parterre

an installation by lauren fensterstock
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Recently, I fell in love with gardening. This was a complete surprise because I have always seen myself as an indoors kind of person. Nature was completely off my radar, something I would whir by in my car with the windows closed and the air conditioning on high.

When I decided to test out my green thumb in my tiny backyard, I found that I had immediate and very definite opinions about how a garden should look. My preference was for all things natural. In my mind, natural meant asymmetrical, slightly wild and overgrown, steeped with a romantic sensibility, and somehow eerily omnipotent. I took painstaking care to arrange my flowers so that they looked unarranged. I agonized over the curl of every leaf and the balance of color and texture. Not a single plant I selected for my wild space was actually indigenous to the garden's location in downtown Portland, Maine. Increasingly, I became aware that my ideas about nature were, in fact, embarrassingly civilized.

In preparation for Parterre, I spent months searching the Bowdoin College Museum of Art's rich collection for artists' depictions of the natural world. In particular, I became fascinated with two sets of prints: Views of the Chateau and Gardens of Rueil, designed by Israel Silvestre with etching help from the Perelle family, and Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America by
William Sharp. Both are exquisitely rendered and illustrate man's reshaping of nature to express his own sense of place in the natural order. In the seventeenth-century world of Rueil, man was king (often quite literally so, as this was a site where the King of France spent many weekends) and as such restructured the earth to improve upon the work of nature. A belief in the power of geometry and the use of clever technical innovations warped nature into the setting for a display of power and personal entertainment. In contrast, Sharp's nineteenth-century illustrations of rare water lilies found deep within the unexplored Amazon tell of a sensual landscape full of exotic specimens, adventure, and the possible fulfillment of a new world.

My research and responses, much like my backyard, are filtered through my own sense of being in the world. The more I discovered in the Museum's collection storage, the more complex I understood my topic to be. This perfectly reflects my own world view: a world I find to be layered, mysterious, full of divine intervention, a thing of past and present merged, and so completely other that its effect is impenetrably isolating. As a result, my work may do more to obfuscate than to clarify.

It was written that in the beginning the world was mishmash, and as always, things stay marvelously the same.
"The garden": a magnificent median way between the wild biological state and the scientific laboratory—similar to the ancient work of the goldsmith, who combined the anarchically multiplied crystal and the infernal "libertinage" of precious stones with the ordered, pedantic application of the artisan, the artist, at work. The tree seen through a window, which seems to have been specially made, is something entirely other than trees in general.  

MIKLÓS SZENTKUTHY

"Landscape" is what Lauren Fensterstock answered when asked what she wanted to investigate when she was invited to create new work in response to the collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Landscape is not an unexpected rejoinder, given the extent of the Museum's landscape holdings and the artist's base in Maine, a state keenly invested in its physical environment. However, it was unexpected given the fact that Lauren Fensterstock is a long-time New Yorker, who can best be described as a conceptual artist trained as a jeweler.

Fensterstock began looking at the collection when the Museum was closed in 2006 for renovation, when most of the collection was stored far off-site and only some of the Museum's works on paper were available for perusal. During this process she began to narrow in on a specific topic—European formal gardens. Her "eureka" moment came shortly after the Museum acquired a set of twelve 1661 etchings by Israel Silvestre that depicted Cardinal de Richelieu's gardens at Rueil. Another revelatory moment came when the oversized works on paper returned to the Museum, and Fensterstock discovered the American artist William Sharp's 1854 botanical illustrations of the magnificent Amazonian water lilies called Victoria Regia. Separated by two hundred years, these two sets of prints and the social and cultural histories in which they were created fueled the development of Fensterstock's installation Parterre.

