next in the way that one passes from stanza to stanza in a poem, with something new occurring in each stanza.

As for how the images speak to individual viewers, well, that's art speaking the way it does in the Chauvet cave.

If there were intelligent artists back then, there must surely have been viewers who reacted individually to what they'd done, and maybe recognized individual lions and incidents in which they'd figured. Or just looked and looked, and went back again and again, and thought the equivalent of "It's just so magical."

Individuals back then were living in an organic world, and understanding the flora and fauna in it was at once practical and aesthetic. The two are not mutually exclusive. Painted wooden ducks in our time, designed to lure flying feathered creatures within range of the guns, have become art collectibles. As Duchamp taught with his readymades, things have forms as well as functions.

And yes, there's also mind, but not what one hypothesizes biographically. Viewing the works in whatever sequence, one's glimpsing her art-mind at work in the Other Kingdom where daily annoyances, and asthma, and migraines, and sick cats, and shabby art politics, and bullying arid male ideologues, and difficult husbands drop away, and things can become timeless, like the Chauvet lions, and bison, and deer, and the rest of the creatures in that amazing work.

The passage from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, which was on her studio wall, concludes with, "It would be permissible to imagine an opposite state, a specific anti-artistry by instinct—a mode of being which would impoverish all things, making them thin and consumptive." One needs to hold on to the fact that works can be both beautiful and charged with mind and meaning, like those here and others by her.

IX

As was said in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *A Visionary Gaze* (1993),

There is often a beyond in her works; she particularly liked windows. But the beyonds don't devalue what is in front of us. There is always more. There are other Provençal olive groves to walk in under the nurturing sun. There are other fantastical parts of the body, other combinations of animal, vegetable, and mineral that can be imagined inexhaustibly... There is always a sense of motion in her works, of kinetic energies.

She marvelled at the world, and loved the gentler things in it. Heaven for her would have room for contented pussy-cats, and flowers that clumsy men didn't step on, and graceful Victorian houses, safe from predators' claws. and good friends talking and laughing together late into the night.

(*A Visionary Gaze*, exhibition catalogue, 1993).

X

In a letter to Zelda in 1940, with all his novels, yes including *Gatsby*, now out of print, and Zelda expensively institutionalized, and their daughter Scottie's college education to be paid for, Scott wrote to Scottie, "My God, I

am the forgotten man.” Even admirers of his earlier fiction had judged that *Gatsby*, so brilliantly an affair of how things looked and felt in a series of montage-like epitomes, organized musically, and full of a love of being, was superficial.

It was good to read in an online item from the *Guardian*, January 18, 1999 that Joyce’s *Ulysses*

emerges easily as top of a poll of British literary folk held to find 10 essential classic novels for the next 100 years...

Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* came equal second with another allegedly unread work, Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*.

It’s good that the two most enjoyed works, in this accounting, Joyce’s great novel of multiple languages and perspectives, and Fitzgerald’s marvellous novel of “surfaces” used montage-fashion to catch and help elucidate the throbbing intensities of living.

The walled Provence garden in “Garden Diagram” exists, though she had to rotate part of it in order to fit in all the areas. And we had three months- long stays in Mexico.

John Fraser
2015

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Biographical

Carol Hoorn Fraser, (1930 – 1991), RCA, grew up in Superior, Wisconsin, and obtained an MFA at the University of Minnesota, where she studied under art historian Lorenz Eitner, aesthetician John Hospers, and poet Allen Tate, among others, wrote her thesis on “The Human Image in Contemporary Painting,” and took top awards in major shows at the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. In 1961 she moved with her husband John to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she lived until her death, with stays in Provence and Mexico. Her works are in the Walker Art Center, the Smithsonian Institute, the National Gallery of Canada, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, and other public galleries.

John Fraser, (1928 –), PhD, FRSC, grew up in North London and has degrees from Oxford (Balliol) and the University of Minnesota, with a minor in Philosophy. For thirty years he taught English at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press. His large website, *jottings.ca*, includes a book-length presentation of Carol’s life and works and the anthology *A New Book of Verse*, and he is the author of several eBooks.

Barbara Bickle, (1947 –), BFA, was born in Toronto, Ontario, where she attended the Central Technical School of Art. In 1980 she moved to Halifax to study art history, drawing and painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. A postgraduate diploma in computer graphics and interactive multimedia at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, led to careers in fine art and web design. She has produced a booklet of her life as an artist: *The Book of Jobs – how an artist survived in Canada*.