

Today's artists share their avant-garde ancestors' passion for plants. But instead of paint, they are using unusual materials and media – including gardens themselves – to break creative boundaries. Sam Phillips meets six figures at the forefront of new thinking about flora

Up the garden path

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THE HOSPITAL GARDEN

Jyll Bradley

Portrait by Thierry Bal

A corridor at a hospital in Lille has morphed into a metaphorical journey through greenhouses filled with botanical plants



It is an unlikely place to have a transcendental experience of art. But visitors to Hôpital Roger Salengro in Lille can expect just that, as they walk between the building's two wings. What was once an oppressive corridor has been transformed this year into an immersive artwork by Jyll Bradley. Entitled *Le Jardin hospitalier* (2015), it brings sensations and ideas associated with gardens into the architecture of the hospital.

'The garden is a perfect metaphor for what happens in a hospital,' explains the Folkestone-born artist (left), as we wander down the 100m-long passageway. 'In particular, plants in greenhouses are like humans in hospitals – both rely on others to bring them the essentials for life. Both gardens and hospitals are ecologies of care.' Along the corridor one encounters several different elements in this artwork. There are floor-to-ceiling back-lit photographs of Lille's botanical greenhouses, which have long grown medicinal plants; wide panels of Douglas Fir, a wood with a warm, beautiful grain that was often used by one of Bradley's artistic heroes, American Minimalist Donald Judd; abstract planes of fluorescent yellow Plexiglas; reproduced texts by Shakespeare and Proust; and sections of partly corrugated white metal, which Bradley describes as 'breaths' to balance the other sensory elements.

As the Academy's exhibition 'Painting the Modern Garden' reveals, Monet and other European painters of his time revolutionised art through their images of gardens. Today's conceptual artists, however, focus less on the visual representation of gardens and more on how ideas about horticulture – social and spiritual, cultural and commercial – can be communicated with clarity, and how gardens themselves might act as a material or medium.

Bradley's composition for the corridor, for example, drew on the ethics of Ikebana, a Japanese form of flower arranging. 'The idea in Ikebana is to create a flower arrangement that has enough space for a butterfly to fly through, so it can experience the arrangement from all angles,' she says. 'A thoroughfare like this is a really challenging site for art because we're conditioned to look at artworks face on – my task was to create something that people would experience from the side as they walked. So I had Ikebana in mind, to make sure I allowed enough space and time for

patients and doctors to relate to the work, giving them something different in their daily lives, such as a contemplative moment.'

Passers-by slow down and, thanks to the brightness of the large back-lit photographs, sense they are outside instead of in. These behind-the-scenes images of Lille's greenhouses do not feature people, but include as much apparatus as they do flora: the pipes, hoses, thermometers and other gauges parallel the technology used by doctors and nurses across the hospital. The photographs also show dying plants, as well as those that are thriving. 'An important element of Ikebana is that you don't just include flowers in perfect bloom,' Bradley continues. 'You include one that's about to bloom, one in perfect bloom, and one that's dying away. I have kept that in mind with the choreography of the images, to be true to the passage of time and the cycle of life.'

But in an astonishing recent work by artist Maria Thereza Alves, plants have cheated the passage of time. On a concrete barge in Bristol's Floating Harbour, the Brazilian artist and a team of specialists have cultivated a garden entirely from ballast seeds – seeds that many decades ago graced the hulls of ships as ballast.

Between the 17th and early 20th centuries it was common for merchant sailors across the world to load earth into the holds of their vessels, to keep them stable in the water. This earth would contain all kinds of organic matter, including seeds. In the late 1990s the botanist Heli Jutila found that the non-native flora of Reposaari island near Pori in her native Finland were a product of such seeds. Arriving in port ships had unloaded their earthy ballast, and its seeds – from across the globe – would germinate into plants.

Alves met Jutila at a conference over 15 years ago, and the Finn's science soon became the substance of the Brazilian's art, after a major revelation. 'Jutila said that these seeds can lie dormant for hundreds of years, and that it was possible to germinate them today,' says Alves. 'It can be difficult and you might need laboratory conditions, but they can be grown, as long as you take some care.' The artist then embarked on her ongoing research project 'Seeds of Change', to discover sites of unloaded ballast around port cities such as Marseilles. In Bristol, commissioned by the city's Arnolfini gallery, she went several