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21st Century Zen Garden

Allison Parker Andrews
Virginia Commonwealth University

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School of the Arts, Department of Sculpture
Virginia Commonwealth University

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21ST CENTURY ZEN GARDEN has been approved by her committee as satisfactory
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Kendall Buster, School of the Arts

Jack Risley, School of the Arts

Sandra Wheeler, School of the Arts

Amy Hautt, School of the Arts

Richard Toscan, School of the Arts

Dr. F. Douglas Boudinot, Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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21ST CENTURY ZEN GARDEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

ALLISON ANDREWS

BS, Finance, Virginia Tech, 1986

BS, Decision Support Systems, Virginia Tech, 1988

BFA, Sculpture, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999

MFA, Sculpture, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Director: KENDALL BUSTER

PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

May, 2006

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	vi
21 st Century Zen Garden.....	7
Images.....	13
Vita.....	16

Abstract

21st CENTURY ZEN GARDEN

By Allison Andrews, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Kendall Buster
Professor, Sculpture

This paper is a discussion of certain philosophical issues that have informed the progression of my work to date.

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21st Century Zen Garden

In my lifetime, I have witnessed America's identity radically shift from the wholesome goodness of baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet to the maniacal self-indulgence of super-sized fries, Hummers, and lifestyles of the rich and famous. I believe this attitudinal shift in our collective conscience is reflected in every aspect of our culture and is most directly influenced by the content and/or messages presented through various media, particularly television, and that it is clearly evidenced by trends in consumer behavior, commerce, political rhetoric, even war. I also believe that the driving force behind the overriding messages imbued upon the public through various media are driven by the power brokers in existence at any given point in history. My interest in this phenomenon has consciously and unconsciously informed the content of my artwork, and my personal convictions and reactions to these cultural shifts have been the primary motivating force for creating work. As a result, my art addresses American consumerism, popular culture, history and politics. And, my own sensibilities have led me to incorporate irony, humor, and the human body into the broader landscape of the finished product.

Much of my earlier works were self-conscious reactions to current events. For example, I created *Dispenser* in the mid 1990's when President Clinton's sexual escapades were making headlines and Heroin Chic was hip. In this piece, I converted a female

manikin torso into a waist-height, Pez-style condom dispenser. The dispenser was activated when the head was pushed back, at which time a condom was dispensed from the neck, the torso lit up revealing a diseased interior, and a pleasing female voice explaining proper handling and usage of the condom projected from inside the body. The height of the manikin's face was crotch-level, implicating her as a non-dominant participant in sexual activities, and more subtly, as a less powerful member of society.

Over time, my work shifted to reflect the increased sensationalism of television content, evidenced by the exponentially growing demand for reality television and entertainment news (both of which are oxymorons). My first recollection of reality TV is the show "Candid Camera", where people were unknowingly subjected to unexpected events or surprises while being filmed. Public demand for such content has changed the face of television as we know it. We now have an inside view of human behavior in all classes and income levels (from low-brow lifestyles on "Jerry Springer" to high-brow lifestyles on "I Want to be a Hilton" and the most bizarre sampling of people/lifestyles on "Taxi Cab Confessions"). We even televise the extremely personal trials and tribulations of obese people competing to lose weight ("The Biggest Loser"), the darker side of human nature when confronted with competing for a pot of gold and surviving extreme living conditions ("Survivor"), and the collision of families with opposing personal values and lifestyles ("Wife Swap"). Curiously, the more 'real' these shows attempt to be, the further from reality they become. While watching these types of shows, a viewer naturally compares him/herself and his/her own behaviors to those displayed by the subjects of these

programs. It is a strangely self-conscious activity, as if we are trying to understand the mechanisms that drive our own behaviors while simultaneously searching for reasons to feel better about ourselves.

In response to this trend, I choreographed a performance titled *Mummy Chair d'O*, where I brought a BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) master and his submissive playmate into an art gallery to perform a sexual fetish practice known as mummification, the act of wrapping another person's body from head to toe rendering them immobile and depriving them of all sensory input. By bringing this very private act into a public space, the subject of the performance vacillated between the mummification act and the viewers' self-conscious behaviors while watching a sexually deviant act.

Since September 11, 2001, my work has grown increasingly political in content, larger in scale, and stylistically more formal, utilizing increasingly minimal visual language and presentation. These shifts reflect my understanding of our national identity, my interest in our habits of unchecked consumption, and my personal concern for the future of citizens in the United States and across the globe. My attention to these concerns has resulted in my most ambitious works to date: *Happy Birthday Mr. President* (2005) and *Zen Garden* (2006).

