

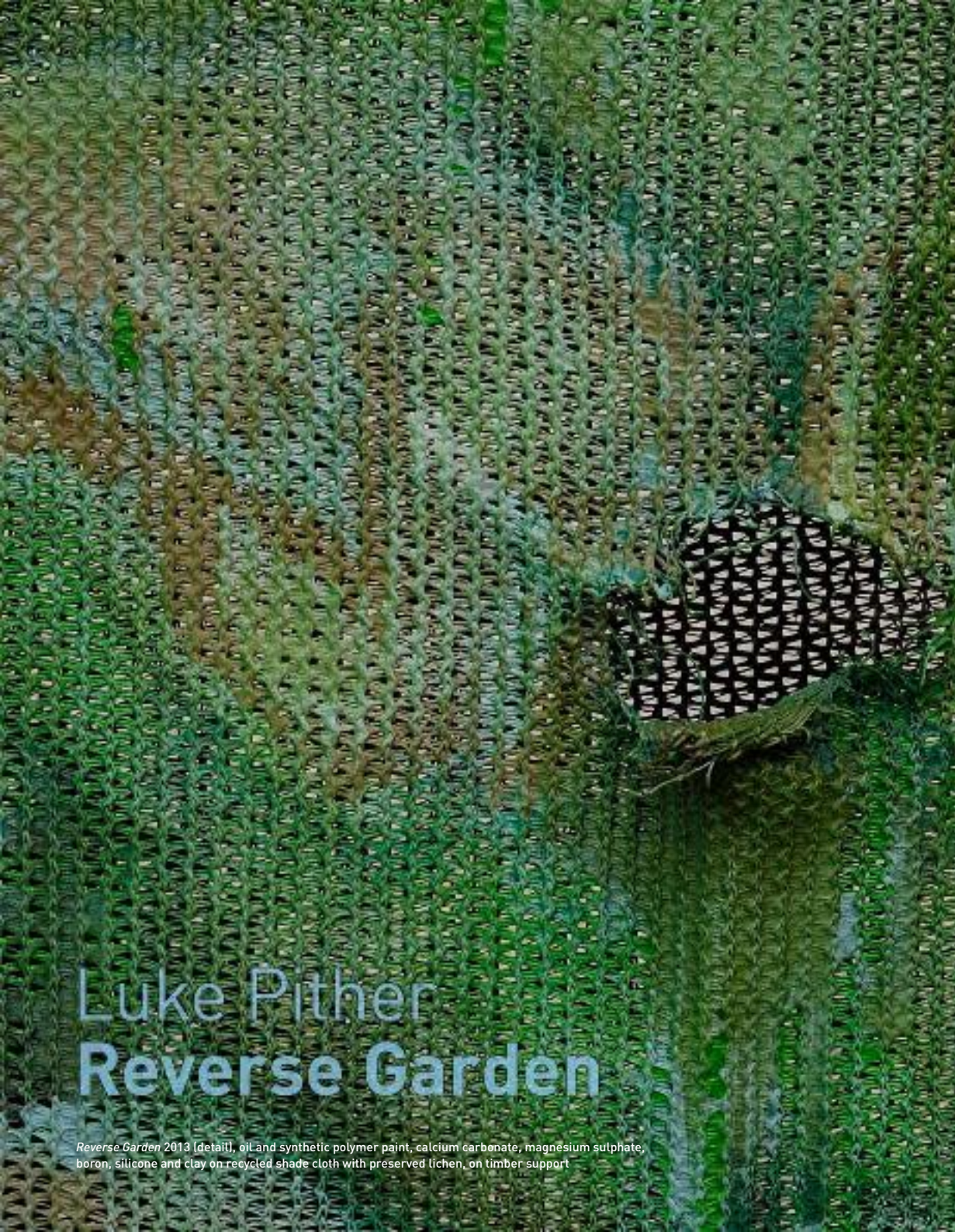
Heide
Museum of
Modern Art
Heide



Luke Pither
Reverse Garden



Reverse Garden 2013, installation view
Heide Museum of Modern Art



Luke Pither Reverse Garden

Reverse Garden 2013 (detail), oil and synthetic polymer paint, calcium carbonate, magnesium sulphate, boron, silicone and clay on recycled shade cloth with preserved lichen, on timber support

Luke Pither is both a painter and a gardener. In *Reverse Garden* he brings together aspects of his chosen disciplines in an experimental way, exploring connections between them and challenging pre-conceptions of what paintings about gardens can be. Presenting images on recycled shade-cloth draped over rural-style timber fences, he investigates the nature of viewer experience and encourages us to reflect on the environment beyond the gallery walls.

