



Grace Wood

A Garden is

a Mother







Gardens, Mothers, and Everything in Between: The Abundant Practice of Grace Wood

Laura Lantieri

Like a garden, the cyber world can be a wild and fertile place. A vast terrain where visual content grows, untamed; continually sowed and cultivated by its users. Its endless proliferation of images—amplified in recent times by rapid advances in AI image-generating tools—is a constant source of fascination for Naarm-based artist Grace Wood, who works primarily with found pictures and digital collage to consider how we access and consume culture in the internet age. Often beginning with a single word or label entered into a search engine, the artist burrows down the online ‘rabbit hole’, where one image persistently leads to another, with a mixture of predictable and unexpected results. She embraces such virtual algorithms to amass an extensive repository of files from which she makes her work.





(Snail) Control (detail) 2025

In *A Garden is a Mother*, Wood has mined both open-source imagery and family archives to create a richly layered installation that weaves elements of mythology, nature and art history with enduring concepts of birth and renewal. She initially conceived the project after reading the artist Mirka Mora's foreword in *Sunday's Garden*, a book that explores the history and legacy of Heide founders John and Sunday Reed's kitchen garden—part of their own personal Eden.⁰¹ French-born Mora was a longtime friend of the Reeds and wrote of how, as a child, she would liberate snails gathered from the garden from her surrogate grandmother's saucepan, and this anecdote captured the imagination of Wood, who at the time was finding empty snail shells with her young daughter in their own backyard:

We were collecting snails in the garden and I really liked that parallel. And I started thinking about her relationship with me, and then my relationship with my mum and my grandma ... About mothers and gardens and the idea of a garden being this generative place where these interactions can happen; where you spend time with your family and are nurtured and nurture the garden in return.⁰²

The Heide grounds also hold significance for Wood, having found solace in them during those sleep-deprived months following the birth of her daughter:

01 . Lesley Harding and Kendrah Morgan, *Sunday's Garden: Growing Heide*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2012. Today, two kitchen gardens remain in operation at Heide, servicing the on-site cafe Heide Kitchen with seasonal produce.

02 . Grace Wood, in conversation with the author, 28 January 2025.

There was a lot of time pushing the pram around the Heide gardens and it's a peaceful, contemplative place. So, I like the way that that garden has nurtured me and then I've nurtured my garden, and my grandma did the same with hers.⁰³

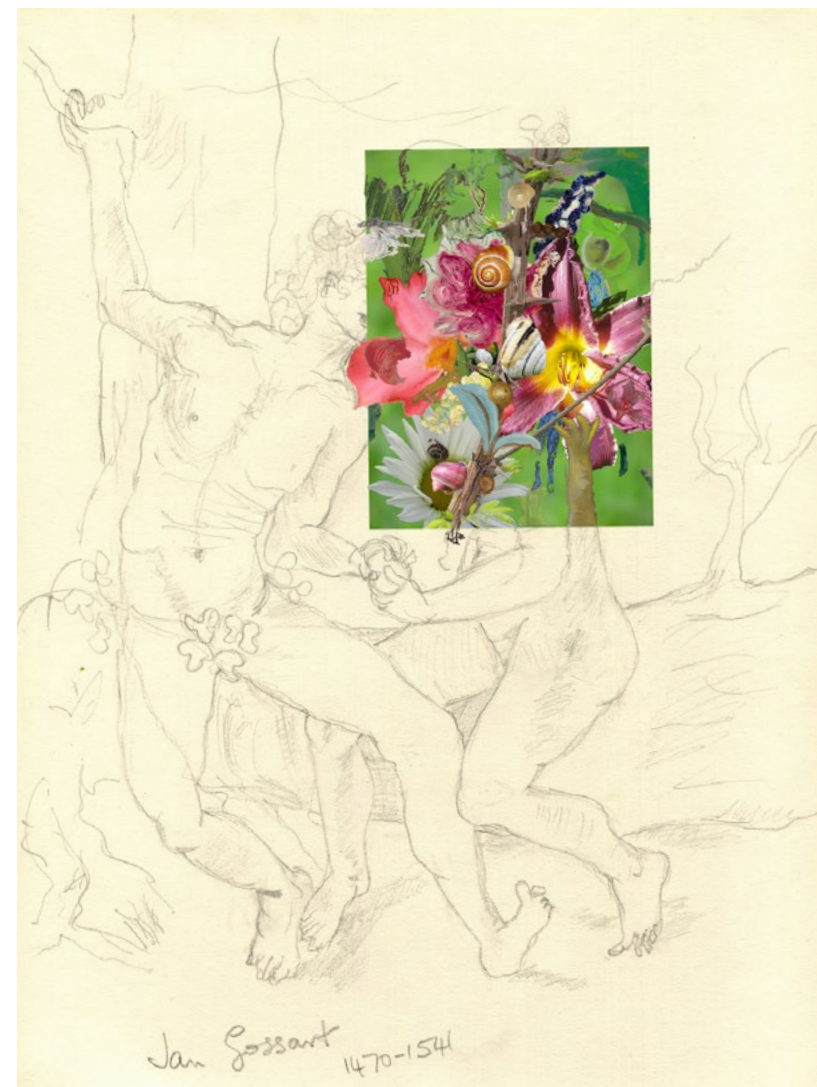
Reflecting on her childhood and the many hours passed in her Nan's garage studio, Wood notes how her late grandmother—who was a prolific Sunday painter—informed her own art practice. Sheila Wood habitually copied the work of accomplished artists such as Picasso and the Old Masters from books, and was also inspired by Mirka Mora, whose distinctive iconography and aesthetic can be traced in Sheila's folios.⁰⁴