Happy Birthday Mr. President is an over-sized, Americana-style basket constructed out of metal, rope and stained reed. The basket is elevated to monumental status by being

up-lit, placed on a platform, and by the nature of its size. At unexpected intervals, a disembodied female voice singing “Happy Birthday Mr. President” fills the basket. The dimensions of the piece are 7’ x 12’ x 6’, with the excessively large scale of the basket referring directly to our insatiable habits of consumption and our seemingly instinctive adoration of all things large. My inspiration for this piece developed during George W. Bush’s campaign for re-election in 2004. In the context of the time the work was created (2005), the rustic-American design of the basket, historic reference of the sound component, and the statuesque size, the piece has many cross-references including American political display, current and historical icons (specifically George W. Bush, Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy), and our unquestionable increase in national pride since September 11th. While the piece is generally masculine, it incorporates a curious blend of masculine and feminine attributes. The masculine attributes include the welded frame, 1” rope ribs and the scale, while the feminine attributes include the reference to low-brow craft and the ‘home-sweet-home’ Americana style of the basket. Additionally, because the basket is so large, a visceral response is elicited in the viewer. The distorted size in combination with the reference to Marylyn Monroe’s performance for President Kennedy in 1962 at Madison Square Garden, alerts the viewer to his/her own body, size and placement in space and time, and his/her beliefs in the current and historical political context are called into question.

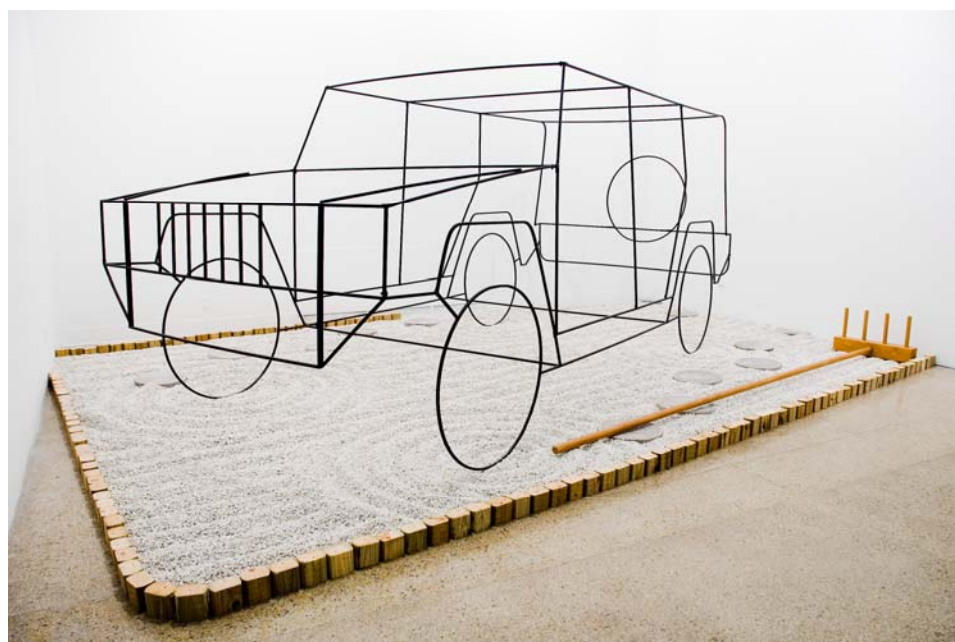
My thesis work, *Zen Garden* is a continuation of the social and political themes underscored in *Happy Birthday Mr. President*. I constructed a full-scale, 2005 model of an

H2 Hummer out of square steel tubing and made it the center-piece of a Japanese-style rock garden. In the garden is a path made of cement walking stones with the relief of the presidential seal embossed on them and an over-sized rake, modeled after the rakes included in the executive toy kit version of the zen garden (usually no bigger than 10 or 12 inches in length). I specifically chose the Hummer as the object featured in the garden because it is the ultimate signifier of our current, insatiable, consumption habits. It directly symbolizes our desire to consume space, sex and fuel, three of the most sought after commodities in the world, and indirectly reflects the recklessness of America's foreign policy and the abuse of political and financial power. With a base price tag of \$54,000, the H2 gets up to 10 miles per gallon, weighs a gross 8,600 pounds and has a 325 horsepower engine. It is the ultimate guilty pleasure, affordable only to those with decadent lifestyles. Proponents of the vehicle tout it's capacity for its rugged off-road capabilities, however, the primary terrain that the typical H2 owner tackles is the urban landscape. I placed the H2 in a zen garden because the Hummer is the ultimate status symbol, representing financial and material success (a.k.a. excess) and therefore is the antithesis of zen philosophy. Ironically, because I constructed my H2 from steel tubing, it functions in the installation as a large, 3-dimensional drawing in space; it is empty, creating a circular reference to zen/anti-zen. The installation is again turned in on itself because of the commodification and consumption of zen philosophy in popular culture over the past several decades. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that miniature zen gardens are available for purchase as toys for executives to help them clear their minds and simplify their overly-busy lives. The political attributes of the installation are further underscored

