



Ramapo
Garden of Desire

Ming Fay

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April 1 – May 6, 2005

Kresge Gallery

Berrie Center for Performing and Visual Arts

Ramapo College of New Jersey

Mahwah, New Jersey

Masterly Hanging

I have been an admirer of Ming Fay's nature-based artworks for many years, and it is truly an honor to have him create something for us here.

For "Ramapo Garden of Desire" the artist has entered somewhat daring new terrain. He has crafted an exhibition specifically for our space which exists not on the floor or wall but mostly above the heads of viewers, hovering as voluptuous color and form. A number of Ramapo students became part of an unusually fertile learning experience as they assisted with building the artwork.

To aid in documenting this unique sculptural installation, we have asked two writers to provide commentary. The exhibition catalogue features an essay about this site-specific piece by independent curator Eugenie Tsai and a more lyrical essay about Fay's body of work by poet David Shapiro.

We hope you will be captivated by the garden.

Sydney O. Jenkins

Director of the Art Galleries

Ramapo College of New Jersey



Forces of Nature: The Art of Ming Fay

Eugenie Tsai

Composed of a dense growth of flora in searing tones of fuchsia, orange, and green, Ming Fay's installation, "Ramapo Garden of Desire" transforms the pristine white cube of the Kresge Gallery into a wild corner of nature. Fay's earlier gardens have simulated an archaeological past or envisioned a science-fiction future. In this instance, the irradiated day-glo hues and the disintegrating surfaces of the plant-life paint a distinctly post-apocalyptic vision of the natural world. Among the unusual forms of vegetation that have taken root in the Ramapo garden are Monkey Pots, Money Trees, Gwa Flowers, and Butterfly Twigs. Although some of these plants do exist in nature, Fay takes their appearance as a point of departure for creative cultivation. The urn-shaped Monkey Pots, so named because they often entrap simians as they attempt to reach the delectable seeds contained within, provide the artist with a symbol for the impulse of desire that is referred to in the installation's title. In a similar vein, the flat, disk-like pods of the Money Trees suggest an all-too familiar desire for wealth and material well being. Surprisingly, there is nothing moralistic or judgmental in Fay's observation of this acquisitive animal instinct, only wry acceptance.

"Ramapo Garden of Desire" is the outgrowth of more than two decades of Fay's experience creating gardens. Shortly after he arrived in New York in the early 1970s, his sculpture began to draw its inspiration from the wide range of fruits and vegetables available in the Chinatown markets that were in close proximity to his studio on Canal Street. In some ways, his handcrafted papier mâché pieces from the 80s, which include oranges, apples, pears, and peaches, resemble objects familiar to us. In other ways, they differ distinctly. Fay's

specimens are more perfect in appearance and larger than life. They are icons imbued with a kind of supernatural potency. The symbolic significance in Chinese culture of particular fruits interested the artist as well (for example, peaches signify longevity and oranges, good luck). Fay's approach to nature as a source took a different turn in the early 90s when he began to produce fruits, vegetables, and plants that were entirely fictional. Based on his close observation of existing species, these fabricated plants and fruits were rendered with such specificity and verisimilitude that they seemed to be representations of actual things in the world.

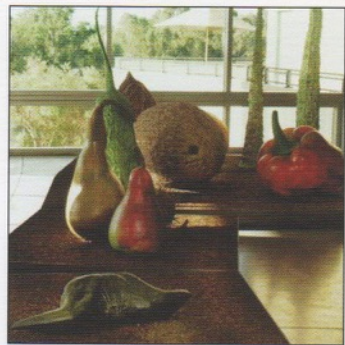
With "Ramapo Garden of Desire," Fay reminds us that this garden is not a product of nature but of calculated artistry. Here, he relinquishes the meticulous craftsmanship that was a hallmark of his earlier sculpture. Rather than concealing the technical virtuosity that allowed him to represent the material world, he has chosen to reveal and even exaggerate processes he utilized in the past to create the fiction of *trompe l'oeil*. The Monkey Pots in particular serve as structural supports for Fay's intensely gestural application of what appear to be thick strokes of paint. This impasto is created with urethane of varying consistencies, infused with a combination of pigments and dyes. Applied around cores of tightly bundled bubble-wrap, crumpled newspapers, or balloons, which aren't always completely concealed, the liquid layers of urethane assume the organic shapes of flora drawn from Fay's lexicon. While form and color have always converged on the surface membrane or "skin" of his oversized fruit and vegetables, "Ramapo Garden of Desire" takes this engagement with the surface even further. Stripping away the pretense of representation, Fay shifts his focus from mimicking the appearance of nature to emulating the process of nature itself, the act of creation. The results, highly expressionistic and deeply personal, draw upon the artist's extensive knowledge of actual, literary, and mythical gardens, while representing a dynamic new direction in his work.

