Lana Locke’s ‘Relic Garden’ at Lungley Gallery, London, UK, 3 March – 15 April 2023

Joshua Y’Barbo

Lana Locke is a cross-disciplinary artist whose exhibition ‘Relic Garden’ at Lungley Gallery, London, in March/April 2023, was an exploration of ‘… the tensions of straddling domestic and artmaking spaces as an artist mother, against wider political, social, and ecological contexts’, according to the gallery’s press release. I interviewed Locke after visiting her exhibition to discuss her art practice, the central themes of her exhibition and how the exhibition title relates to her subject matter.

Joshua Y’Barbo (JYB): Would you please generally introduce your practice? For example, what kinds of work do you make? How do you make your work? What subject matter do you make your work about? And why do you make the work that you do? Do you associate yourself with a particular genre or moment in art theory, history or practice?

Lana Locke (LL): I work across a range of media, including sculpture, installation, video, painting and performance. My artworks are made with a variety of materials. I use what is expedient, what is at hand; it is quite improvised in that sense. Even the cast metal work is only made because I am occasionally lucky enough to have access to a foundry. Similarly, when I get the chance to create an installation, as with ‘Relic Garden’, I cannot help but want to use the resource of the space itself and to seek to transform it into another environment.

The subject matter is both human – bodies, bits of bodies, political structures and their violence upon bodies – and non-human, plant/object encounters, one material as it turns into another. In terms of the ‘why’, I think the simplest way of putting it would be a desire to express the physicality of existing in the world. My films elaborate more than my objects in this regard, and I started making these after having my first child in 2015. Here, I am often reflecting on practical and ethical problems I encounter through my experience of motherhood to reach out to explore wider-ranging, global, political issues, approached through a kind of dark humour.

In terms of art history and theory, what I was looking at most in my PhD was the feminist sculptural and installation art practice of American artists like Mary Kelly, Judy Chicago, and the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, in conversation with the contemporary context of New Materialism (reconsidering the place of the human in the wider ecology), critical race theory, and queer and trans theory.

JYB: Can you tell me about the central themes, arguments or positions that you were representing, describing, taking or making in the Lungley Gallery exhibition?

LL: Ultimately, in this environment of a barren desert garden, I was forcing the viewer to confront both their own mortality and that of the planet – if we do not address our continued exploitation of it. Whether casting perishable plant matter into metal or building up layers of bioresin on found fabric, my sculptures seek to preserve life, but the ‘life’ has already moved on from the object. Similarly, with the Three Graces (2023) palm fronds piece, the body is pitted as ethereal, but it is closer to dried-out meat than that of an idealised goddess.

By creating a whole-room environment for the viewer to enter, the position I am taking is a collective one: we are in this together. The film Journeys of a Laundry Mountain (2021) articulates more fully some of the themes hinted at in the objects. My own gendered responsibility for the domestic laundry is subjugated as unpaid, endless labour. However, the fact that I cut my life with clips of found footage showing up inherited roles of gender and race also demonstrates my own complicity and tension with heteronormative, white capitalist patriarchy and colonialism –
through my own family unit and my parents’ move to Australia. I am sharing the messiness of parental responsibility and failure to keep it tidy as a way of showing that intersection and inescapable entanglement with global, political and ecological issues. The end question of the film is how we might ‘parent’ the Earth better, post Australia’s 2019/2020 forest fires, and post-pandemic.

**JYB:** How did the exhibition title, ‘Relic Garden’, reflect the subject matter of your work on display?

**LL:** I was thinking about what objects are if they are remnants of a life that has gone, and a relic is a leftover from what was there before. So, it is a garden of dead things, but there is a kind of desperate, humorous attempt to keep going: the dead plants can’t grow in the ground, but they can be molten in a crucible, alchemised into bronze and aluminium, painted and potted in colourful pots to inject vibrancy. I had also been travelling in both Australia and California in the lead-up to the exhibition, so I was thinking about the vast, harsh, rural, desert landscapes and the extraordinary-looking plants there (the palm fronds came back in my suitcase from Queensland, the spiked thing from the Joshua Tree National Park in southern California) – compared to the colonial occupation and relentless capitalist culture that is surreal in its shiny, man-made, plonked-on nature in nearby cities and towns.
Where my parents live in Queensland, there are huge expanses of empty land, then shopping malls, houses and swimming pools. For my high school ‘formal’ (like a prom), we went to the Big Pineapple – a function space inside a giant pineapple on the side of the highway. Then in California, the gardens, like the houses, can be anything a person dreams of and has the money to build/import – it is just, then, thinking about the repercussions of that. My Laundry Mountain film speaks to the white supremacist colonialist violence that is felt by nature as well as by people – for example, in the found footage of the Aboriginal fire expert speaking about the native plants in Australia that suffered in the 2019/20 forest fires as a result of violent occupation – or as I cite in my narrative, the theory that Covid-19 began as a knock-on result of encroachment on wild territories and species through capitalist deforestation.

