



# ITALIAN GARDENS *and* GARDENERS

*Giardini e Giardinieri in Italia*

CATHRYN SHINE







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*Villa Lante*



*Villa Medicea di Castello*



## BEHIND THE LENS: The secret lives of Italy's famous gardens

“Live in each season as it passes;  
breathe the air, drink the drink, taste  
the fruit, and resign yourself to the  
influence of the earth.”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

New Zealand-based photographer and printmaker Cathryn Shine explores and celebrates nature and humanity within her artistic practice.

A passion for the people and landscapes of Italy in particular has, in recent years, given rise to a new body of work which privileges botanical beauty and foregrounds human communion with the land – a constant which has underpinned the arts since time immemorial. From Giotto to Wordsworth, in paint and in poetry, humankind's place within, and relationship to, the natural world has preoccupied artists across creed and culture. Shine's photographic portraits of both famous and lesser known Italian gardens, some of which are over 400 years old, and their contemporary guardians are presented in true and brilliant colour. With an artiste's eye for composition and an appreciation for the exquisite symmetry and elegance of Renaissance gardens, but also an innate understanding of the extraordinary beauty in the everyday, she captures the evolving personalities of both the landscapes and those who tend them. Her work pays homage to the tradition of both landscape and portraiture in the visual arts and, thematically, like Thoreau before her, privileges the constancy of nature.

Shine's portraits of Italian gardens of significance, and of the people who commit their careers to maintaining those public and private spaces are, in part, an acknowledgement of the undisputed cultural and historical wealth of Italy.

However, while her subject matter is steeped in tradition, aligning her with the landscape painters and classicists, including Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, the artist's direct, reportage-style approach to her subject and her privileging of those responsible for their perpetuity results in contemporary imagery. Traditionally, classical landscapes, both natural and designed, were depicted largely unpeopled. Alternatively, figures were shown dwarfed by their sublime surroundings, anonymous and insignificant within a larger, idealised realm. In others the landscape served as a backdrop to imagined scenes from antiquity. By contrast, Shine gives people and places equal attention which lends her work a greater, almost unexpected immediacy and increased relevance. Gardeners, curators, custodians, professors of botany – these are the many unseen faces which Shine pays heed to alongside works which bear testament to their labours. In drawing our attention to the humanity behind the majesty – the very hands that till the soil – viewers are encouraged to consider both the original and current purpose of these historical gardens, many of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This leads to a greater appreciation for their importance as historical treasures and contemporary places of beauty and sustainability.

Labyrinths, elaborate and awe-inspiring in their complexity and scale, such as at the *Villa Avredi*, Veneto and *Villa Lante*,





*Villa Averdi*



*Renato Butti, Andrea Gilardi, Aldo Molli, Villa D'Este*



*Villa Medicea di Castello*

Bagnaia, represent human triumph over nature and evidence an entrenched drive to tame our environments. These are juxtaposed with images of smiling, polo-shirted, sunburned men and women whose vision, patience and constancy have brought the gardens into being over decades. Shine's informal portrait of Selina Bonelli Zondadari under the ginkgo tree at *Villa di Vico Bello*, Siena, is patience and fortitude epitomised. Here is a woman whose every action is in harmony with her environment. In other images, the enormity of the task is hinted at in a single figure bent over a wooden handle, raking the paths neat again after a day of precision clipping. In a late afternoon portrait of *Villa Averdi*, the unrelenting nature of the gardener's work is suggested in the repetitive patterns of the receding hedges. At *Medicea di Castello*, whose grand fountains, statuary, grotto and gardens influenced the design of Italian Renaissance gardens and French formal gardens, there is a very real sense of humility conveyed in the quietness of the sole gardener. He is pictured hose in hand, watering one of the numerous fragrant beds. By contrast, in Shine's portrait of the gardeners at *Villa D'Este*, Como elegant topiaries and a monumental facade play a supporting role to the three men responsible for realising such grand symmetry. Shine captures something of their well-deserved, collective pride. Such images are both humbling and inspiring. Here, the architecture and natural landscape are the result of human labour (intellectual and physical) and evidence the Italians' longstanding dedication to uphold perceived ideals of beauty on an unparalleled scale.

