

GARDENS OF THE MIND

**An exploration of the integral role of gardens
in the lives of contemporary Australians
by probing the construction of a public garden space and
exploring visually an idiosyncratic artistic experience
of the Flecker Botanic Gardens.**

A thesis submitted with an exhibition by

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ABSTRACT

The research explores the construction of the garden in contemporary Australia through a visual art practice. The written thesis was conceived as a reflection upon the meaning of the Garden; and the exhibition as an individual interpretation of one particular public, tropical garden, that of the Flecker Botanic Garden. This Garden is located in suburban Cairns, Far North Queensland and is explored from the perspective of the aesthetic, sensory and spiritual, rather than the scientific.

Our garden sanctuaries are the product of centuries of development in garden making and are symbols of people's relationships with the environment. The garden is a significant part of Australian culture satisfying as it does a significant need in the contemporary Australian identity. This view is supported by an investigation into the highly interdisciplinary area of research of the nature of the garden in which attention is focussed on cultural geography to provide connections between place and identity. This is followed by an analysis into garden design and a discussion of the spiritual aspects of people's interaction with the garden as a place of peace, reflection and renewal.

The garden is an aspect of the landscape that is commonly associated with the domestic domain, rather than as a subject worthy of intellectual appraisal. In the realm of contemporary visual art this association has led to garden genre artworks traditionally holding an amateur status. In part, this is due to the lack of documentation about the ideology of the gardens in the garden genre in art. *Gardens of the Mind* seeks to address this deficit by examining artworks that have interpreted the garden in a manner that transcends the mundane and deals with aspects of people's perception of their environment. Research into artistic insights of gardens found that depicting a sensory and spiritual connection between the plant and human worlds was frequently communicated through the use of intimate and multi-viewpoints. It was also expressed in artworks by including sensory information, conceptual titles, enlivening colour schemes and the depiction of growth forms in optimum health.

My sensory response to the Garden was informed by the written research and by frequent field studies in which extensive photographic records were made in order to prompt recollection of the Garden's colours and growth forms. I also interviewed the Curator of the Gardens and attended tours given by the Interpretative Officer in order to gain insight into the site of the FBG. The paintings and watercolour prints created were shown at the Cairns Regional Gallery from the 5th of February to the 6th of March 2005 in the exhibition entitled

Gardens of the Mind. This was my first solo exhibition in a high status gallery and was a significant milestone. Exhibiting at the CRG extended my art practice, as I was able to explore exhibition concepts, utilise professional museum display techniques and present my work to a broad audience.

The images in the exhibition *Gardens of the Mind* fall into two series – the *Garden Series* and the *Wallpapers of the Mind Series*. The *Garden Series* focuses on the lifeforce of flora and observation of plant forms. The more decorative works of the *Wallpapers of the Mind Series* are concerned with mark-making and are in part inspired by the history of flora in art. The artworks created represent the abundant visual delights and kinaesthetic experience of walking through the Gardens. This was done by including several downward views and close-up images of plant forms and by using the grid format to represent the diversity of plant forms. Manipulating colour schemes and depicting garden scenes filled with light communicated the uplifting experience of being in the Gardens. *Gardens of the Mind* represents the depiction of flora as a means of connecting with nature and thus operating from an intuitive side of perception.

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