**JYB:** Based on my own experiences as an artist-curator-researcher-teacher, and as a parent, your exhibition resonated with some central themes for me. These include: the 1978 exhibition by the Hackney Flashers titled ‘Who’s Holding the Baby’, which highlighted a social undervaluing of women’s professional and domestic work; Suzanne Santoro’s 1974 book, *Towards New Expression*, which ‘… explored the drapery on classical female statuary whereby the author found underlying structures representing the female sexual form’; and Catherine Grant’s found footage and first-person moving image studies. Do any of these social, aesthetic and

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methodological ideas about creating work resonate with you and the work in your exhibition? If so, how? If not, what have I missed?

LL: I think these are great references, albeit not artists I had particularly been looking at myself. The Hackney Flashers speak through the field of British photography to that 1970s history of socialist feminist art practice that continues to inspire, drawing on the personal as political. I find the Santaro reference really interesting, and there is definitely a semblance of female sexual organs in my sculptures, but I do play with this in such a way that a form can be read as female or male, or both — for example, in Between Labours (2022), where the feather duster could be penetrating a womb but could also be the body’s own phallus. I am unfamiliar with Catherine Grant’s practice but I identify with the found footage and the first-person moving image approach — I will check it out.

Locke’s exhibition, ‘Relic Garden’, offered originality and a unique insight into the balance between making art and domestic duties, while also using dark humour and clever use of materials to suggest more significant concerns of equality and environmental stewardship. According to the Lungley Gallery:

…Locke creates an apocalyptic environment of relics of human and non-human life, in a play of sculpture, installation, video and painting. In this garden, plants are not borne of the ground, but the crucible, alchemised into bronze and aluminium, pinned, potted and placed about the barren space. Contrasting materials like plastic and plaster are forced into the mix, playing in survivalist kinship with the value-laden metal trophies.

Throughout the exhibition, Locke played with concepts of value and labour with irony and seriousness that were reflected in individual artworks and the central installation and video work. The exhibition gave viewers insight into perspectives on personal and environmental growth garnished from Locke’s international experiences in Australia, California and England, each with many different associations between landscapes, labour and social-economic value.

From visiting Lana’s exhibition and talking to her about her ideas and approaches to work and labour, I noticed significant domesticity, life and artistic qualities. Certain aspects of Lana’s sculptures and video work reminded me of the Hackney Flashers’ 1973 exhibition, ‘Who’s Holding the Baby’, which drew attention to the difficult balancing act between domestic childcare duties and professional work as an artist. For example:
*Who's Holding the Baby?* aimed to explore the need for childcare provision and the repercussions of its absence on mothers, children and the wider society. It addressed complex ideas about women’s roles as mothers and as workers inside and outside the home.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (2023)

Although Locke doesn’t describe herself as a photographer like most of the Hackney Flashers, her exhibition and work share similarities with the playful use of humour and documentary footage to reveal more significant political contexts and activism. Additionally, the Hackney Flashers used photojournalism, conceptual art practice and multiple creative methods to create their agitation propaganda campaign intended for various audiences outside of a single exhibition setting. Locke, too, draws from her personal experience, using video documentation of private family moments, combined with sculpture and installation to create a conceptually robust exhibition about making sense of the existential pressures of parenting and artmaking, as well as processing the tensions between one’s personal politics and more significant social concerns through creative and domestic labour.

Lana Locke, ‘Relic Garden’, installation view (detail) at the Lungley Gallery, London, 2023, whole-room mixed media installation, courtesy of the artist

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I also noticed feminism and representation of bodies through clothes reminiscent of Suzanne Santoro’s investigation of sculptured drapery and the female form in *Towards New Expression* (1974). According to Santoro’s website:

The book explored the drapery on classical female statuary whereby the author found underlying structures representing the female sexual form. The publication of the book then led her to explore this theme further by making molds of various parts of the female body in transparent polyester resin.