Pither avoids simply picturing gardens in this exhibition. Rather he appropriates and re-purposes some of the methods and processes of gardening for his painting, using both organic and inorganic materials to cultivate surfaces and emulate forms, textures and colours found in nature. His images are also potential garden designs, with abstracted shapes suggesting contour maps and patterns that could be used as a basis for building living artworks in the landscape.

By dispensing with conventional display methods and presenting the paintings as objects to be experienced spatially as well as visually, Pither evokes the physical, immersive experience of close contact with nature. Arranged in a network, the paintings direct our passage, offer multiple viewpoints and encourage contemplation, much like an encounter with a real garden.

In this interview with Heide curator Kendrah Morgan, Luke Pither elaborates on his development of the exhibition concept and the complex processes involved in creating the work.

Kendrah Morgan: Reverse Garden evolved from an idea you had about creating gardens based on your paintings. This reverses the more usual process of painting a garden.

Luke Pither: My initial proposal came out of a series of paintings I intend to make which will function as plans from which I can build gardens as artworks. In other words, I'm investigating how a painting can be rebuilt physically into a garden and what this entails.

Gardens are envisioned and designed well in advance of the practical act of gardening. Their future must be anticipated or imagined at the start, requiring a kind of reverse thinking to achieve a successful result. I find an interesting connection here between painting and gardening. Planning a painting is similar to designing a garden, as it means firstly thinking of the kind of thing that I want to deliver as a final product, then working backwards through it. I'm interested in the idea that an image always leaves potential for an action.

KM: Are you attempting to also convey a sense of the physical act of gardening in the paintings in Reverse Garden?

LP: Much botanical art has been produced, yet the act of gardening itself has been largely left out of art, left as an experience for the gardener. Our culture has widely stopped subsistence gardening and my primary aim as a gardener has been to promote the revival of edible gardens. I'm examining how painting can perhaps assist this revival by working with and for the process/practice of gardening and its distinction from landscape architecture.

Just painting a garden doesn't interest me: plenty of people are better at it than I could ever be; Monet, for example. But I admire most the process Monet undertook—the idea that he was out there building trenches in the rain just to find the right scene to paint. That image to me is powerful.

Gardens are about human settlement and occupying land in some way. To garden is to tend, to use your hands, mind and body at the same time—but what you're uncovering is always something that has the potential to add life or to give life or to turn into something you can eat—and most plants won't yield their true potential unless you're a great horticulturalist or very lucky. There are always problems. The point of gardening therefore is about trying new things when there are problems.

Painting is similar. Again, there's a relationship between the two disciplines that I'm exploring.

KM: The network of fences and paintings in this exhibition articulates the space and suggests the experience of walking through a rural landscape or garden setting. What led you to activate the space in this way?

LP: I was looking for a common denominator through which I could relate the garden to the gallery. I first considered an architectural disposition of the space that would reveal paintings behind walls as you moved through that architecture. In some ways it was about making a space within a space in order to attempt to find something, to search. That led me into a material investigation of the type of architecture that I wanted to use. The architecture at Heide has many diverse surfaces, and established plantings around it—it's both structurally and organically busy, which encourages the eye to find open space—so the idea of the void or clearing I thought about a lot.

Living rurally, as I do now, you can't help but notice clearings and this led me to think about how fences demarcate gardens. Wherever there is a fence there is some kind of garden, tended or not, and where there is not a fence it is open landscape or planned park. The fence and garden relationship is very strong in Australia and in that sense Heide is interesting, as while there are boundary lines and remnants of the old post-and-rail fences, and the kitchen garden is fenced, it is quite an open site.

The slippage between my original intention to build a garden, then build walls with hidden paintings, then finally using fences with the paintings draped over them, was about trying to let the history and present inside, rather than just re-fashioning the gallery architecture. It also pushed the paintings into the territory of becoming objects in their own right.

KM: Is this spatial awareness informed by your background in set design, and work in choreography?