By extension and in a collaboration of sorts, Wood has used scans of Sheila's copies, paintings and photographs as the basis for a number of her own pieces in this exhibition. Her grandmother's sketch of Netherlandish painter Jan Gossaert's *Der Sündenfall*, c.1520, forms the underdrawing of *Taking something that doesn't belong to you (The fall)*, to which Wood has added a floral and snail collage composed from images sourced online. Similarly, a Nan-rendered portrait originally by the French Symbolist artist Maurice Denis sits beneath a photographic flower-filled butterfly in *Orchid*, drawing links between grandmother and granddaughter, their creative practices, the past and present.

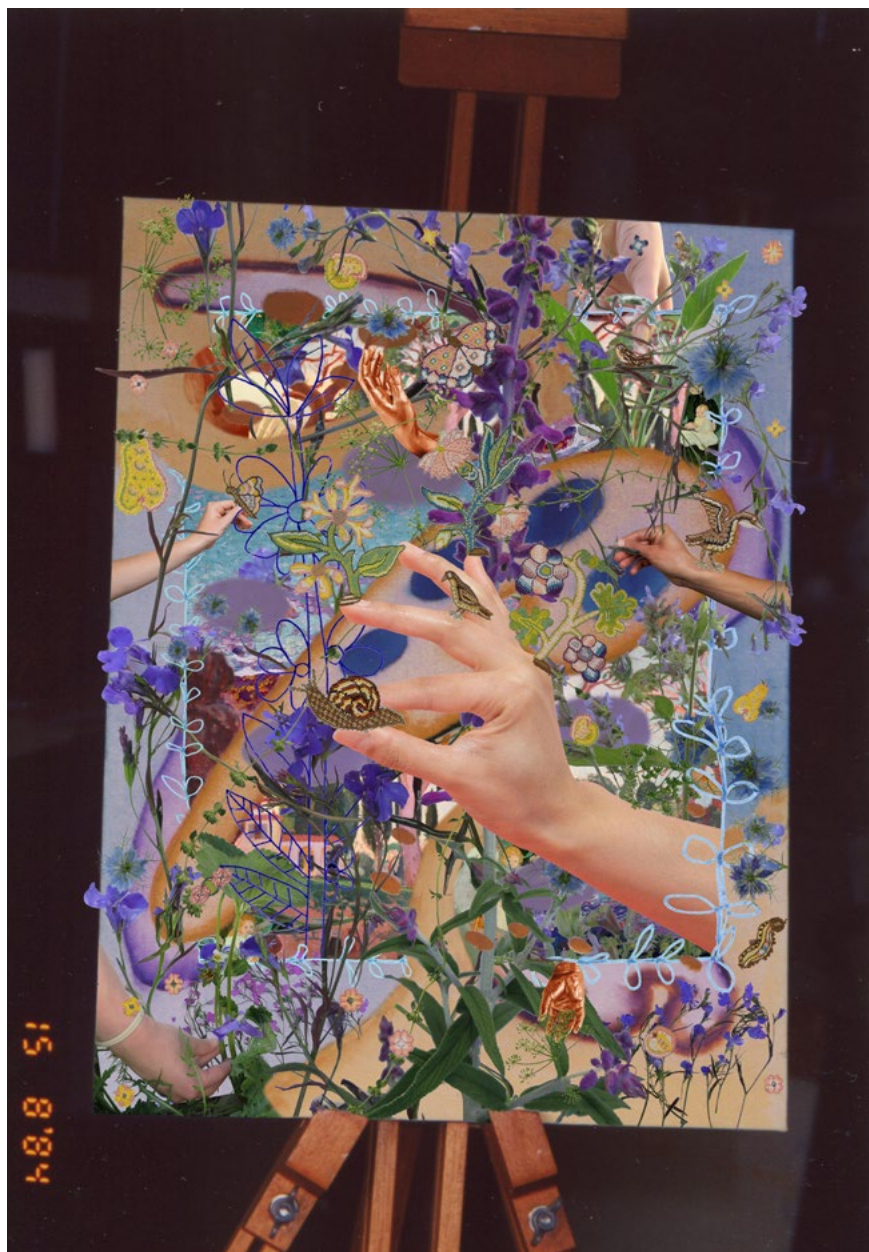
Sheila's analogue method of copying—whether directly or in stylistic terms—can be seen as a precursor to Wood's digital process of reproducing existing images for