Like Santoro, aspects of Locke’s sculptures use clothing and domestic objects to represent female sexual organs. However, Locke’s semblances of bodily anatomy in her sculptures could be seen as either female or male, or both. Therefore, Locke and her work expand feminist ideas about the representation of the female body in art and in art history beyond gender-specific boundaries, which she does with a dark sense of irony, making jokes about how gardens grow through an apocalyptic aesthetic and drapery that could conceal wombs, vaginas, penises, or all of the above.

Irony is not a new or unique language in feminist theory. As Lydia Rainford wrote in 2005: ‘Irony can be regarded as the obvious mode in which a feminist might speak, as it reflects her relation to the patriarchal structure while refusing to validate the truth of the current sexual hierarchy’, while the waves of feminist art often use appropriation and revisiting past moments in art history to critique equality and representation in art. For example, ‘Polish artist Julia Curylo carries on the feminist investigation into male-dominated constructions of art history by appropriating iconic works from female artists’ (Project, 2015).

However, Locke’s work is distinct in her unique material approach to using human and non-human objects, documentaries and found footage, which she uses to represent a significant position within a broader social-political spectrum. Locke’s video work, in particular, occupying the central space within ‘Relic Garden’, shows similarities with Catherine Grant’s moving image studies, especially in the use of found footage and the first-person, emphasising the importance of authorship, authority, subjectivity and agency within patriarchal society. According to Grant:

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5 Lydia Rainford, *She Changes by Intrigue*, GENUS: Gender in Modern Culture series, Volume 6, Brill, 2005, ebook available at [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401201131](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401201131)
Unlike many other words referring to the activities of particular kinds of cultural producers (‘writer’, ‘painter’, ‘dramatist’), the term ‘author’ raises intrinsic questions about authority and about whether the individual is the source or the effect of that authority. 7

Although Grant is writing specifically about feminist filmmaking, she also discusses the ‘author-as-subject’ and ‘author-as-source-of-meaning’ more generally, which easily apply to Locke’s authorship and authority as an artist who uses filmmaking and irony as tools to make comments on artmaking and parenting on a personal and global level. Therefore, Locke creates her unique position as an artist who addresses feminist, racial and postcolonial debates by breaking down gender specificity, while placing herself and her life experiences at the centre of her work. As Locke said in our interview: ‘the personal is political’ – which clearly places her within a historical tradition spanning waves of feminism and student movements for change within institutions.

Left: Lana Locke, ‘Relic Garden’, installation view at the Lungley Gallery, London, 2023, whole-room mixed media installation; right: Lana Locke, Between Labours, 2022, found objects and bio resin, both courtesy of the artist

'Relic Garden’ provided a layered experience that combines aspects of domesticity and the balance between making art and raising a family. Locke’s exhibition also touched on long traditions of feminist art theory, representation of the body and irony, and a breadth of material approaches to making work that represents the contradictions and tensions from the competing forces influencing her life as an artist and mother. In ‘Relic Garden’, Locke embraced the messiness of the world around her and reflected on what she sees and how she responds to uncertainty, challenging values and limited time, through her unique sculptural installation and filmmaking style. However, as a viewer, we don’t have to think about the art history, theory and knowledge about practice contextualising Locke’s work to experience the chaotic tensions between the personal and the public, motherhood and artistic authorship embodied in the exhibition.

Lana Locke is an artist working across a range of media, including installation, painting, sculpture, video and performance. She is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts. She undertook her practice-based PhD (2017) on ‘The Feral, the Social and the Art Object’ at Chelsea College of Arts, where she also studied for her MA in Fine Art (2012). She has had solo exhibitions at Lungen Gallery (2019, 2020 and 2023), Liddicoat & Goldhill project space (2018), DOLPH Projects (2016) and Schwartz Gallery (2014), and has exhibited in group exhibitions at Shtager & Shch (2023), Hales Gallery (2022), National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts, Taiwan (2021), Kingston Museum (2019), MOCA Taipei, Taiwan (2018), the Nunnery Gallery (2018), Block 336 (2015) and Bloomberg New Contemporaries (2013 and 2016).

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