A Day with Ming Fay: The Money Tree, the Monkey Pot, A Wealth of Nations

David Shapiro

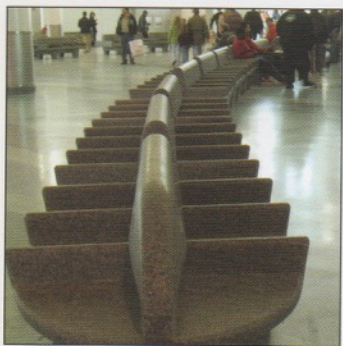
After knowing Ming Fay for two decades, I am still amazed and more than amused when I enter his house on Broadway and am struck by a cornucopia of images: hanging sculptures, wild cherries, vegetables on command, fruit out of control, and a wealth, truly a wealth, of gardens. After all the years I have seen his students imitating his voice, his voice is soft and clear. His work begins with a reference to the real, and somehow he has become the master of a scientific surrealism. The cherry is not a cherry but an explosion in mixed media. I laugh as we both entangle ourselves in his tango, and here, in his house, I examine the slides of a vast career in art. He began in Shanghai, but as a young artist in Kansas, he is already imitating well de Suvero, Smith, Judd. All this international minimalism was digested by Ming before he came to the most explicit decision: to create a mimetic sculpture that would be even more hilarious than Oldenburg's but would have to do less with soft and hard than with an absolute Zen dedication to detail.

It is not for nothing that one sees in his early work the beginnings of this wire-foam-paper mania. The work always had the most monumental possibilities. And today, one can see his triple pun of a sculpture beside Seattle's law courts. He explains how this iconic hand, tulip, vertical triple pun will be slowly harbored by trees. Ming tells me that the sculpture is actually based on a splinter from a cedar cone, imagery drawn from the



Floating Botanica, 2003, installation at Copia,
Napa, CA

ecology of the area. This is part of his mastery and humor: the ecological sense that makes his most whimsical fantasies into something like indestructible surrealism. The anti-romantic finds him deposing a Goldsworthy as too pretty—and this is something of which one cannot accuse Ming Fay. His desire for a “clean desk” is an emblem of his clarity. His works are “as clear as natural reticence permits.” He likens his hanging fruit to the Chinese spatial uses in shops and homes. He regulates his art with a constant attention to finish, patina, color, and now expressionist cadenzas of plastic post-Pollock splashes of pigment. Like Blake, he has taken the road of excess to the Palace of Wisdom, and if not wisdom, then the desire for wisdom.



Whitehall Crossing, 2005, granite benches,
Public Art Commission, Staten Island Ferry
Terminal, New York, NY

When we leave his home, almost burbling with the happiness of his work, we find that he has created a fish paradise in the Lower East Side subway station near to him. He has accumulated public commissions, and one will be opening at the Staten Island Ferry in a month. He has been willing to compromise but only to find his solutions that are exquisitely satisfying in such a grungy space. When one looks, it is a little fish, which, elsewhere a tree, becomes an arrow to his project and a key. When one finds the whole project, it is a gigantic slashing urban mosaic with the hottest colors possible and with an elegance that never leaves him. The orchard on the other side of the subway is

a festival of Mondrian-like cherries. The punctuated trees stand as an historical memento. He has done his research. Is it American, Chinese, or beyond all nationalisms? He says the question interests him less. And yet one must find this syncretism compelling (We often bump into each other wherever scholar rocks are shown). He has made wild calligraphic drawings and his own seal of moon-and-sun are within them. He has carefully made transcriptions of rocks, and the rock is still part of his future. Most of all, his works are about what Anne Porter, the

religious poet, has called “living things.” The mosaic, as Benjamin says of the essay, is his true method of discontinuous insight.

