

*Florescence, or the Gesture of Tending a Garden*

*The following is an edited transcript of a talk given at the Hardwick Gallery, Columbia, Mo.*

To cultivate any skill requires sustained engagement and dedicated work. This body of work came about slowly over the course of years. Any success that you see was built on a foundation of thousands of pots that came before them. My practice is a continuous process of refinement.

When you start out, it is like walking into a fresh tilled field. There is nothing but potential. There is a long period of exploration, of trial and error, trying to find anything that will work and taking pleasure in every small victory. Eventually though, you learn what works, what does not, and more importantly what enriches and sustains you. Then the challenge shifts, at some point you have the skills and the knowledge to achieve whatever you like, then comes the harder task of finding something meaningful to pursue.

When I was working towards my undergraduate degree, I heard an analogy for different types of creatives. The analogy presented three creative archetypes: Gardeners, Gatherers, and Architects, using them to illuminate a few notable tendencies in creative thought and practice. Though this was only a brief aside, it has stuck with me and I have been thinking about these archetypes and my relationship to them ever since. This has been a way for me to come to terms with my own practice, and a way for me to find a way of working that is both meaningful and generative. I want to take a few minutes now to discuss my understanding of these tendencies, and my relationship to them.

A Gardener stakes out a plot of land, plants their seeds, and tends to them. They find fertile ground and they develop it, coming to know it and its potential over time. The fruits of their labor grow from the creative act. For the Gardener, the act of creation is a collaborative gesture, working with, rather than subordinating. This method allows space for both intention and emergence.

Gatherers move from place to place, taking something from here, something from there. At first, Their process seems unstructured, taking what they like from where they like. For them, consistency is not a virtue. However, over time, patterns begin to emerge. The Gatherer learns where to look and what to look for; they become more adept at identifying and incorporating those things that resonate with them. Through this process, their work becomes more reflective of their sensibilities as their intuitions are developed and refined. The gesture of gathering is characterized by openness and perception.

Architects are planners; the path forward must be charted before the journey begins. They carefully develop a vision, and their work is to faithfully bring that vision into being. Form,

material, and labor are all selected, molded, and directed in service of a known end. Their work is judged based on its adherence to the Architect's vision. The gesture of the architect is deliberate and instrumental.

As an artist you must move between these modes of working and thinking. When I need inspiration or find myself stagnating, I become a gatherer. When I am deep in a making cycle and new ideas seem to emerge and grow from one another, I am a gardener. When I plan and install a show I step into the shoes of the Architect, arranging and ordering parts into a cohesive whole. Where I find myself most at home though is in the studio focusing on refining, honing, and elevating a form or idea. Seeing my work evolving and growing alongside me brings me great joy.

I think this is why the act of tending a garden has always seemed like an appropriate metaphor for my creative practice. My first serious artist statement was a poem about labor and its rewards:

“You work, toiling away in the dirt and, eventually, you are rewarded for your efforts. You have created something of the earth to which you have a deep connection. It is the fruit of your labor and from the knowledge of this you attain a profound sense of satisfaction, knowing you have made something tangible, useful, and nourishing. Now rest and begin again.”

I want to take some time now to revisit and unpack the intuitions that led me to write that poem. The metaphor seems to have grown more resonant over time, I hope it may be useful to you as it has been to me.

A garden is more than a garden.

A garden is a species of technology; it is the cultivation of land and the growing of crops, but through the gardener it becomes much more. A garden can be tended beautifully, arranged beautifully, set to rest beautifully. A Gardener may make an art of the canning of tomatoes or the burning of their fields. A garden is by its nature a thing that reaches beyond its purpose. Though it may serve that purpose well, it is not subservient to it, it is more than a means to an end.

A garden nourishes. It requires that you invest yourself in it and rewards you in turn. Tending a garden may seem like an archaic gesture, rendered obsolete by the advancement of technology and the economies of scale which are integral to modern production. Yet the gesture remains, and those who practice it find meaning within its inefficiencies. There is pleasure in the tilling of the soil, anticipation in the sowing of the seeds, pride in the labor of cultivation. For the gardener this connection to soil and to seed, the time, care, and labor that went into a harvest, invests the fruits of that labor with special significance. It is a sort of value that is difficult to quantify. One based in a logic aimed towards quality of experience rather than efficiency or productivity.

A garden demands attention, and its needs shift as the season progresses. A gardener must have a variety of skills to fulfill these needs. Tilling the soil, sowing the seeds, placing peas and beans in the shade and tomatoes in the sun – each thing in its time and place so that they may thrive. For the gardener this is a collaborative gesture, working with the land, guiding and nurturing the things being grown.

A garden is directed towards fulfilling our needs. These needs may be practical, as in food, commerce, or research; or they may be directed towards another set of needs. A flower garden defies most of the already archaic practical potential of the garden, yet its products nourish all the same, fulfilling psychological, aesthetic, or emotional needs. For the Gardener, tending their garden may be an end in itself, but that is a solipsistic meaning; the true beauty of the garden is realized when the efforts of the gardener are directed towards the needs of those around them.

A gardener must take up a variety of roles. Just as there is meaning to be had in the tending of the garden, so too is there pleasure in preparing, preserving, and presenting the product of that labor. Some gardeners take pleasure in canning their vegetables for the winter, others find joy in the precise arrangement of their flowers within the home, and some take satisfaction in the delicate relationship of their garden and the bees – the particular way that they sustain one another and, by extension, us. The Gardener sustains their garden, and in turn the garden sustains them.

So far I have touched mostly on the metaphor of a garden as it relates to my practice and process, but the idea has also influenced my forms, my thoughts on functionality, and my belief in the value of hands-on engagement with my craft.

A garden is a confluence of nature and human design. Here, two radically opposed forces come together creating something harmonious and distinct. I am fascinated by areas like this where two seemingly opposing forces meet and rather than clashing, compliment each other. It has been said, though I can't remember now by who<sup>1</sup>, that a curve does not exist in its full power until it is contrasted by a straight line. This simple principle has guided my work and my thinking.

My forms are curvilinear, soft, voluminous. They have an expansive feeling that connotes growth, abundance, and generosity. I divide the pots symmetrically, using line as a means of projecting order onto my forms. The aspect of nature I am capturing here is not wild and untamed, but directed and purposeful. I use symmetry to reflect this ordered aspect of nature. Elements such as handles, rims, and feet seem to grow from the body of the pot and their placement reinforces the formal symmetry of the vessels.

My work is utilitarian in nature, intended for use in domestic spaces. I make functional work because I value those spaces and the daily rituals that take place in them. Coming together

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Henri

around the table to share a meal, a quiet morning with a cup of coffee before the rush of the day, presenting flowers from the garden in a vase on the table; I want my work to be a part of these beautiful moments and to draw attention to their significance.

Over time, It transforms from, say, a cup into a beloved familiar object and finally into a personal sacred object. A thing that we carry with us, and which alters the way we see the world. I believe that this is part of the power of Art. Be it through the poetic image that sticks in your head, a painting that makes you realize a beautiful moment that may have gone unnoticed, or a cup that helps bring new significance to your morning rituals, all of these things enrich our lives.