

Introduction

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This is, after all, a special issue on “the garden.” We should not be surprised then, by the prominence “the garden” has in it. What may still surprise at least a few *Mosaic* readers, however, is that Eden, when it comes up in the following pages, is not a pure paradisaic abode or a myth about blissful beginnings. If the essays in this issue are at all representative, contemporary literary criticism takes “the garden”—and Eden as one of its foundational figures—to be what Helen Tiffin calls a site of “radical ambivalence and contradiction.” Hence, “the garden” in this *Mosaic* issue recalls, in Tiffin’s words, “The Garden, original symbol of Paradise,” as also “the symbol of Paradise lost; cast out of Eden, Adam and Eve must labour in the ‘wilderness’ to render it ‘fruitful,’ converting an untamed nature into human cultural territory.” A meeting-ground for many of the West’s irreconcilable oppositions—nature/culture, civilized/savage, indigenous/exotic, pet/pest among them—“the garden,” as Barbara Langhorst puts it, exhibits duality; it is, at once, celebrated sanctuary and space of subjugation; “urgent, vital necessity and compromised ruin.” Such an approach to “the garden” as locus of contradiction and contestation informs, in Tiffin’s case, a study of a particular kind of settler colony cultivation, the botanical garden, specifically the Melbourne, Botanical Gardens during a recent invasion by “flying foxes.” Examining the rhetoric behind the intense outcry that surfaced against the marauding bats, which only a few years earlier had been protected in every state in Australia, Tiffin suggests that settler colony attitudes to garden and gardening, to wilderness parks, and to such boundaries as urban/wild, may work against biodiversity—and even against long term human sustainability. In Langhorst’s case, the space of contradiction and contestation is found in the classroom. Her collage-text, informed by Walter Benjamin, itself a garden of sorts, focuses on strategies of teaching, and at a moment when, “whatever our nostalgia for origins, for a never-realized (but ever-dreamed-of) time of complete textual control, we garden in ruins.”

On the basis of these two essays alone, it goes without saying that “the garden” is a complex, critical, and *diverse* (special) issue. On the latter point, I leave it to *Mosaic* readers to gauge whether it is significant that the “biodiversity” evident in the following essays results from approaches that are anything but nostalgic, whether “the garden” is read as site of contestation, mediation, integration—or as Don Reichert has it, transmutation. The actual word that Reichert uses in the catalogue to *Nature Morph*, an exhibition of his recent work that was held from 28 March to 20 May 2005 at the Art Gallery of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC, is “transmogrification.” I am taking the word (which, appropriately, carries in it elements of magic and surprise) from the interview with Robert Enright that is published in the *Nature Morph* catalogue, where Reichert discusses his work of “transmogrifying” the digital photographs he took of elements of an old bridge, the Redwood Bridge, that spans the Red River near his home in Winnipeg. In manipulating, “flipping and stitching,” the images on his computer, Reichert says, he was surprised, sometimes startled, by what was opened up to him: “I discovered that there were certain angles that would function in certain ways, so I would take diagonal pictures as well as horizontal ones. Different things would happen with the transmogrification of the imagery. It’s quite a change from what you are actually looking at but it seems like the essential basics of the imagery are there and some key aspects are enhanced by being seen in a self-contained system as opposed to ‘open air’ space.” This sense of discovery—never arriving at completion, always working towards something new—marks all of Reichert’s work. It is everywhere evident in the sixteen images that open this special issue.

Mosaic is honoured to feature this selection of Don Reichert’s recent work here. Although he has travelled and exhibited widely, Reichert remains, resolutely and proudly, a Manitoba, Canada artist, born in Libau, Manitoba in 1932, and a 1956 graduate of the University of Manitoba School of Fine Art. He is “a prolific art maker,” Meeka Walsh writes in *Don Reichert: A Life in Work*. For over forty years, he has been a painter, “a consummate painter with an unerring sense of colour” (72), many of his canvases large and abstract. He has also been photographing for all of this time. By 1987, Reichert notes in the *Nature Morph* interview, “I started putting paint on photographs and I was really astounded at how the aesthetics of the photography immediately became the aesthetics of painting. Just in the way you read the space and the new energy on the surface.” The painting-photography interplay persists in his recent transmogrifying of digital images, as if the computer screen were the surface of a canvas and the abstract painter were inevitably at work. Consider *Far Shore* (Fig. 15), for example. The image, in Reichert’s words from *Nature Morph*, “has some of the freedom that I like to get in my painting. It also has a very solid structure but it isn’t too

tight. I get very uneasy when things start to get too organized—too locked in. So my tendency is to want to break that and open it up so that there's more flow and play to it. Make it more like a real life aspiration in a sense."

Breaking it open, and in the process opening to the richness and complexity of the natural world: this is Don Reichert's ongoing artistic endeavour. Back in the 1970s, when he took to laying out his canvas on the Precambrian granite, "that beautiful reindeer moss" in the woods near his cabin in Bissett, Manitoba, Reichert entered "the wild garden" and embarked on abstract landscape painting with equal feelings of intimidation and exhilaration: "It was so intimidating," he says in *Nature Morph*, "that it's amazing that I continued with it, but it became exciting once I realized what a rich pursuit it was going to be." He would say no less of his current explorations into digital imagery. For Reichert, nature provides "more awe and subject matter than I can ever use up." Let's take that away from this *Mosaic* special issue.

WORKS CITED

Don Reichert. "Nature Morph: An Interview with Don Reichert." Interviewed by Robert Enright. *Nature Morph: Recent Work by Don Reichert*. Washington, DC: The Art Gallery of the Canadian Embassy, 2004. An exhibition catalogue.

Walsh, Meeka, ed. *Don Reichert: A Life in Work*. Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1995.