03. Grace Wood, in conversation with the author, 28 January 2025.

04. Sheila held the artist's autobiography *Wicked but Virtuous: My Life* in her book collection.



Taking something that doesn't belong to you (The fall) 2025
Photograph of Sheila Wood's garage studio, Healesville, 2004



her own purposes. However, while Wood's content is often derived from other creators, her work doesn't attempt to mimic or *be* the originals; rather, citing Hito Steyerl, she sees her versions as a 'poor' likeness of them.⁰⁵ In a similar vein she echoes the logic of Susan Sontag, who wrote in her influential treatise *On Photography*, 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.'⁰⁶ Wood appropriates with the understanding that images, when freed from context, can have a life of their own and hold their own meaning and power:

I can have the same relationship with the image that you can have, it could mean something or nothing ... They become available to everyone in the same way.⁰⁷

In *Fecund*, it is difficult to pinpoint where Sheila's hand ends and Wood's begins. The work engenders a material push and pull between Sheila's initial photograph, its digitisation and manipulation, and its return to linen—a painter's classic substrate. This interplay between image and medium is characteristic of Wood's practice as a way of interrogating notions of originality and authorship, and in turn, what it means to make, circulate, receive and canonise art.

05. Grace Wood, in conversation with the author, 10 July 2023. The artist, filmmaker and cultural critic Hito Steyerl writes, 'The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities.' See Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux Journal*, Issue 10, 1 November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image>, accessed 22 July 2025.

06. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1977, p. 4.

07. Grace Wood, in conversation with the author, 28 January 2025.

Further reinforcing the regenerative role of the mother through the ages and across generations, throughout this exhibition the artist has incorporated symbols from the origin story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden—namely, the apple and the serpent. In *Apple-shot (William Tell)*, for instance, she conflates the two by combining a photograph of her grandmother's hand nursing an apple overlaid with a circular hollow of collaged snakes. The superimposed legs that hover above and out of the 'snake hole', complete with Mary Jane shoes, are as playfully suggestive of Alice falling into the fantasy world of Wonderland as they are of Eve succumbing to the temptation of the forbidden fruit. In a typical cross-fertilisation of sources, the legs are in fact based on a sketch found in the Mirka Mora autobiography held in Sheila's library.

The serpent finds its full splendour in *Ouroboros*, a large-scale, two-sided collage featuring hundreds of cascading snakes, which forms the centrepiece of the installation. Extending to seven metres over one continuous length of fabric, the artwork brings together contemporary and historical images, including a fragment of Adam and Eve as portrayed by Albrecht Dürer, along with other mythological figures.⁰⁸ An ancient, circular symbol that typically depicts a snake or dragon consuming its own tail, the ouroboros has long represented the eternal cycle

08. The images in *Ouroboros* span centuries and various mediums, and include: Hans Christiansen, *Adam, Eve, the Serpent, and the Forbidden Fruit*, 1778, design for a stained-glass window; Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, c.1879, oil on canvas; *Silver Bracelet with Two Snake-Head Terminals*, Ptolemaic or Roman Period (304 BC–AD 364); Fyodor Bruni, *Brazen Serpent*, 1841, oil on canvas; François Grenier de Saint-Martin, *Allégorie de la Prudence*, 1818, oil on canvas; *The Infant Hercules Strangling the Serpents*, plaque by Master of the Labours of Hercules, Verona, model after 1506 (possibly cast 19th century); and *Apep Being Warded off by a Deity*, Tomb of Pharaoh Ramses West, c.1307 BC.