LP: People move through gardens in such interesting patterns—there is often a slow rocking and a ponderous shuffle backwards. How we move physically around the paintings in the installation also defines what we see. From a choreographic perspective you're actually moving through a series of investigations in order to produce a vision—you're not just looking at a picture. Draping the works over a floor-based structure compels you to look and perhaps bend down—it's not like viewing a conventional painting yet it's not exactly like viewing plants in a garden either. It's somewhere in between, a space that invokes participation and creates movement.

KM: *In draping the paintings over fences you dispense with the traditional method of display. The paintings are also made of unorthodox materials—not canvas, but shade-tents that were on your rural property at Coomoora.*

LP: By draping the paintings on the fence structures I am, to an extent, dismissing the triumphant positioning of a painting on the wall, a theme which I focused heavily on in a previous project, *On Trees and Birds*, exhibited at The Substation in 2010. The paintings become simple things that are just thrown over fences, they're not precious.

When we moved to Coomoora recently there were tents made from green shade-cloths dotted about the landscape where the previous owner had grown ginseng. The tents were an interesting blight because although usable they were in the way of where we wanted to place gardens. I exchanged some of the shade-cloths for timber with our neighbour, who wanted to protect wood he was sawmilling. I began to think about how these shade-cloths might be used at his sawmill—essentially they were hung loosely over timber.

A sustainable use of resources is intrinsic to my gardening practice. I'm not trying to draw attention to the fact that the shade-tents are recycled because everything should be recycled if possible. Perhaps perversely, I sought a material that I could try to battle with for a while.

KM: *What were the challenges of using this material?*

LP: Shade-cloth is a semi-transparent synthetic material and because it had been exposed to the elements it was partially covered in different species of lichen. Previously almost all of my work has been made on opaque, smooth surfaces and although I've painted images of lichen, I never painted on lichen. I tried to honour the idiosyncrasies of the shade-cloth and deny its presence at the same time, then worked out how to preserve the lichen on the surface of the paintings without highlighting it. These technical concerns went into the fold at the same time as learning to paint on the material.

There are so many textures in gardens and they are always related to weather. It's so simple yet so complex. Trying to depict this relationship is difficult. What does wet look like once it has dried? Plants offer this information. They record it. How to paint it on shade-cloth is another thing entirely.

KM: *What other materials have you incorporated?*

LP: The paintings have a whole series of organic and some inorganic materials applied to them. I used seaweed extract in the early stages to prepare the lichens for coating with synthetic polymer and to keep



Above
Shade tent, Coomoora, 2013
Photograph: Luke Pither

Below
Reverse Garden 2013 (detail), installation view,
Heide Museum of Modern Art



Reverse Garden 2013 (detail), oil and synthetic polymer paint, calcium carbonate, magnesium sulphate, boron, silicone and clay on recycled shade cloth with preserved lichen, on timber support

them healthy, albeit dormant. I'm not trying to destroy the lichens but to work with them, so the first thing was to feed them. They have the capacity to re-grow on the work.

I explored a lot of ideas for stabilising the substrate. I also examined how extracted mineral compounds relate to the way we move around the world and what visual changes they create. For example, I've used silicone on the works, which has influenced us so much in terms of how we control water and in turn clean everything—how we sanitise our landscape. There is also magnesium sulphate, boron and calcium carbonate, and natural clay from our property. These have been washed over the works as well as being incorporated into drenches.

KM: *So in a sense you have fed the paintings, as you would feed a garden?*

LP: Yes. From a gardener's perspective fermentation processes are pivotal to soil life and I've tried to imitate this process in the painting. The ability to create heat, energy, to break matter down and promote new growth and nutrient cycling is vital. I've soaked the paintings, and used materials that can influence the paint without my brushstroke. So it's not just about me painting the painting, it's about the painting living and finding its own space within itself.

Each work is cultivated, so to speak, in a different way. I have a tendency to make shapes or capture colour and light in reverse—a sort of post-impressionist or early fauvist clash where the background is brought forward and the foreground is pushed back, finding ways I can paint and pronounce things and ways that I can hide them. I'm layering the paint, without losing the understorey.

KM: *The forms represented suggest plant matter but are non-specific: where does the imagery originate from?*

LP: I've painted lichen and mould and compost for a number of years—they have been a recurrent theme in terms of both my process of starting a painting and the subject matter of the painting: looking at disease and mould, things that people really don't like to look at but things that are inside gardens, mapping the physical health of the garden. The idea of the visual spectacle or beauty of the garden is important to this because it simply cannot occur without these mycorrhizal fungal relationships—fungi attaching to roots to aid plant growth symbiotically. It's not the pretty stuff that makes things grow but these mucky things that are the source.