The Rueil Gardens
Cardinal de Richelieu commissioned architect Jacques Lemercier to plan the Rueil gardens between 1633 and 1642. According to garden historian Kenneth Woodbridge, the Rueil gardens, destroyed in the early eighteenth century, were the most admired and original European gardens in the mid-seventeenth century. They greatly influenced the architect André Le Nôtre, who created the gardens at Versailles for Louis XIV. Rueil's uniqueness
was characterized by the architect's bringing together characteristics of the French classical garden tradition with those of Italian gardens. Woodbridge summarizes the two styles concisely in his article "The Picturesque Image of Richelieu's Gardens at Rueil":

Briefly then, the French classical tradition of garden design aimed to display the architecture of the house as a symbol of the status of the owner; his public persona, as it were, without any hint of his private character. The Italian gardens (Tivoli, Caprarola, Pratolino, Bomarzo, Aldobrandini) were not only more private places; they also displayed those fantasies which public dignity did not permit.3

Lemercier, and later the Duchess d'Aiguillon, who inherited Rueil from Richelieu, her uncle, took advantage of the irregularity of the site to dispose a lavish series of features: a Grande Allée, canals, grottoes, cascades, balustraded steps, and framed views. In the design of the prints, Silvestre, and the Perelle family of etchers, owe their approach to the landscape painters working in Rome at the end of the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries. Despite their leaning towards rendering the picturesque rather than accurate topography, we are still able to appreciate the characteristics that made the gardens unique for their time. For instance, aggressive water games like the Fontaine du Dragon were, as Woodbridge points out, "a positive enticement to disorder." Woodbridge elaborates, noting: "Louis Huygens wrote in 1655 that people were obliged to leave their swords at the entrance, because of the disturbances arising from those who were annoyed at being wetted."4

Victoria Regia
Now known as the Victoria Amazonica, this dramatic South American water lily deeply entered the imagination of mid-nineteenth-century England and America. It inspired the design of the Crystal Palace (and perhaps popularized the metaphor describing delicate, fragile constitutions as "hothouse flowers"). Special glass conservatories were built for the sole purpose of encouraging Victoria Regia's survival in foreign, inhospitable climates. Its lavish flowers and leaves are the subject of Sharp's portfolio of spectacular oversized prints that was accompanied with text by John Fisk describing the discovery of these flowers in the Amazon and accounts of their subsequent cultivation.

Fisk's text was primarily descriptive and historical, whereas contemporary scholar Margaret Flanders Darby critically summarizes the socio-cultural conditions underlying the nineteenth-century fascination with the plant:

The history of this tropical plant's journey to England is strikingly typical of the scientific and imperial motives that encouraged Englishmen to penetrate forbidding foreign environments in order to pluck up what grew there, often destroying whole ecosystems in the process. Having worked so hard to bring home plants made vulnerable by this very resourcefulness, they then devoted themselves to the delicate sensitivity of the plants' needs, the better to raise them in a completely different climate.5

Sharp and Fisk do not mention the international race to cultivate the lily. Darby, however, points out that "the lily's early history in England, as with palms, orchids, and other desirable exotic species, is also an account of aristocratic and scientific competition."6 In November of 1849 Joseph Paxton, head gardener to the sixth Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, was the first man to bring the Amazonian water lily to flower in England. Simon Schama writes: "The difference between the attempts of the Renaissance botanists to encompass the world in a garden
The Gigantic Water-lily (Victoria Regia), in flower at Chatsworth, as it appeared in The Illustrated London News, November 17, 1849.

Courtesy the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.
Veué en face de la grande Cascade du Jardin de Rueil.

Israel Silvestre delin

Perelle, sculp.
and the imperial tropical gardening of the nineteenth century was simply the industrial marriage of glass panes and iron ribs." 7
Indeed the same Joseph Paxton, only two years later in 1851, designed the Crystal Palace, crediting the complex leaf structure of the giant water lily as the inspiration for his structure's engineering and architectural audacity.

**Parterre**
Entering the Bowdoin College Museum of Art's Halford Gallery, a space the artist chose because its plan reminded her of those of European formal gardens, viewers are immediately confronted with Fensterstock's bold interpretation of a water lily pool for the *Victoria Regia*. Her eight-foot by twenty-foot pool and its plants and contents, however, are entirely—and strikingly—black.
The water lily pads and flowers, as well as the grass that sprouts up between them, are created from exquisitely sliced, inky black paper. The gigantic leaves and stately, elegant flowers sit on reflective black Plexiglas that provides the illusion of water.
The plants are presented as expansive and thriving at the front of the pool; towards the back, however, they metamorphose into overflowing piles of intricate, obsessively quilled paper forms. These beautifully crafted "paper filigree" shapes dramatically disintegrate into beds of crushed black charcoal.