Apple-shot (William Tell) 2025
 "Me as William Tell!" (caption from family album), Sheila Wood Chillingham, c.1980



of life, death and rebirth. In *A Garden is a Mother* it also references the never-ending rotation of images and how art itself continues to grow and evolve, as Wood explains:

It's a snake into a snake into a snake and it never ends because it's cyclical. These throughlines in the work mimic the idea of images just generating, and now with AI, images are endlessly regenerating.⁰⁹

While *Ouroboros* does not encompass any family or personal archives—its elements are drawn entirely from copyright-free repositories—the piece nonetheless found its roots in the work of Sheila Wood and Mirka Mora. In Sheila's albums Wood came across perilously up-close photographs that her grandmother had taken of snakes in the garden, as well as paintings reminiscent of Mora's, for whom the serpent formed part of her visual vernacular. Often appearing as a double-headed creature with an elongated winding body and a bird head at either end, for Mora, it was a friendly rather than menacing figure. She once commented: 'The serpent is two things: often it is my own sexuality, which I have to try and understand; and sometimes it is the serpent of the garden of Eden, which really to me is knowledge. (You see I *have* to eat that apple!)'.¹⁰

Wood pursued the symbol in the Google rabbit hole, discovering a surprising number of images of two-headed domestic snakes (unlike Mora's, the two heads fork out of one end of the body) cradled in the hands of their owners and photographers. Both seductive and repellent, the

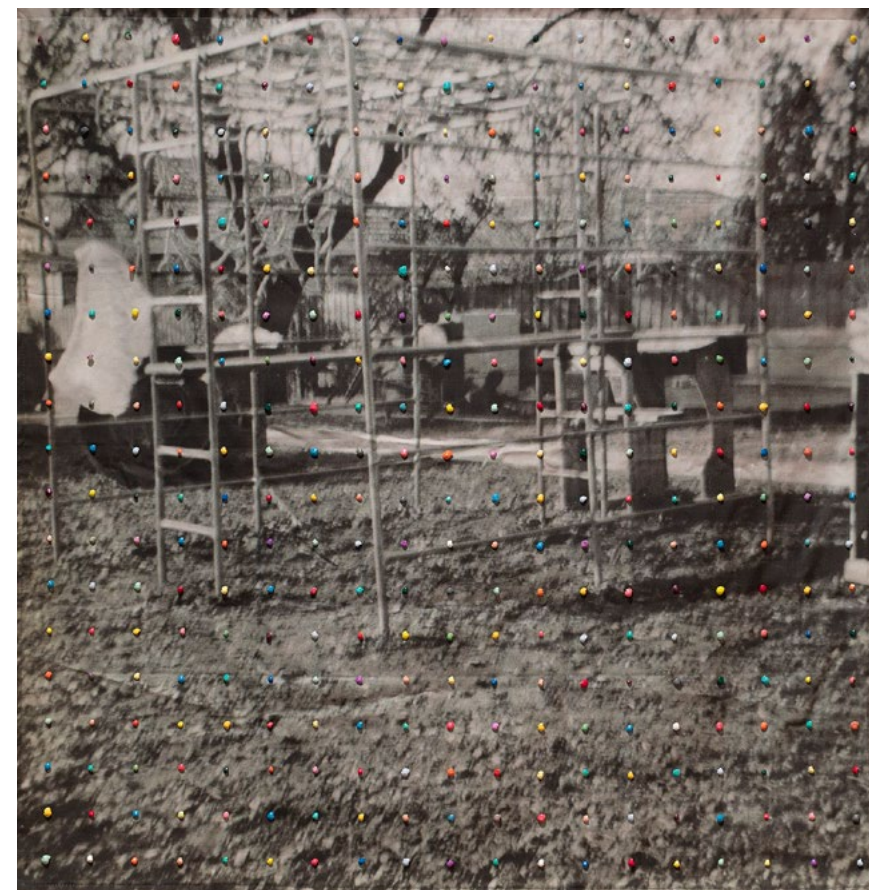
09. Grace Wood, in conversation with the author, 28 January 2025.