by the presidential seal walking stones. To stroll through the garden without disturbing the patterns scratched into the rock garden, one must tread upon the beliefs and values established for this country by our founding fathers. Just as the Hummer is the ultimate symbol of rampant consumption, the entire installation represents the 21st century consumer's utopia. Ironically, utopia, as understood in zen philosophy, is nothing, literally.

Images

“Zen Garden” metal, wood, marble chips, 2006



“Happy Birthday Mr. President” metal, rope, reed, wood, lights, sound, 2005



VITA

Grants/Awards

- 2004 International Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Dean's Office. Award \$500.
- 2004 International Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Graduate Dean's Office. Award \$400.
- 1999 Jose Puig Award for Excellence in Sculpture, VCU Sculpture Department.

Group Exhibitions

- 2006 *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2006 *W/E Show*, Graduate Student Exchange Exhibition, Claremont Graduate University, Los Angeles, California.
- 2006 *Graduate Student Exhibition*, Capital One Headquarters, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2005 *Art For You To See*, FAB Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2005 *Scurvy Picnic*, Locker 50B Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2005 *Are We There Yet?*, VCU Sculpture Candidacy Exhibition, Corrugated Box Building, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2004 *Madison's Cave*, Keith Talent Gallery, London, England.
- 2004 *LadyFest*, Ada Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2003 *It Came from the Grad Studios*, Graduate Sculpture Exhibition, VCU School of the Arts Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

- 2003 *Urban Light Works International Festival* (management, production, curator and participating artist), Turning Basin, October, Richmond, Virginia and Sorlandets Kunst Museum, Kristiansand, Norway.
- 2003 *Urban Light Works Installation* at Sorlandets Kunst Museum (management, production, curator and participating artist), July, Kristiansand, Norway.
- 2002 *Urban Light Works International Festival* (management, production, curator and participating artist), Shockoe Bottom, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2000 *9Lives*, Aquiles Adler Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2000 *Urban Light Works Festival*, Shockoe Bottom, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1999 *VCU Sculpture Senior Exhibition*, James Center, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1998 *UNSOUND-One Night Of Works by Richmond Artists*, Abandoned House at 609 South Laurel Street, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1998 *Sculpture/Engineering Collaborative Projects*, VCU School of Mechanical Engineering, Richmond, Virginia.

Publications

- 1999 Featured Artist of the Month, June Issue *Vision's Magazine for the Arts*, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Artist Lectures

- 2004 Presenter at the Art Council of Richmond's 'Partners in the Arts Summer Institute'. Topic: *Our Creative Community – Integrating Performing and Visual Arts into K-12 Curriculums*.
- 2004 *Fundraising in the Arts*, "Artist Curators" Topics Class, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2003 *Mock Interview* for Communication Arts & Design Workshop (Interviewer), Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2002 *Mock Interview* for Communication Arts & Design/Kinetic Imaging Class (Interviewer), Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

2001 *Creative Job Applications*, Senior Video Class, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Academic Appointments/Arts Administration Experience

- 1999-2006 *Assistant Professor*, Virginia Commonwealth University (2002-Present: *Director of Recruitment*; 1999-2002: *Admissions Specialist/Student Recruiter*)
- 2001-2004 *Co-Founder and Managing Director*, Urban Light Works (non-profit public art organization with international reach), Richmond, Virginia. See also: www.urbanlightworks.com
- 2006 (Fall) *Instructor*, Foundation Studio, Art Foundation Department, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- 2003 (Spring) *Co-Instructor*, “Urban Light Works”, Senior Topics Class in Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- 2003 (Fall) *Co-Instructor*, “Urban Light Works”, Senior Topics Class in Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- 2002 (Fall) *Co-Instructor*, “Urban Light Works”, Senior Topics Class in Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- 2000 (Spring) *Instructor*, Conceptualization & Presentation, Art Foundation Department, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- 1998 (Fall) *Teaching Assistant*, Concepts in Sculpture, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Professional Affiliation/Service

- 2001- 2004 Urban Light Works (Managing Director) – Urban Light Works is a public arts and education organization with global reach.