Sharp's striking oversized prints of the *Victoria Regia* hang prominently in the gallery to underscore their generative influence on the artist's project. Yet Fensterstock's flowers are not primarily about the extraordinarily visceral presence of the plants that were described so lovingly, even ecstatically, in Fisk's text. Instead, her three-dimensional rendering of *Victoria Regia* is based on Sharp's manner of presenting visual information: clean, crisp, and precise. His bold and colorful illustrations, which augment the verbal descriptions found in the text, were created for an audience that could not travel to Chatsworth in England or Salem in Massachusetts where the plant was successfully cultivated. Both in the prints and in Fensterstock's water lily pool, we encounter a representation of nature.

Fensterstock is interested in how, throughout Western history, human beings have brazenly re-visioned the world of nature and, acting upon their plans, thought to improve upon it. She views this attitude as simultaneously audacious, wonderfully idealistic, and extremely seductive. 8 Both the Rueil Garden and the *Victoria Regia* prints participate in this re-visioning; *Parterre* both criticizes this point of view and takes pleasure in the elaborate human imagination and inventiveness necessary to support such creative endeavors.

Fensterstock herself crafts nature in *Parterre*, emphasizing her point through the handwork of quilling, a craft dating back to the sixteenth century (and, according to some, possibly even to ancient Egypt). The technique involves tightly rolling small pieces of paper and gluing them together to create the illusion of metal filigree more frequently found in decorative art and jewelry. Though "natural" might not be the first word that comes to mind in the face of *Parterre*, Fensterstock's materials—paper and charcoal—come from nature and are two of the oldest materials in the history of art-making. Like the goldsmith described in the opening quote by Szentkuthy, Fensterstock the jeweler and disciplined artisan manipulates these natural materials into something entirely new in which to revel.

She seductively invites the viewer to accompany her into her arena of investigation and creativity. She boldly decorates the perimeter of the entire gallery by embedding thousands of simulated diamonds, cubic zirconia, in a continuous horizon line around the walls. The sparkling line draws attention to the shape of the gallery's walls, with their elegant bends and recesses, and
emphasizes the physical position of the viewer in this defined space. Gardens, like galleries, are designed to be moved through, and are often planned so that viewers pause at appointed moments to appreciate a controlled vista. Fensterstock’s ring of cubic zirconia emphasizes that space surrounds us—it is not merely in front of us. Parterre transports viewers into the work of art to be encircled and embraced by the sparkling band.

On the north wall of the gallery Fensterstock’s sparkling gems recreate a map of the hedge labyrinth from the garden of Versailles. Louis XIV had the labyrinth built for his son, the Dauphin and the future king of France. “The hedge-lined alleys of the maze contained a series of highly decorative fountains, which were organized as a kind of teaching tool for the young boy. Each of the fountains represented an Aesop fable, those timeless tales that teach moral lessons on, among other things, jealousy, ignorance and deception—moral lessons that the king wished to teach to his young son.” Fensterstock’s intent is not to impress her viewers with the opulence of her materials, the level of her craftsmanship, or her imaginative intellectual mining of the Museum of Art’s collection. The map of this hedge maze suggests instead the lessons and wisdom to be drawn from stories that illustrate examples by which Western culture and society has seen its destiny as master and possessor of nature.

Parterre is also a lament. The consequences of human arrogance in the face of nature and the environment are acutely felt today, and Parterre mourns this human hubris. The black flowers flourish in one part of the pond but elsewhere disintegrate into an elaborate ruin suggesting devastation and loss. The water lilies, in obsessively hand-made majesty, sit within what could be seen as a large shadow box, suggesting a link to another ornamental craft tradition popular during the Victorian era, the elaborate mourning wreaths made from human hair. And mirrored in the black Plexiglas, the lily pond garden becomes a representation of “a miniature, transportable cosmos, always on the verge of disappearing.”

