



The Healer, 2018. Dry plant root, hollow birch branch, vintage mannequin hand, nylon hair-netting, cotton string, air current.

All photos by Karen Asher.

April 26 – May 24, 2019

Embodiment

CONNIE CHAPPEL



A Garden Laid Bare

A response by

Tricia Wasney

Nature's places, no matter how beautiful and moving we may find them to be, are not yet gardens; they become gardens only when shaped by our actions and engaged with our dreams. So we go on to consider the acts that make a garden: molding the earth, defining and connecting spaces with walls and ceilings and paths and monuments, irrigating, planting and tending, weaving patterns of recollection with names and images and souvenirs, and possessing the place by rituals of habitation.¹

With *Embodiment*, Connie Chappel has created a kind of garden. In gardens, as in art-making, raw materials remain just that until transformed by intent. What is Chappel's intent? Her garden is comprised of dead things and disease but is as lovingly tended as any other. A series of suspended root balls are tethered together in solemn yet hopeful solidarity. A large diseased branch is tenderly rocked in a hammock. One-hundred ominous black-knot galls are



hung with cheerfully-coloured embroidery floss from the ceiling, some of the specimens wrapped in cocoons crafted by Chappel from synthetic netting as if believing that, with care, they will emerge as something new and alive.

Inhabited by these sombre artifacts, optimism nonetheless pervades the exhibition. Though the vegetation is no longer alive and the elements inanimate, Chappel has given the works titles that suggest movement and regeneration. *Bloom* is the first work encountered, dramatically lit and located at the title wall of the gallery—one of five sculptures installed on two-inch high plinths which Chappel refers to as “grave slabs.”²² Cradling a rock, a mannequin arm—joined to a long, slender branch—extends upwards. In *Surge*, a mannequin arm lies horizontally on the plinth, seemingly born from a nest of lava rock and hair netting; the handless arm rests in the centre of a cracked log, and from the rupture a red glow emits from within. *Sisyphos Rock*—a sculpture made from a tree root, branches, soil and mannequin parts—evokes the pointless task of Sisyphos but nevertheless suggests movement forward even as we know it also means movement backward, creating a surprising tension between the still components. In *This Nest I Rise From*, a mannequin arm sprouts from a root ball, nestles around a rock and attaches to a branch of grafted tree fragments. The title says it all; a nest as a place of birth and, eventually, of leaving.

Chappel has provided literal movement as well, and the audience provides more. In *Suspended*, the black-knot-infected branch is cradled in a hammock that oscillates ever so slightly, not by a prairie wind, but by a tiny motor hidden inside the gallery wall. *The Dwelling Place*—a complex environment of root balls hung from the ceiling and interconnected with latex tubing, embroidery floss and monofilament—becomes animated as visitors walk carefully through it, the roots and their connections swaying gently from breath and human bodies in motion. Similarly, *The Healer*, a dry plant root covered in a birchbark sleeve with an antique mannequin hand extended at one end gestures slightly here, and then there, as visitors create air currents walking by.



Impactful is Chappel's deep personal involvement with each piece of vegetation. In her artist talk and in a tour with her through the exhibition, Chappel was able to share the provenance of each piece. Not collected randomly, the specimens came from her own yard, from those of friends and neighbours, or from far-flung places that are dear to her. With *Drip Drawing I, II, III*, *Tear Catcher*, and *Passages*, Chappel pays particular homage to a damaged, and now dead and removed, birch tree in her next-door neighbour's yard. She noticed that the tree was prodigiously dripping sap; crying, as she interpreted it. Adding red food dye (what she had at hand) to the wound, Chappel placed paper below and collaborated with the tree on *Drip Drawing I, II, III*. She only discovered later that birches are referred to as "bleeders" because of their prolific sap production. The collected sap is housed in *Tear Catcher*, a glass vessel installed in a wall niche that is reminiscent of a funerary crypt. The vessel is covered loosely, allowing the sap to evaporate, another suggestion of movement to another plane.



The Dwelling Place, 2019. Roots, latex rubber tubing, embroidery floss, monofilament, shadow, air current.



