



by Lauren Fensterstock

Imagine That You and I decide to walk through a garden. Depending on the garden, that walk might take form as a simple meandering through a small delineated patch of ground or a long trek through acres of landscaping. From every vantage point we may clearly see the entire vista or, perhaps, be surprised by twists and turns, dense forests, labyrinths, ups and downs, bodies of water, barriers, ruins, and other unexpected features. On this walk, we may pay close attention to our surroundings and delight in our discoveries. Or maybe the movement of our feet and the intimacy of our endeavor will inspire a conversation that takes us elsewhere, to another time and space incongruous to the reality stretching out before us and enveloping our steps.

Now, imagine that you and I decide to build a garden. We could make plans or we could just start digging and see what happens. To some, this latter route would seem illogical as it allows for the inconsistent. The path is unsure and potentially wasteful. And yet, somehow, the idea is exciting. Therein lies the potential of chance, the ability to evolve, and the slow call and response of coming into being, dying, change, and finding liberation.

I imagine Alison Hildreth approaching her work with this same exploratory notion—that of an intuitive builder of gardens—as her work captures that sense of bold belief and release. Her drawings are intuitive even as they are informed by the artist’s intensive research into a disparate array of topics spanning history, literature, philosophy, and poetry. Free from the binds of predetermination, Hildreth culls from these resources and her imagination to draw a new reality into being.

Hildreth lays a path ripe with complexities. Here, systems cross and converge. What begins as a road becomes a capillary system: first architectural, then biological, and finally botanical. These shifting connective systems are punctuated by isolated features. In some cases the punctuations appear like dialogue bubbles in a cartoon or a mandorla¹ in a medieval Christian illustration. They are exclamatory moments that break the fluidity of the larger system. Windmills. Processions. Soaring birds. Cloister gardens. The connectedness of these isolated images functions like the inventory of an allegorical ecosystem, woven together by a pilgrimage route of roads and waterways.

There are also traps along the way. Notably repeated is the form of Theresienstadt, an 18th century fortress (named after Marie Thérèse of Austria, mother of Marie Antoinette) that later served as a ghetto where Jews were held and forced to work, before being sent to the extermination camps at Auschwitz. Theresienstadt was featured prominently in one of Hildreth's significant inspirations: W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, in which the very shape of the fortress hauntingly permeates the fragile memory of the protagonist. As Hildreth has noted, Theresienstadt was built to protectively keep people out, but was later used to forcefully shut people in. In its first appearance in *Fragment #1*, the fortress is rendered precisely, while in later drawings the image becomes increasingly abstract—a symbolic trap in a landscape of the imagination. These isolated details in the drawings function like instances of focus. They rise from the fluid network of connections as either potential destinations or looming areas of danger or both.

Ideas surrounding the notion of freedom arise throughout Hildreth's work from the images of caged animals to the shedding of language to loose shifts in perspective. Partly inspired by ancient Turkish maps, Hildreth's vantage point shifts widely from an elevation to a perspective; or from the viewpoint of a person on the ground to that of one liberated from grav-



ity's pull. The drawings function like multi-dimensional maps describing something more complex than a simple topology or a single timeline. As John Berger points out, "Man is the only

creature who lives within at least two timescales: the biological one of his body and the one of his consciousness.”² He goes on to say:



To make sense of what I am suggesting it is necessary to reject the notion of time that began in Europe during the eighteenth century and is closely linked with the positivism and linear accountability of modern capitalism: the notion that a single time, which is unilinear, regular, abstract and irreversible, carries everything. All other cultures have proposed a coexistence of various times surrounded in some way by the timeless.³

Hildreth’s drawings may, as Berger suggests, reject convention to imply a new way of mapping that allows for a more complex multiplicity of perception. She frees her drawings—and by implication her viewer—from the shortcomings of a linear perspective.

In her monumental sculptural installation, *The Feathered Hand*, winged creatures and phenomenal baubles possess an alchemy that allows them to transcend gravity. Their flight connects the multiple layers of the gallery at the University of New England. In contrast to the glorious vision of the figures in flight, a large and dark pool of water lies below. Here, the figures’ transcendence is tragically reflected as an endless descent. The doubling effect reads as a cautionary lament or

a comment on our need for an extreme dialectic of polarities to affirm our own place on the ground. Allen S. Weiss writes beautifully on the subject of reflecting pools in his treatise on the metaphysics of Versailles.

It is precisely the fluid, unstable effects of these aquatic mirrors that emblemize the baroque sensibility, with its fascination for doublings, exaggerations; its desire for flight, dispersal and evanescence; its passion for a vertigo in which the self is in flight with the clouds, flowing with the waters, ultimately absorbed by the world—a mutable form expressing the limits of the imagination.⁴

As Weiss suggests with his aquatic mirrors, art has the potential to relocate the self in an unsettling new “absorption” or connection to the world. As Alison Hildreth adeptly proves, the plane of a single piece of paper can provoke epic journeys. Unlike our walk in the garden, Hildreth challenges us to leave the path already paved to build new terrain. If we agree that our world is a construction of our own perceptions bounded only by “the limits of our imagination,” then this paper could become not simply an image of the world, but the world itself.

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Notes

1. A *Mandorla* is an almond shaped area of light and color often found in paintings surrounding the image of a holy person or the figure of Christ.
2. Berger, John. “Into the Woods” [on Jitka Hanzlova’s *Forest* series, 2000–5], *Le Monde Diplomatique* (February 2006) as republished in Morley, Simon. *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
3. Ibid
4. Weiss, Allen S. *Mirrors of Infinity*. New York: Princeton Press, 1995.