A long horizontal display case contains rarely seen eighteenth-century European timepieces from the Museum’s permanent collection. Fensterstock insinuates three of her own ruby- and diamond-ornamented “timepieces”—two potatoes and one banana—into the same case. Her jewel-encrusted fruits and vegetables record the passage of time quite differently from the marvelously complex mechanical watches; hours and days register by the rate at which the organic matter has withered and decayed. Unlike the watches, which represent time as measured by Western culture (and were symbols of ostentatious wealth), Fensterstock’s humble objects represent nature’s time, which she makes precious by decorating it in a manner similar to the bejeweled, enameled, and filigreed watches. As a complete installation, Parterre suggests not only that nature’s time is precious, but that, now more than ever, it is in crisis. Yet in time there is possibility and Parterre, in the end, holds out hope for the survival and flowering of human imagination.

Notes
6. Darby, 259.
**Biography**

**Born**
1975, Towson, Maryland

**Education**
- 1996 (Summer) Penland Mountain School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina
- 1993 (Fall) School of Visual Arts, New York, New York
- 1992 (Summer) Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

**Solo Exhibitions**
- 2006 *Laced with History*, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin
- 2006 *Marriage of True Minds*, University of New England Art Gallery, Portland, Maine
- 2005 *Sofa Chicago*, with Sienna Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 2004 *LandEscapes 2006*, Beech Hill Farm, College of the Atlantic, Mount Desert, Maine
- 2005 *Maine Biennial*, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
- 2005 *Everything But Paper Prayers*, Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
- 2004 *Touchstones*, Blum Gallery, College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine
- 2004 *Portland Biennial*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine
- 2004 *Exposing Scarlet*, Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
- 2003 *Exquisite Corpses*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine
- 2003 *Home*, DUMBO Art Center, Brooklyn, New York; University of New England, Portland, Maine
- 2003 *New Paltz Metalsmiths*, Andora Gallery, Carefree, Arizona
- 2002 *Treats*, Hay Gallery, Portland, Maine
- 2002 *Composition 101*, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
- 2002 *Curiosity*, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
- 2001 *The Sacred and Profane: The Devil Made Me Do It*, The Battery Steele, Peaks Island, Maine
- 2001 *Spot: The Sacred and Profane*, The Battery Steele, Peaks Island, Maine
- 2000 *Portland Regional 50*, Danforth Gallery, Portland, Maine

**Selected Group Exhibitions**
- 2009 *Reactions*, Craft Alliance, St. Louis, Missouri
- 2008 *The Thinking Body*, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon; Museum of Art and Design, San Francisco, California
- 2007 *Lauren Fensterstock, Dylan McManus, Justin Novak*, Dorsky Curatorial Projects, Long Island City, New York
- 2006 *New Natural History*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine
- 2006 *In Situ*, Bakalar Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts
Selected Bibliography


Selected Published Writings


Selected Exhibitions Curated
Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece
Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, Portland, Maine
Arthur Ganson: Machines Contemplating Time, 2008
Lisa Young: Transcendence and Temporality, 2008
Hay Gallery, Portland, Maine
Botanicals, 2003
The Fetish Garden: Jack Montgomery, 2003
Ornament as Content, 2003
Saco Museum, Saco, Maine
Image in Print, 2002
Still Lifes: A Tradition Retold, 2002
Life Is Uncertain: Past and Present American Mourning Customs, 2001
On a Very Small Scale, 2001
Hodgepodge, 2000
Icons, 2000
Inspired by Saco: Artists Respond to the Collection, 2000
The Battery Steele, Peaks Island, Maine
Spot: The Sacred and Profane, 2001

Lauren Fensterstock is represented by Aucocisco Gallery, Portland, Maine

Checklist of Objects

Works in the Exhibition
Works by Lauren Fensterstock
Courtesy of the Artist and Aucocisco Gallery, Portland, Maine

Lily Pond, 2008
quilled paper, Plexiglas, and charcoal installation
Lily Pond was assembled on site at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.
The piece contained thousands of tiny paper parts.

Horizon/Versailles, 2008
cubic zirconia wall installation
Horizon/Versailles was assembled on site at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.
The gallery walls were inlaid with approximately 5,000 3 mm stones.
The piece was dismantled at the end of the exhibition.