If you really want to draw close to your garden, you must remember that first of all you are dealing with a being that lives and dies; like the human body with its poor flesh, its illnesses at times repugnant. One must not always see it dressed up for a ball, manicured and immaculate.³

Chappel's garden brings to mind a hospital or care home for the sick and dying. Perhaps not surprisingly, Chappel was formerly a recreation director in a nursing home and has cared for her own elder relatives. *Embodiment* seems an extension of this drive to care and nurture. *Passages*—one-hundred birchbark fragments arranged in a spiral on the wall and fastened with acupuncture needles—is an evocation of the circle of life, illness and death, and considers the way we try to

TOP: *The Forest*, 2019. Branches, black-knot galls, nylon hair-netting, embroidery floss, glue, monofilament, shadow, air current.
 BOTTOM: *Suspended*, 2019. Fabric, elastic rope, black-knot galls, glue, branch, rock, wire, monofilament, electric motor, movement, shadow.

Passages, 2019. Birch bark, acupuncture needles, tape, embroidery floss, wax.

heal or treat people. The use of acupuncture needles in *Passages* and of latex rubber tubing (referred to as “connective tissue”⁴ by Chappel) in *The Dwelling Place* further evoke the tools of healing or at least those of medical intervention. The sleeve in *The Healer* and the strips nailed to the wall in *Passages* recall the healing properties of birchbark traditionally used by First Nations peoples to treat skin conditions and wounds. The infected branch is rocked gently in the hammock referencing people in pain who do a lot of rocking. Chappel also likened the hammock to the slings used to move immobile patients. The lamp cord in *Surge* is covered, suggesting insulation, “a protective covering,” according to Chappel.⁵ During her artist talk, Chappel handed around a sample of the birch-tree sap for the audience to look at and sniff. Fittingly (and eliciting some giggles from the audience), it was housed in a urine sample bottle.

The small private garden remains true to its instinctive, unchanged purpose of expressing, protecting and consoling.⁶

Interestingly, though Chappel ascribes human signifiers of suffering and healing to the dead vegetation, it is the plastic mannequin parts that she regards as stand-ins for people, especially women, “All are female arms; females are often the caregivers, the ones who look after disease and illness and the ones who insist that we take care of the planet. Eco-feminism, earth work—women do this.”⁷ Chappel knows that many people are creeped out by mannequin parts. Chappel finds them unapologetically fascinating, and a necessary metaphor and representation in her work of human connection to the earth, “It wouldn’t be the same if I didn’t have a human component.”⁸

The human element is a critical component of gardens. We build gardens, and, as we typically regard them, they are places of nourishment and refuge for us. We walk along their paths, coax their incremental growth, pull at the things that would destroy them, put them to bed for the winter. We care for them and in turn they provide us with food, flowers, scents, and with a deep connection

to life and regeneration. Gardens are also about stillness, dormancy and death. This is especially marked here on the prairie landscape. How remarkable is it that the four-foot bergamot plant in my garden last summer is now a dry lump with just tiny signs of life emerging? It will rise again in a few weeks and in a couple of months will push out wild purple blooms. The incredibly fragile-looking pussy toe plant has survived last winter’s minus forty temperatures and an unusually cold spring, and is thriving and blooming right now.

Listen, all creeping things, the bell of transience.⁹

Chappel’s *Embodiment* garden is not dressed up for a ball in the conventional sense of what that means, and it will not rise again, at least not in the way we expect gardens to rise. But it possesses its own kind of beauty, vitality and hopefulness. Considering the criteria from *The Poetics of Gardens*, Chappel *has* achieved a garden. Her actions have shaped not only the placement of the works in the exhibition but from every touch she laid upon the branches, bark, root balls, rocks, and mannequin parts on their journeys there. She has defined and connected spaces, created paths and tended her charges; she has made connections, woven patterns, bestowed names, and recalled that which no longer exists, creating her own rituals of habitation.

Notes

- 1 Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell, and William Turnbull, Jr., *The Poetics of Gardens* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), vi.
- 2 Connie Chappel, from artist’s notes shared with the author, April 30, 2019.
- 3 Fernand Lequenne quoted in “gardendigest.com,” accessed May 2, 2019, <http://www.gardendigest.com/death.htm>
- 4 Connie Chappel, conversation with the author, April 30, 2019.
- 5 Chappel, from artist’s notes shared with the author.
- 6 Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man: Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to the Present Day*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 7.
- 7 Chappel, conversation with the author.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Kobayashi Issa, *The Dumpling Field: Haiku of Issa*, trans. Lucien Stryk and Noboru Fujiwara, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991), 5.



Tear Catcher, 2018. Birch tree sap, glass, wood, LED electrical light.

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