

THE WEEDS OF ARCADIA

Nicholas Alfrey

All the pieces exhibited here were made during Caroline Rothwell's three-month residency at the Lakeside Arts Centre at the University of Nottingham. Rothwell is known for her work as a sculptor, but recently her practice has been focused more on site-based drawing, working directly on the wall with signwriters' vinyl. Her motifs have been flowers, plants, birds and shadows, and her underlying concerns the modification of nature, the collecting of specimens and the search for utopia. The prospect of returning to make work in England for the first time in ten years has enabled a number of latent possibilities in her work to come together, and a personal journey has been undertaken in a heightened awareness of a longer, and sometimes troubling, history of exchanges.

The new work has one predominant motif- the weed. It must be more than a coincidence that a number of other contemporary artists have also become preoccupied with weeds as a subject (one thinks, for example, of Paul Morrison, Michael Landy, Jacques Nimki), but the weed has a particular significance in a New Zealand context. One of the sources Rothwell uses for her imagery is a book by F W Hilgendorf entitled *The Weeds of New Zealand*, first published in 1926; it has the significant subheading "*and how to eradicate them*". A weed is regarded as a plant in the wrong place, its presence in field or garden inimical to profit and pleasure. The majority of the weeds of New Zealand originated from England, and could only have been introduced by human activity, since New Zealand is so far removed from other land masses that it is beyond the reach of the natural agencies of dispersal (seeds carried by birds or wind). Its remote situation meant that it once had a self contained ecosystem that was almost unique in the world. This isolation ended with the arrival of first Polynesian and later European settlers, but it was the systematic colonisation by the British in the mid nineteenth-century, instigated by Edward Gibbon Wakefield and his ideal of another, improved England on the far side of the world, which really initiated significant disruptions to the natural environment of the islands, leading even, in the strong terms of a recent commentator, to a 'biological holocaust'.

The distinction between desirable and undesirable plants can only be made in relation to ideas of culture, and the language in which weeds are described is inevitably loaded, steeped in the values of the social and political world and permeated by anxieties about national character, integrity and purity. Weeds are relentless invaders and colonisers, they are tough and persistent, aggressive and successful; they are aliens, competing with our interests, threatening our fragile natural economies and our native botanical treasures; they must be resisted, contained and, if need be, eradicated. The weeds that Wakefield and his followers brought often flourished more strongly in the propitious new climate than they had done in England, though they ended by compromising the very nature of the new arcadia. By the late twentieth-century, the full extent of the ecological damage could be acknowledged. But the evidence of a counter-invasion was also becoming unmistakable. According to the conservation

body Plantlife, the New Zealand pigmyweed is now the most pernicious of the fifteen plants regarded as most invasive in Britain, its prevalence here described as ‘a disease of the ecosystem’, one that threatens to overwhelm native habitats and even to smother the starfruit, one of the rarest wild flowers.

Rothwell has given the title *Weed Garden* to the largest piece in this exhibition, the seven suspended ‘drawings’ on sheets of PVC. The title plays on an obvious contradiction, one that goes to the heart of the principles of selection and exclusion involved in the management of a garden. A garden of weeds would be a neglected, failed or abandoned garden, or perhaps an alternative one, a site of resistance to prevailing convention.

Rothwell’s sources for her weed images are diverse. Her choices serve to prompt a series of reflections on plants and their proper place, and how this is always relative. Plants act as emblems of identity and take their meaning from particular locations and contexts; they can be invested with a potent symbolic value, but no system of values is ever fixed. Running in parallel to this cultivation of uncertainty, her own artistic strategies - her use of materials and scale, her formal procedures - also deliberately work against any expectations we might have of botanical representation, twisting away both from the conventions of scientific illustration and any lingering assumptions about drawing plants as an essentially feminine practice.

The image of the manuka, or tea tree, is derived from a drawing made for Joseph Banks, the naturalist who accompanied Captain Cook on the expedition of the Endeavour to the South Seas (1768-71), one of the consequences of which was the European rediscovery of New Zealand, the mapping of its coast and the collecting and documentation of botanical specimens. The image functions here as a botanical emblem of the beginning of a relationship between two cultures and two ecosystems, (its display in Nottingham is curiously appropriate, since the location is geographically speaking roughly half way between Banks’s two midland domains in Derbyshire and Lincolnshire). Another image in the *Weed Garden* is that of the silver fern, once the bane of New Zealand’s farmers but now a national emblem: the source this time is a specimen from the natural history collections of Wollaton Hall, once again an image that strays across borders, collapsing radically different times and spaces together. Other images are based on the volume *The Weeds of New Zealand* already mentioned, while yet another is based on the artist’s first hand drawing of weeds in her own garden; in this case, the plant forms are overlaid in rambling, embroiling traces as opposed to the usual format of a single image emblazoned on the field.

The images are transferred to the large scale by resolutely low-tech means, photocopied on to acetate and projected on to the large sheets of clear PVC. The forms are traced out using signwriters’ vinyl, a material with no fine art associations, and certainly none with botanical illustration, though its usage will be familiar from any urban street, where signs are as ubiquitous as weeds. The vinyl comes in rolls of strong solid colour, and the action of cutting into it confounds the practices of

drawing and sculpture. In their commercial form, the cutting is done mechanically, without inflection, but Rothwell's 'drawing' is visibly hand-made, more like a painterly trace than an industrial process. Hanging *in situ*, the space beyond each sheet becomes as much a part of the piece as the elongated coloured shards heat-sealed upon its surface, and because they are suspended like hangings and lit by a combination of natural and artificial light, the configurations also cast shadows on the wall, as if the light beam that carried the original image has continued its journey, throwing out an unstable after-image, a faintly mobile trace. Some sheets are done in a reflective vinyl, capable of bringing about an abrupt colour change with the angle of light: the effect is like a roadside weed suddenly flashed up in a headlamp. The enlargement of the original image makes the weeds appear as big as shrubs, but it also relates them to a human scale, suggesting analogies between their branching forms and the system of veins and capillaries within the body.

At the opposite end of the scale, *Wonderland* consists of a grouping of diminutive forms arranged on plinths. Some of these are derived from the leaf-shape of weeds, while others are taken from birds, some living, others that are endangered or extinct. They are made by cutting simple templates from old pillow cases, sewn together in threes to form moulds which are then filled with molten lead, itself re-cycled from redundant church organ pipes. In this way, stuff, which was once soft and comforting, is brought into conjunction with something hardening and toxic. These tabletop sculptures are as dense and heavy as the *Weed Garden* is open and transparent, and are suggestive of some Victorian parlour game, or a phalanx of misshapen ornaments. The mutated lead figurines bulge like topiary in a miniature garden, a sinister throng of curious new life forms coming together in a fantastic reduction of the natural world.

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