10. Mirka Mora, quoted in Ulli Beier, *MIRKA*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1980, p. 28.

entwined animals pay homage to Mora's double-headed snake and the myth of Eden, while drawing a connection back to Heide in high summer, where reptilian locals are occasionally seen slithering across the parkland.

In addition to the serpent, the snail is a recurrent motif in *A Garden is a Mother*. It appears in two dimensions within the collages as well as in three, with found snail shells sewn onto the face of several fabric works in playful reference to Mora's childhood deception and Wood's own intergenerational experiences in the garden. Hanging adjacent to *Ouroboros*, *Snail (Control)* marries dozens of the shells collected by Wood and her daughter with a mossy crushed velvet, evoking snails crawling along a garden bed. In *Something to climb (the order of things)*, the artist has used a black-and-white photograph of a backyard she discovered in her grandmother's photo album as the basis of the work. With the help of her daughter she individually hand-painted 430 tiny snail shells procured from a necklace also found among Sheila's possessions, before stitching them in a colourful grid of dots over the image. The photograph is possibly of her father's childhood garden, but for Wood the specifics don't matter; she embraces the ambiguity, relating it to mythology, where the reader can assign their own narrative and value.

In these examples there is an undercurrent of play, imagination, memory, and the role of nature in childhood. Such themes are also present in *Precious things*, which combines photography, drawing, digital collage and sewn shells and seeds in an image reminiscent of a youth scrapbook, or an assemblage of small wonders gathered at the beach or on outdoor adventures. *Precious things*





highlights the artist's bowerbird tendencies both online and with objects; an art practice underpinned by the collation of found treasure from the depths of the internet and out in the physical world.

The American artist Walter De Maria famously stated 'Any good work of art should have at least ten meanings', and strata of history and meaning abound in Grace Wood's multilayered project.¹¹ Knitting together her grandmother's archive with art references and links to the Heide site, *A Garden is a Mother* is a poetic reflection on how myth, motherhood and nature interconnect through the lens of perpetually-spawning images. Wood has drawn on the rich symbolism of the Garden of Eden to deliver an exhibition that is by turns stimulating and evocative, cultivating the viewer's imagination and own mental algorithms. *A Garden is a Mother* celebrates a personal history as well as a universal experience in considering what we inherit and what we leave behind. It is a love letter; to gardens, mothers, those who have nurtured and those we nurture—to birth, renewal, and all living things.

11. Walter De Maria, artist profile page, Gagosian online: <https://gagosian.com/artists/walter-de-maria/>, accessed 8 May 2025.



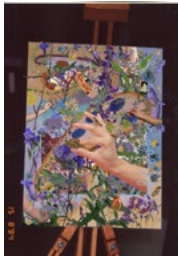




List of Works



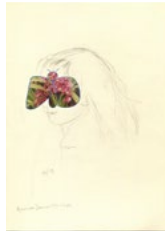
Apple-shot (William Tell) 2025
photographic print on recycled and
organic cotton drill fabric
32 x 46 cm



Fecund 2025
photographic print on linen
98 x 140 cm



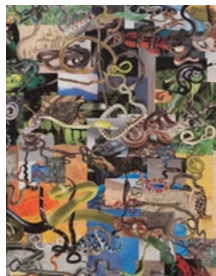
For my flower 2025
photographic print on paper
37.5 x 50 cm



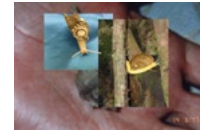
Orchid 2025
photographic print on paper
60 x 80 cm



Orpheus charming the animals 2025
photographic print on paper
36 x 44 cm



Ouroboros 2025
photographic print on linen
140 x 700 cm



Pet 2025
photographic print on paper
32 x 46 cm



Precious things 2025
photographic print on recycled and
organic cotton drill fabric, found shells,
nasturtium seed pods, nail polish
and thread
32 x 46 cm



Seeds of our seeds 2025
photographic print on recycled
and organic cotton drill fabric
32 x 46 cm



(Snail) Control 2025
crushed velvet, found snail shells
and thread
140 x 700 cm



*Something to climb
(the order of things) 2025*
photographic print on recycled and
organic cotton drill fabric, found shells,
nail polish and thread
90 x 92 cm



*Taking something that doesn't belong
to you (The fall) 2025*
photographic print on paper
60 x 80 cm





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to their Elders past and present, and recognise the rich
traditions and continuing creative cultures of all Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.



Sheila Wood's garden, Murwillumbah, 2000



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