War of the Roses, 2008
ink and gouache on paper

Fountains, 2008
ink and gouache on paper

What Happens I, 2005
diamonds in potato

What Happens II, 2005
diamonds, ruby, and sapphires embedded in potato

What Happens III, 2007
diamonds and sapphires in banana

Bowdoin College Museum of Art
Prints
Israel Silvestre, the Younger, French, 1621–1691, with the Perelle Family
Views of the Chateau and Gardens of Rueil, 1661
six from a set of twelve etchings on paper
Museum Purchase, James Phinney Baxter Fund, in memory of Professor
Henry Johnson
2007.6.4.5., 6., 7., 8., 10., and 12.

William Sharp, American, 1803–1875
Complete Bloom from “Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America,”
1854
chromolithograph
Gift of David P. Becker, Bowdoin Class of 1970
1978.16

William Sharp, American, 1803–1875
*Opening flower from “Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America,”* 1854
chromolithograph
Gift of David P. Becker, Bowdoin Class of 1970
1991.42.2

William Sharp, American, 1803–1875
*Underside of leaf from “Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America,”* 1854
chromolithograph
Gift of David P. Becker, Bowdoin Class of 1970
1991.42.3

William Sharp, American, 1803–1875
*Intermediate stages of bloom, “Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America,”* 1854
chromolithograph
Gift of David P. Becker, Bowdoin Class of 1970
1991.42.4

William Sharp, American, 1803–1875
*Opening bud from “Victoria Regia, or the Great Water Lily of America,”* 1854
chromolithograph
Gift of David P. Becker, Bowdoin Class of 1970
1991.42.5

Watches and Jewelry
Mermillon, French, early eighteenth century
*Blue Enamel Gemmed Watch*
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.15

Julien Le Roy, French, 1686–1759
*Gemmed Byzantine Repeater Watch*
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.11

Henrique Favre, French, eighteenth century
*Tortoise Triple Case Watch*, 1730
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.29

Philippe Terot, French, eighteenth century
*Gemmed Painted Watch*, 1740–1750
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.17

Unknown Artist, early eighteenth century
*Fine Enamel Watch Case*
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.5

George Dunlop, British, eighteenth century
*Filigree Repeater Watch*
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.22

Julien Le Roy, French, 1686–1759
*Gemmed Painted Repeater Watch*
Bequest of the Honorable James Phinney Baxter
1921.12.13

Unknown Artist, late eighteenth century; setting early nineteenth century
*Ring*
Gift of Miss Margaret Folger
1967.2

Book
James Gairdner, author, Scottish, 1828–1912
*Houses of Lancaster and York, with the Conquest and Loss of France,*
book bound in green levant with gold tooling and inlaid design
Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin College
I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to the many people who helped to bring this exhibition to life. First and foremost to the incomparable Katy Kline and Alison Ferris who provided the utmost of support and inspiration, encouraging my wildest ideas with thought-provoking feedback and compassion. To Curatorial Assistant Kacy Karlen, who spent countless days by my side as we scoured Bowdoin’s collection storage facility; to Peter Shellenberger for his beautiful photographs; to Jean Wilcox for the design of this catalogue; to Museum Registrar Laura Latman, who let me paw through her carefully ordered collection facility; and to Preparator José Ribas for his assistance with—and often tolerance for—my installation requests. Thank you to David Becker for his knowledge of the Victoria Regia prints and to Andy and Virginia at Aucocisco Galleries. A special thank you to my studio assistant, Olivia Cyr, who spent hundreds of hours curling paper by my side, with additional help from Michael Deles, Molly Vogel, and my best friend Rebecca FitzPatrick, who often got sucked into cutting paper when tempted by a dinner invitation. Thank you to Dad, Eric, and Naomi, and to Mom, my gardening confidant and regular partner in plant fancy. Most significantly, I would like to thank Aaron T. Stephan, who supported me through the madness of making this piece and is inspiration for my dreams of eternity in a garden built for two.

Lauren Fensterstock

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Bowdoin College Museum of Art
Brunswick, Maine