

Natural affinity

Garden historian **Tim Richardson** explores the relationship between artists and garden-makers, and selects six of the world's most celebrated garden designers to shed new light on the artists in 'Painting the Modern Garden'

The relationship between gardens and the art world has become somewhat fraught in recent years, chiefly because gardens mean wildly different things to different people. The garden is caught somewhere between two extremes. It can be the weekend and evening hobby promoted on television by Alan Titchmarsh, where the garden is seen as a place for growing flowers, fruit and vegetables, perhaps with the idea of the garden as a 'leisure space' tacked on to that, with decks, barbecues and so on. At the other extreme there is the garden as a place for meaningful expression: the symbolic temples, vistas and glades of the 18th century, or in our own time the poetically nuanced creation of Ian Hamilton Finlay at Little Sparta in Scotland, Derek Jarman's mystical seaside garden in Dungeness, or the drama of Charles Jencks's cosmological landscapes.

The impression one has is that some people – especially those from fine art backgrounds – would like to keep gardens in their place, in the first category, as an amateur's hobby. As a result, those who seek a deeper intellectual and artistic engagement with gardens can be frustrated by the condescension they experience – imagined or not – coming from an 'artistic establishment' that mistrusts a genre in which mutability is key, and where the artist can only exert a certain amount

of control over the finished product. Garden-makers revel in this lack of control, while artists might look on aghast.

When treating the garden as subject matter, some contemporary artists plump for a satirical take on the notion of the garden as a kind of 1950s suburban, middle-class throwback: pipe-chomping males mowing the lawn while wives in pinafores bake indoors. As satire, this amounts to dull cliché, so it is always refreshing to come across artists who engage with the idea of the garden on a deeper level (see page 58). To gardeners, it is obvious when an artist demonstrates an affinity with plants. There will be a vibrant, unpredictable and palpably living aspect to the depiction, which is clearly the result of a sympathy with the subject – plants and gardens are portrayed as dynamic living entities that affect the world.

There are many and various examples of just this kind of affinity in the Academy's 'Painting the Modern Garden'. Monet was pre-eminent as the painter who understood the ways of plants – not surprising, as he was a keen horticulturist (see page 44) – while Sargent and Matisse were intimate with them in different ways. Artists such as Pissarro, Sorolla and Bonnard were drawn more to a sense of place in gardens.

BELOW *The Little Palm Tree*, 1905, by Raoul Dufy



Cézanne painted space itself, while for Kandinsky and Dufy (*The Little Palm Tree*, 1905; opposite) it was the excitement of shape, form and texture that was the stimulus. Munch and Vuillard used the garden as a metaphorical visual cipher. Klee deconstructed it to create mythic analogies. Van Gogh, as ever, was painting something else altogether.

For garden designers and landscape architects, paintings of gardens and landscapes can be curious and compelling, as demonstrated by the accounts on these pages, in which six designers revel in the mystery and ambiguity of garden art. For those working creatively in the world of gardens, it is not botanical accuracy that is of prime interest but the way in which an artist can capture an intriguing or mysterious moment in a garden setting. It seems that a painting can draw in the viewer just as a garden does. Perhaps we might think of ourselves as 'visitors' to garden paintings, as opposed to mere 'viewers' – it is as if we become absorbed, in some way, in the depiction of garden space.

Tim Richardson leads a panel discussion at the Academy on 4 March 2016 with Tom Stuart-Smith, Sarah Price, Dan Pearson and Stephen Farthing RA; see **Events & Lectures** page 71

Sarah Price on Matisse

Trained as an artist, Price built her reputation in garden design through the 2000s, creating delicately detailed private spaces, as well as large-scale public works, such as her plantings for London's Olympic Park

Henri Matisse

Acanthus (Moroccan Landscape), 1912

This painting is one of three Matisse made of a garden in Tangier in Morocco. It is on view in Stockholm's Moderna Museet, while a later Matisse, *The Rose Marble Table* (1917), is coming to the RA.

Violets and purples are unusual colours to see in a garden painting, but where I live in South Wales you do see these colours at sunset. At that time of day you can look at a garden and see it in a purely visual, sensual way. You can step back. It feels as if this painting is caught in a strange twilight moment. You can just enjoy being propelled into that moment. It is one moment and it's joyful – and that is why I make gardens.

There is ambiguity here. It's like a garden creeping into a landscape – we're not sure. The composition appears spontaneous and chaotic, but it's not. It is tightly conceived, with a delicate balance of forms. It feels harmonious and alive, full of spirit. I love the way my eye bounces away from the void in the middle and moves around the painting. By using a strong magenta for the tree trunk Matisse is exaggerating the plant forms, like the whippy, multi-stemmed tree in front. In this picture it is as if each plant and tree has its own spirit, its own personality.

I like the sense of the yellow being scraped out and the dappled light coming in. And the peachy colour in the top right against the lilac and the acid yellow. It picks up on some autumn colours. I can almost sense the heat coming off the bush.

What initially drew me to the picture were the colours, and then the use of negative space. I thought, 'This is what I am aiming at when I am composing my garden spaces.' There is so much negative space around the plant forms. They really hold their own.

