

Plant, Landscape, Nature

Artist, Horticulturist, Mother

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As an artist I have always been drawn to the natural world and particularly to plants. I have marvelled at their morphology, colour, cultural uses and aesthetic merit. Plants have regularly been cast in the role of the very materials with which my artwork has been made. I have also sugared, preened, pruned, selected, grown, stolen, injected, experimented on and preserved plant material all in the name of Art. I have plagiarised the logarithmic spiral, I have looked to replicate the intricate details of random that I have observed and been awed by... sometimes this has all been to good effect, but that's just it, a good effect. I could start the thorny discussion of what art is, how as artists have we been influenced by nature and plants and who has done so most successfully, but I have decided to tread a rather more unfamiliar path.

As a horticulturist I have studied plant physiology, growth and development, pests and diseases and how to use and tame the tangle of plants within nature. I enjoyed playing God when it came to propagation, whether it was seed sowing, taking and establishing cuttings or shaking my head in wonder at the use of grafting in commercial settings. I could muse over the horticultural role of genetically modified crops, of cultivating chimeras to the extreme, but this essay does not seek to revere or scorn Western horticultural practices. No, I want to look at my personal relationship with plants and how that has changed, not by art or horticulture but by human existence.

As a human and someone currently carrying a child in utero I feel I am at last having a relationship with nature on the same level as my plant siblings. No longer voyeur to their secret world of innocent growth, for the first time I am an active participant in the mysterious world of nature. This change is not from seeing a psychologist and working on self esteem issues, no, this is entirely physical and not from an emotional place but from the setting of human seed and the establishment of cell division in my womb.

I have used and observed flora all of my life. As a child I had the unsettling feeling that as a human, my cause and effect on plant lives was not a positive one. I used to wonder how the world would change if we as a race were to be wiped out and "nature" left to take over. I loved the thought that within a number of decades the concrete jungles we had created would be torn down not only by age and weather but also by the slow and creeping power of plants. I used to find root lifted pavements reassuring, I revelled at the naughty creepers pulling out mortar from the sides of buildings and I relished the idea of corroding rots taking over houses so that humans would beat a retreat. One might put these feelings down to a simplistic, undeveloped understanding of my own place in our world but my, what a changing world I have grown up into.

My forefathers crofted an existence within Scotland's landscapes; we hear tales of "working the land", but they grew what plants they needed for basic requirements and did not use or covet more than they required. In the developed western world I exist in, this is a fond memory that stands in stark contrast to where I now find myself. And yet, I have felt more similar to a plant in recent months than ever before, I have felt growth at the same rate as the plants I once tended. The propagation I once felt smugly in control of is now a distant, scoffable memory; that I thought I had played the role of God now seems laughable. The magic and mystery was not mine, but still the plants'!

I look at plants and nature and think how incredible; how original, how perfectly and exquisitely designed; thank goodness when we rip her off we have the grace to entitle it "biomimicry".

Realising that I may never live up to the artist Mother Nature but with a hankering to create something original, I myself thought I developed a new preservation technique for desiccating plant material – "what a genius I am", I thought gleefully until I was presented with research showing that the eighteenth century botanist John Hope had already described this in teaching papers to his students. This leaves me wondering again and again if the only truly original creator is nature. Subsequently can this mean that plants are nature's art? My only truly original creation in this lifetime may well be what nature has entrusted me to care for and only for a limited time at that: a child.

I feel for the first time that humans might be part of nature in a positive way. The same joy I now feel as I watch my belly expanding is equal to that of seeing the golden scaled new leaves unfurl on the Malayovireya Rhododendron in the glasshouses of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE). I watered, fed, nurtured and tended this living collection. In another attempt to have some kind of self-made legacy, I remember the thrill I experienced at being a named collector to a botanical collection to add to the living material from the jungle in Borneo of *Rhododendron javanicum* subsp. *cockburnii* (again with RBGE). I still feel some pride, but looking back, there is no ownership of nature's plant material. From the collection in Borneo to the living plant in Scotland, as the leaves die back they all still end up in the compost heap – but those fallen leaves are of equal importance in nature. That is what I should strive to mimic.

Let me clarify - I don't sit here writing this as a fruitarian hippy who has set up an emerging community of crofters. Far from it in fact, I sit here in a city, on a computer and pause between cups of (non fair trade) tea to study "my" water-lacking-warped *Pelargonium* that sits on the desk next to me defeating death by some unknown miracle. However, I do sit here with an understanding of my place alongside plants and within nature far greater than ever before. I still find plants a marvel, I am still a spectator to the wonder of seasons, of growth and death and am still thoroughly enchanted by the aesthetics of plants. But I feel part of the context of the world; reliant and deeply grateful for the part plants have to play in my life. And my child's life.

Notes

1. Mairi Gillies is a sculptor and artist based in Edinburgh, Scotland.