

# SUSAN SHANTZ CHAMBER

May 19 to June 23, 2011

## ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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"Chamber", canopy detail. Photo: Betsey Rosenwald



Garden mural from the House of Livia, Rome. Photo by Ian W. Scott available under a Creative Commons Attribution-share Alike license.

Cover: "Chamber", polyester leaves, cotton, wood, Astroturf, potash, paint, stool, choroplast 2.5 x 3.0 x 3.0 m, 2011. Photo: Robert Keziere

# CHAMBER

In the middle of the nineteenth century archeologists excavating on Rome's Palatine Hill discovered the house of Livia, the wife of the Emperor Augustus, its walls covered with splendid murals. Among the rather restricted corpus of classical paintings, those painted for Livia are especially splendid, and are ubiquitously illustrated in art historical textbooks. The best known of these portrays a magnificent garden with trees full of pretty birds, garlanded with ripe fruit, trees which provide a delicate shade canopy beneath which grow beautiful flowers and bunnies grazing on the lush verdure. Architecture dissolves into a vision of paradise; the walls of this lovely room offer as perfect a vision of an ideal nature as one could possibly desire.

Like the dim haunting whispers of memory, Susan Shantz's installation plumbs the deep strata of the developing language of the representation of nature in our culture. Rich in unconscious suggestions of both that history and its lived experience, her project is more concerned with the conventions of naturalistic representation than it is with nature itself. Shantz's *Chamber* strangely echoes Livia's: instead of painted trees the walls of this *Chamber* are dappled with shadows of the overhead leaves. It is not the walls themselves that portray a garden; this illusion is now enacted within the space defined by the walls. Carpeted with the too-brilliant verdure of Astroturf, we now stand in the place occupied by Livia's cute little bunnies. It is a beautiful little landscape, and we are offered a designer version of a camp stool on which to sit and absorb its comforting illusions.

Within Shantz's *Chamber* landscape appears on its wall as shadow, hinting at what has been one of the most important subjects of representation since ancient times. Landscape has variously moved from foreground to background, but it has remained within the painterly frame for most of that history. Since the triumph of Romanticism, especially in North America, the representation of landscape was the obsessive subject of the painter's gaze until the mid-twentieth century. But it is a much older history, one going back to the beginnings of painting. The representation of what could be seen in nature was, given the surviving evidence, the earliest subject of what we call art. The field through which move the animal and human subjects of the most ancient rock paintings were an implied landscape; what could be seen was, for the most part, what could be portrayed. And what could not be seen was imagined in terms of what was at hand; think of the rearranged animal heads given by the Egyptians to their gods, or the perfect birds' wings that grace medieval angels. Not just in high art, the portrayal of nature has long been one of the most popular themes in folk art, domestic decoration, and in popular culture. A broad range of hobby and amateur craft activity over the past century sought to root an increasing urban culture in nostalgic *naturalia*.

Social geographers tell us that we are living in one of the greatest periods of urbanization in human history. Most of us experience nature indirectly through media and markets. We watch documentaries that refigure exotic environments as entertainment, and we vacation in carefully contained and sanitized resorts or protected ecological "preserves" that offer perfected, even "restored," representations of a new kind of pre-lapsarian paradise. Contemporary tourists can spend a couple of weeks in as carefully framed a landscape as those painted by the idealists of the Hudson River School or the Group of Seven. In retrospect we begin to see such painterly representations of an untrammled and allegedly un-peopled raw landscape as a kind of

pornography for the titillation of prospective settlers and developers. Today, outside the perimeters of a national park or a nature preserve, one is just as likely to encounter the kind of devastated landscapes of clear-cut logging or strip-mining portrayed in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky. In very recent memory, we have seen the familiar landscapes of winter tourist promotion transformed on the evening news by oil slicks.

If this vision, if apocalyptic landscape is too hard to assimilate, we have come to find a kind of solace in morality dramas such as the recent film *Avatar*. Popular culture serves somewhat the same purpose as our dreams: the elements of our quotidian experience, overshadowed by our fears and desires, are reassembled in patterns and narratives with which we can deal. Twenty years ago the late Alexander Wilson wrote, about this re-processing of nature in popular culture drawing attention to this function in for example, the films and cartoons of Walt Disney and the manipulated landscape of the U.S. National Park system. (*The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*) In this economy of mediation, wild animals that earlier generations hunted or feared become banal plush caricatures offered to children.

A century ago aesthetic wags like Oscar Wilde could joke about nature imitating art; today it is a sinister reality. Genetically altered animals and plants, even cosmetic surgery, systematically recreate actual nature in the light of a fantastic and reified naturalism. Organic farm produce offends most consumers who want nothing less than ideal apples and perfect potatoes turning the crispers of their refrigerators into uncanny *nature-mortes*. Contemporary consumers spend billions on their bodies attempting, in a grotesque parody of Plato, to change their natural and aging bodies into imagined ideal forms.

To an even greater extent today, the nature we no longer experience directly is sold back to us to be planted in window boxes or suburban plots by the corporate nurseries of Wal-Mart or Canadian Tire. For those who cannot afford the cost or the time of purchasing out-of-season fresh flowers, there is now the option of arranging astonishingly life-like fabric flowers imported by the container-full from Asian sweatshops. It is exactly such fabric leaves, clipped from their bar-coded wire stalks, that Shantz has delicately sewn to make the pleasing canopy that hovers over the walls of this *Chamber*. Between 2003 and 2006 she hand-stitched thousands of these artificial cloth leaves to a backing of quilt batting which was then trimmed to the outline shape of the leaf. This almost compulsive activity seemed to be a response to the alienated and anonymous activity of the appropriated artificial leaves, a kind of redemptive act by which they would become associated with both hand work, specifically the kind of hand work traditionally done by women in the home for domestic use (embroidery and quilting), as well as one of the singularly most individuated kinds of labour known to contemporary society, the making of works of art. Shantz has taken these anonymous leaves and intensively reworked them not only to identify them with herself as an artist, but also to remind us that despite their

anonymity, they too are the work of human hands -- most likely women's hands, in some far away sweatshop.

The elements of *Chamber* comprise appropriated commodities that are manufactured to represent natural elements: Astroturf, printed fabric leaves, the wooden blanks hobbyists use to carve decoy birds. All of these are likely to be imported, manufactured by people who live continents away from the nature they represent, sourced from big box stores and otherwise destined, at best, for re-gifting or garage sales, at worst for the landfill which increasingly displaces green space around our urban agglomerations. The trickery of such simulacra is pervasive and devious, but Shantz's *Chamber* serves a very different purpose than the false security offered by the enchanted forgery of nature offered for our consumption. Despite appearances, for all its lyrical beauty, this quiet meditative space is in a sense a *Chamber* of horrors; its familiar components are offered to us with subtle juxtapositions to awaken suspicion of our complacency in the ways in which we are manipulated by such familiar tropes of land and nature.

Bruce Russell



"Chamber", installation. Photo: Harwood Truscott