But we are off to a Brooklyn day in the Dumbo neighborhood. We enter a studio that is again a riot of perfumes and colors. The synaesthetic whole is staggering, as if one were reading Rimbaud for the first time. There is a tree he discovered in Singapore, a tree transplanted from Brazil. On this tree hangs a kind of architecture without architects—a brown-green fruit that monkeys must find as lasciviously welcoming as a banana to a starving Crusoe. The tree’s fruit is as big as a watermelon and as compulsively alluring to this master of vegetation. From his researches—on the window one finds skeletons of little animals that intrigue Ming Fay—one discovers that these are “monkey pots,” and just as exotic as a bottle-tree in the life of Ray Charles.

He has, however, made an intrinsic leap within his realism. I have already seen the uncanny in his work. And here he begins to use an element that is as lava-like and as strange as the plastics of Lynda Benglis. And for libidinous reasons unknown to us all, he has decided to besmirch, smear, and drape his precise art in the colors of some anti-rainbow. Every color is part of this, and the monkey-pots begin to resemble, on their hanging wires, an absolute symphony of abstract expressionist vigor and wilderness. One pot is a skull; another is a tormentor; one pot is a piñata; another is a lamp. The unlit lamps of these globes seem to burst forth in our imagination.

He knows this is a tumultuous scene, and he revels in it and also casts an analytic eye on his Garden of Desire. Certainly, he is now at a stage when excess and anti-mimesis can be paraded as much as precision. “What is more precise than precision? Illusion.” Here, one finds him at the furthest extreme of his mimetic joys. The colors are so raucous that one has



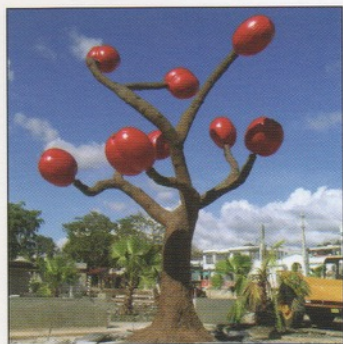
Pillar Arc, 2004, aluminum, Public Art Commission, US Federal Court, Seattle, WA

stumbled upon, perhaps, the very latest vision of brightness. But there is no flatness. Everything here is an experience. One walks the garden. One has no “aboutness” until one purposely stops. It is a garden where transfusion, confusion, and perfusion reigns, what has been called a perfusion of signs. We know it is courtly, because even the wildest of the monkey pots seems aristocratically encrusted. Like his mosaics, Ming is in love with not the decorative but the Matisse-like delight. He starts with nature but never ceases to be an artist with mental acuity, as if to say, as he does in a tower of soda bottles: has this gone far enough, too far, and not far enough? His work has the quality of space and noisy joy that cannot be denied. As *The Book of*

Changes puts it, on the very edge of fullness: “Do not be sad. Be like the sun at midday.”

It is Kenneth Koch who has explained the ethos behind the permission in such work. Koch says as a poet it was too easy in the 1950s to regulate oneself with melancholy and the abyss. The explosion of surrealism should teach one a kind of “army leave” to recite the courage of happiness. In St-John Perse, the Nobel prizewinning French author, there is this line, which seems to sum up the glory of Ming Fay’s explosive trees: “Sing, sweetness, to the last palpitation of the evening and the sea-breeze.” Fay has come from his early Minimalism

to a maximalism of mind and sensation. He has used the ceiling the way Andre used the floor. He has lit up these pot-lamps with cake that he has made, and also eaten. In this celebratory mood, he brings us Tang detail and the tradition of the fantastic landscape that is, after all, our hanging rocks.



Arbol Magico, 2005, ferro cement & fiberglass, Public Art Commission, Lluberas Park, Yauco, PR



Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2005 "Ramapo Garden of Desire," Kresge Gallery, Ramapo College, Mahwah, NJ*
- 2004 "Ming Fay – From Concept to Reality," Cuchifritos, New York, NY
"Money Tree & Monkey Pots," Montalvo Gallery, Saratoga, CA
- 2003 "Floating Botanica," Copia, Napa, CA
- 2002 "Hidden Seed Garden," Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong*
- 2000 "Qian and Bao," Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
- 1998 "Garden of Qian," Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris, New York, NY*
- 1997 "Lings," Bulova Corporate Center of the Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY
"Earthly Delights," Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, NY
- 1996 "Veins of the Spiral," Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY
"Feast for the Eyes," Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI*
"Mid-nite Porridge," Broadway Windows, New York, NY
- 1994 "Matter into Spirit," Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY*
"Extended Curves," Butters Gallery, Portland, OR*
"From the Garden," Alisan Fine Arts Ltd. Hong Kong*
- 1993 "On the Edge," Keen Gallery, New York, NY
"Existential Attainment," Lungmen Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan*
- 1991 "Images from Beyond," Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
"Nature Reborn: From Archaeology to Science Fiction," Exit Art, New York, NY
- 1990 "Objects from Nature," Chinese American Arts Council, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2005 "Neutral," Lab Gallery, New York, NY
"Material Terrain," Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO
- 2004 "Lodz Biennale," International Artist Museum, Lodz, Poland
"The 179th Annual," National Academy Museum, New York, NY
"Crosscurrents in the Mainstream," Zimmerli Museum, New Brunswick, NJ
"Metamorphosis," Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI
"Hearing Voices: Personal Narratives," The Gallery at Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Lawrenceville, NJ*
- 2003 "RE-DO CHINA," Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York, NY*
"Food Matters," Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY
"Serene Beauty," Jamaica Art Center, Jamaica, NY
- 2002 "To Scale," The Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2001 "All Terrain," Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA*
"Abundant Invention," Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery, Bronx, NY
"Art Nature/Nuture," Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, WI
"The End," Exit Art, New York, NY
- 1999 "As Far as The Eye Can See," Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, GA*
- 1998 "Paper: the State of Connection," Bergstrom-Mahler Museum, Neenah, WI
- 1997 "1997 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art," Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY
"Gardens of Urban Delight: The Lower East Side," Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY
- 1996 "Mutation of Ink and Paper," Taipei Gallery, New York, NY*
- 1995 "Elusive Source," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC
- 1994 "Fabricate Nature," Boise Art Museum, Boise, ID*
"The Garden of Sculptural Delights," Exit Art, New York, NY
- 1991 "The Hybrid State," Exit Art, New York, NY*
"Artists of Conscience," Alternative Museum, New York, NY*
- 1990 "Selections," Artists Space, New York, NY*



Selection from *Ming Fay's Garden*, 2004, "Crosscurrents in the Mainstream," Zimmerli Museum, New Brunswick, NJ

Public Art Awards

- 2003 Dept. of Transportation & Public Works, Yauco, PR
- 2002 Oregon Convention Center, Portland, OR
- 1999 MTA, Delancey/Essex Streets Station, New York, NY
- 1999 Economic Development Corp of NY, Flushing, NY
- 1998 GSA, US Court House, Seattle, WA
- Percent for Art, Staten Island Ferry Terminal, NY
- 1997 Public Art Fund, Phipps Housing, Bronx, NY
- 1993 Percent for Art, Criminal Justice Center, Philadelphia, PA
- 1990 Percent for Art, P.S. 7, Elmhurst, NY

Selected Reviews

The New York Times (NY), New Jersey section, "Mixing Colors, Blending Cultures," Benjamin Genocchio, April 18, 2004.

Sculpture, "A Decorative Reading of Nature: Ming Fay," Jonathan Goodman, September, 2003.

The Asian Reporter (Portland, OR), "Artist Ming Fay Commissioned for Oregon Convention Center Expansion," Edward J. Han, April 1, 2003.

South China Morning Post (HK), "Seeds of Truth," Denise Simmons, January 11, 2002.

Downtown Express (NY), "Whitehall Terminal Gets an Artistic Lift in Long Stalled Project," Melissa Chapman, November 17, 1998.

The New York Times (NY), "Garden of Qian by Ming Fay," Grace Glueck, February 27, 1998.

The New York Times (NY), "Art Flourishes on a Grimy Brooklyn Waterfront," Kennedy Fraser, October 27, 1997.

The New York Times (NY), "Hudson Valley Conversations," Roberta Smith, July 18, 1997.

The New York Times (NY), "In New Jersey, Evolution in Retrospectives," Michael Kimmelman, July 18, 1997.

The Star Ledger (NJ), "Three by Five: Contemporary Sculpture," Dan Bischoff, June 20, 1997.

The Philadelphia Inquirer (PA), "Painter Bride," Edward J. Sozanski, October 14, 1994.

Williamette Week (Portland, OR), "Full Circle," Ted Sawyer, June 29, 1994.

The Washington Post (DC), "In the Spirit of Nature," Mary McCoy, June 25, 1994.