Though the imagery is plant-like, or originates from plant forms, I wanted to allude to growing processes—the overturning of soil, the looking and re-looking, and the mixes of soils, carbons and leaf matter that occur. They draw reference points from things I see while gardening. In the act of

gardening you're sometimes not seeing anything, you're just experiencing. I'm attempting to capture that experience and the by-product is the painting.

KM: *The paintings in a sense represent a microscopic view of the garden: a microcosmic world that has become macrocosmic in translation.*

LP: That is interesting because the main point for me in the making of these paintings is to try and present the process of gardening, which is very different to the visual documentation of gardening.

I have looked at scale, focus and resolution differently in each of the works and each depicts completely different areas or patterns within each garden subject. As the paintings are double-sided and essentially two paintings per single frame, the process has been to investigate this transfer or exchange between seeing and moving to look.

Gardening offers the opportunity to see obscure things, if you're looking, and I want the paintings to also offer this. There is a strangeness within the garden—it's a place full of anomalous forms and visual surprises, and this is something I try to portray in the paintings.

KM: *Your paintings seek to reclaim the uncelebrated aspects of both gardens and the physical act of gardening. Are you also asking us to reconsider the Heide gardens in this work?*

LP: Heide for me is first a garden: there are a series of galleries inside a gardened landscape, not the opposite way around. The many early deciduous plantings form an incredible resource today for gardeners. I would hope that my work encourages visitors to the exhibition to explore the Heide gardens further and in more detail.

KM: *And you've addressed this to an extent by bringing the garden into the gallery.*

LP: One of the things about bringing the garden inside is in response to the pictorial history of gardens. There is so much history to do with painting and gardening and many garden notations, plans and graphics are visually interesting and continually developing. That's a history I am interested in observing and watching evolve. The crux of it is to use painting in a way that inspires the act of gardening.

And the way that I want to do this is ideally to replicate the way I stand back in a garden and look out at something, and realise that I've been standing looking for half an hour and haven't even noticed time go by. That's how I want to paint.

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1975, Melbourne; lives and works in Coomoora, Victoria.

Luke Pither trained in painting and printmaking at RMIT, Melbourne in 1994 before deferring to concentrate on a self-directed practice that combines the study of movement, colour physics and gardening in projects traversing multiple visual platforms. Between 1997 and 2010 he worked extensively in set design, dramaturgy and choreographic projects in Europe and Australia. Since 2002 he has designed permaculture and organic gardens in Australia as well as working collaboratively with permaculture design consultancy Very Edible Gardens, Melbourne.

Pither's solo exhibitions as a visual artist include: *On Trees and Birds*, The Substation, Melbourne, 2010; *In as Far as We Have Come*, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney, 2007; *Last Time We Met*, Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, 2006; *Tree Study*, Otter Gallery, Berlin, 2003; *Whenever*, Space 11, Antwerp, 2001; *This is Falling Down*, Former East Berlin Television Studios, Adlershof, Germany, 1999; *Doki Doki*, Jacksue Gallery, Perth, 1996.

Selected group exhibitions include: *Apple from the Tree*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, 2012; *The Monobrow Show*, Hell Gallery, Melbourne, 2010; *Another Point of View*, Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne, 2009; *Chromaphobia*, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane, 2009; *The Secret Life of Plants*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne and Fremantle Arts Centre, WA, 2009; *The Ecologies Project*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2008; *An Ordinary Moment*, Bendigo Fine Art Gallery, VIC, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, VIC and Powerhouse 9 Gallery, Daylesford, VIC, 1997; *11 Degrees*, Academy of Fine Art, Berlin, 1999.

Pither's work is held in numerous public and private collections nationally and internationally, including: BHP Billiton, Australia; W Arthotel, Hong Kong; RACV Art Collection, Melbourne; Absolut Collection, Netherlands, and private collections in Australia & Europe.

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For Moi, who always took such time to look...



Reverse Garden 2013, installation view
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Luke Pither: Reverse Garden
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Project Gallery #13

**Heide
Museum of
Modern Art**

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