

Urban Eden

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On the invitation to his show *True Gardens #3* (Dijon) at the Frac Bourgogne in Dijon, Pedro Cabrita Reis prints a photograph of a building site. The environment is clearly urban, presumably New York. On the left, the site is sealed off by a wall of wooden planks; to the right by a high concrete wall; and at the rear by a brick wall. It is unclear if the site is at street level or sitting several floors above the city grid.

We may as easily be dealing with building foundations or the raised structure of a floor. The symmetrical row of concrete beams and the protruding reinforcement of steel bars seem to suggest that there is at least further construction to take place. But apart from a loose pile of palettes in the front of the picture, there is no evidence of an active building program. In sharp contrast with the image printed on the invitation to his solo show in Antwerp in the space of *objectif_exhibitions* (2003), Reis's *True Gardens* contains no worker of any description, be they mason, contractor or architect. The site is simply abandoned, empty of machinery or tools. Only the raw building site itself, the unfinished structure, remains. Perhaps he captured the site at the end of a busy day of construction, during a weekend, or a moment after the building process ground to a standstill for some financial or juridical reason. But what does this picture say about the 'true garden' that the visitors will encounter in the exhibition? Neither a single tree nor any plants are to be seen, and even if the garden is still 'under construction', this picture hardly conveys any sense of a true or 'natural' refuge. Rather, the place is uncanny and inhospitable, not immediately a destination of retreat.

In many of his works, Pedro Cabrita Reis evokes the practice and situation of 'building'. His miscellaneous constructions, preferably made of such cheap and recycled materials as wood, bricks, mortar, plaster, glass, cables, bitumen and fluorescent light tubes, represent the 'making of architecture,' or even merely 'architectural activity.' Throughout his work, architecture functions not only as medium, but first and foremost as metaphor. Interviewed by Adrian Searle, Reis states that we have lost contact with nature to such an extent that the "exercise of architecture is the only form that makes the world comprehensible." His entire oeuvre evolves around "architecture as a mental discipline or [as] an exercise of reality." After all, he says, "architecture is more about defining territories than actually building houses." All of Reis's structures – ranging from his configurations of plaster volumes from the late eighties, the furniture- and wall-like sculptures of white-painted wood from the nineties, or his most recent steel skeletons with assemblages of recycled scrap – act out the delineation of a surface, occupying it and building upon it.

The work *True Gardens #3* comprises a low and irregular pattern of walls of loosely stacked bricks on the exhibition space floor, dividing the space into four different zones. Alongside each side of these stumpy walls, Reis casually lays fluorescent light tubes, their cables nonchalantly entwined in their encounters across the gallery floor.

As the title suggests, the Dijon work is the third in a series. The first (*True Gardens #1*) was shown at Le Crestet Art Centre in Aix-en-Provence in 2000 and consisted of a rectangular platform of nine mirrors and two enameled panels in an outdoor patio. Installed within the interior garden of the building, the work literally reflected the trees, the architecture and the sky above it. The second

(True Gardens #2), in contrast, was installed indoors, in the exhibition space of the Magasin 3 Art Centre in Stockholm during 2001. It comprised of wooden caissons placed directly on the floor in a pattern embracing the three heavy concrete columns supporting the ceiling, each covered with painted panes of glass. Underneath these panes, fluorescent light tubes carefully delineated the overall structure of the work. While True Gardens #3 is certainly the most architecturally explicit of the series – constructed of the most universal building material, bricks – it is also the most 'territorial'. The tiny and crumbly walls divide the exhibition space into four distinct zones that, in contrast to his previous 'true gardens', can truly be occupied by visitors to the space. Here, the demarcation of a site and its transformation into a territory is no longer a merely personal and aesthetic gesture, embedded in the traditions of sculpture and painting.

Faced with an undeniable interplay between the work's title, its physical presence and the publicity image, we are forced to confront the contemporary meaning of 'territory', not only as a political or military notion, but, above all, in a human sense. In these times of globalization and virtualization, the desire to maintain (or recover) 'a place of one's own,' a place to resist the total mobilization and alienation of contemporary life, has far from lost its urgency. With modernity reaching a global scale and our home being replaced by an extensive network of places and spaces within which we operate, reside and assume multiple identities, two questions become ever more valid. What, Reis asks, constitutes a territory? What, by implication, is a 'true garden', a proper place to recoil?

While the works in this series touch upon a seemingly irresolvable desire for domesticity in our present age of excessive mobility, they first and foremost point at the paradoxical role of nature within that nostalgic yearning. Nature has totally lost its pre-modern status of sanctuary. Nowadays, there is not one virginal, unexplored or promising territory left, from the Himalayas to either North or South Poles.

Every spot on earth has been acculturated, awaiting the inevitable process of urbanization. The only thing we may do in response is to build our own elaborate replicas of a paradise long lost. However, Reis's gardens are 'true' in the proper sense, underscoring the artificiality of every garden. They acknowledge that each is man-made, the result of human intervention, cultivation, delineation and construction, or, in other words, an 'architectural' operation 'on' nature. Pure nature, in contrast, is always elsewhere. And it is to this paradox that the invitation image for the work True Gardens #3 points. The 'true gardens' of modernity are no longer natural, but metropolitan. In an interview with Mark Gisbourne, Pedro Cabrita Reis points out that "the city in itself is the quintessence of human presence. (...) though we consider the city as chaotic, it is still the only lively approach to having a notion of humanity at its best." But in contemporary cities, territories incessantly shift while spaces are under perpetual construction. True Gardens #3 appears as the remnants of a recently deserted and hastily demolished building, merely the light fixtures remaining. While the spatial division of the former structure is clearly legible, it does not seem to prohibit future work. It is a site of both frightening and promising nature. We may read True Gardens #3 as a miniature plan of either a future or a past city. It captures the paradoxical status of the contemporary metropolis and its janus-faced modernity. Urban spaces are at once the most hospitable and hostile places on earth, representing both the most dazzling and sinister visage of contemporary society. But, as such, they correspond to the true status of nature, both dangerous and delirious. The only true jungle we have left is urban.

Notes:

SEARLE, Adrian - *A conversation with Pedro Cabrita Reis*. In: Michael Tarantino [ed.] - Pedro **Cabrita Reis**. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2003.

GISBOURNE, Mark - *Pedro Cabrita Reis*. In: **Contemporary** (December 2002).

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- *Urban Eden*.

In: A.A.V.V. - **Poster #2: Pedro Cabrita Reis: True Gardens #3**. Bourgogne:

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