The Standard (HK), "Ming Sees Fruits of His Labour," Josie Brennan, January 5, 1994.

South China Morning Post (HK), "Ming's Fertile Garden," Margaret Sheridan, January 5, 1994.

The Oregonian (Portland), "Art's Herbal Essence," Randy Gragg, November 15, 1991.

The New York Times (WC), "With Paper as a Starting Point," Vivien Raynor, September 15, 1991.

The New York Times (NY), "Ming Fay," Michael Brenson, February 15, 1991.

The Star-Ledger (NJ), "Food Inspires Delectable Exhibit," Eileen Watkins, November 16, 1990.

The New York Times (NJ), "Food Made Larger than Life," William Zimmer, October 28, 1990.

The New York Times (NY), "Ming Fay," Michael Brenson, February 23, 1990.



Ginkoberry Gwa, detail, 2003, bronze, glass, steel, Public Art Commission, Oregon Convention Center, Portland, OR



Selected Catalogue Essays

"Money Tree & Monkey Pots," Montalvo, CA, 2004. Essay: Michelle Rowe-Shields.

"Food Matters," Katonah Museum of Art, NY, 2003. Essay: Sarah Tanguy.

"Hidden Seed Garden," Alison Fine Art, Hong Kong, 2002. Essay: Arlene Raven.

"From Rags to Riches: 25 Years of Paper Art From Dieu Donne Papermill," 2001.
Essay: Donna Stein.

"All Terrain," Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA, 2001.
Essay: Carla Hanzal.

"Abundant Invention," Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, 2000.
Essay: Jennifer McGregor.

"Environmentally Concerned," Nathan Cummings Foundation, NYC, 2000.
Essay: Karen Jones.

"Garden of Qian," Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, NYC, 1998.
Introduction: Eugenie Tsai. Essay: John Yau.

"Ming Fay," Queens Museum of Art at Bulova Corporate Center,
Queens, NY, 1997. Introduction: William Valerio.

"Neuberger Museum of Art 1997 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art," Neuberger Museum of Art,
Purchase, NY, 1997. Essay: Judy Collischan.

"Ming Fay: A Feast for the Eyes," Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan WI, 1996. Essay: Faye Hirsch.

"Mutations of Ink and Paper," Taipei Gallery, New York, NY, 1996. Essay: Wucius Wong.

"Matter into Spirit," Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY, 1994. Essay: Robert Morgan.



Lodzivine, 2004, mixed media,
installation at Lodz Biennale, Lodz, Poland

About the Catalogue Essayists

Eugenie Tsai is an independent curator who lives in New York City. From 1994 - 2000 she worked at the Whitney Museum of American Art where she organized numerous exhibitions and artists' projects for the museum and its branches. As Senior Curator (1998-99) and Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs (1999-2000), she oversaw the museum's permanent collection. Tsai received her doctorate in art history from Columbia University. She is the author of *Robert Smithson Unearthed* (Columbia University Press, 1991), which received a Choice Outstanding Academic Book Award in 1992. Tsai was an early member of Godzilla: Asian American Art Network, formed in 1990. Last year she organized a Robert Smithson retrospective for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which will open at the Whitney Museum in June 2005, and a Byron Kim mid-career survey for the Berkeley Art Museum, which will open at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in May 2005.

David Shapiro is a poet, art and literary critic, historian and editor. He was a professional violinist in his youth and his poetry is known for its musicality. Nominated for the National Book Award at age 24, among his more than twenty volumes are the first study of John Ashbery, the first monograph on Mondrian's flowers and the first book on Jasper John's drawings. His most recent books include *Lateness, House (Blown Apart), After a Lost Original, and Burning Interior*. He pioneered the teaching of children with Kenneth Koch and has received numerous awards including the Zabel Prize for Experimental Poetry from the American Academy, NEA and NEH Fellowships, and grants from the Merrill Foundation and the Graham Foundation. His poetry at the monument of John Hejduk to Jan Palach was dedicated at the Prague Castle to President Vaclav Havel. Shapiro recently collaborated with Bill Beckley on the aesthetics anthology, *Uncontrollable Beauty*. Educated at Cambridge University in England, he has taught at William Paterson University for 25 years and also teaches at Columbia University and Cooper Union.

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Right:
Detail, *Ramapo Garden of Desire*





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**RAMAPO
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