Though the gardens she privileges in her lens abide by classical ideals, Shine dispenses with staid academic formulas which govern both portraiture and landscape in the fine arts. Instead, the photographer invites her subjects to participate in her process; the viewer is thereby afforded insight into the private and public sides of these landscapes. In her portrait of two chefs crossing the lawn at *Villa D'Este*, Como, for example, there is a sense of fun and everydayness at odds with the

monumental formalism of their surroundings. Their presence belies the seriousness such imposing architecture might inspire. Through Shine's lens, gardens which are almost overwhelming in their beauty, scale and age are humanised and vistas which may otherwise appear static – or locked in time – are revealed to be constantly changing and evolving in response to not just contemporary environmental threats and changing fashions but in line with the inclinations and idiosyncrasies of their guardians. Some have divulged to Shine that specific plants which they have nurtured (perhaps from seed or against threats – climatic, organic or otherwise) have become old friends. Others confess to enjoying actual conversations with favourite plants – none consider themselves soliloquists – these are, apparently, dialogues not monologues, albeit in a language unique to each. Shine shares their passion for the plant collections which have been preserved in spite of war and pestilence, ducal rivalry, pollution and climate change. Her human portraits remind the viewer that it is through their expertise and labours of love that the gardens continue to exist.

In Shine's portraits of specimens, plants take on a human quality. *Orto Botanico di Lecce*, succulent is like a whiskery old uncle. Brightly-coloured, single floral blooms take on personas reminiscent of debutantes vying for attention amongst a bevy of bright, young things. In the close ups of the daily specimen collection at the *Orto Botanico di Pisa*, the various plant varieties seem to be in animated dialogue with one another. The effect is endearingly theatrical. Some of that animism is present in Shine's montage of close ups with colour harmonies privileged and complementary organic forms dictating their placement within the larger work. If we are to believe the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, then Shine's panoramic montages are veritable tomes whose pages boast rich visual narratives. In a recent group exhibition entitled *Pleasure Zones* (Newcastle, June 2013) Shine hung, to





*Orto Botanico di Lecce*



*Orto Botanico di Pisa*

stunning effect, 120 images (3 vertically, 40 laterally), as one larger work. They are modern snapshots of some of the oldest gardens in history. Individually and collectively, the images served as windows to foreign, more exotic climes. Such ambitious installations recall Monet's glorious panoramic views of water lilies. Monet's aim, and that of his fellow Impressionists, was to better convey the experience of a landscape, including the visual effect and physical sensation of light. In a letter of October 1890 Monet writes,

"I'm hard at it, working stubbornly on a series of different effects, but at this time of year the sun sets so fast that it's impossible to keep up with it.... a lot of work has to be done in order to render what I'm looking for: 'instantaneity', the 'envelope' above all, the same light spread over everything... I'm increasingly obsessed by the need to render what I experience..."<sup>1</sup>

In her panoramas, Shine shares Monet's aim: to reveal not just the beauty of the natural world and capture the particular the light that envelops it, but also the palpable living forces which govern a landscape.

Throughout her Italian garden works, Shine reveals something of the rich tapestry of life that Charles Baudelaire, in his seminal essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), demanded artists address. Baudelaire insisted that artists take modernity as their subject matter to serve historical purposes and that life's experience be at the heart of all art practice. Some of the gardens captured in Shine's lens boast varieties valued for their rarity or for their medicinal, religious or ritualistic properties, as suggested in images such as *Orto Botanico di Perugia*, pressed botanical specimens. Her work is, then, historically important while being utterly modern; and it demonstrates an allegiance to the guidelines set forth by Baudelaire. These principles inspired the Impressionists particularly, and continue to be globally relevant within a contemporary fine art context as artists strive to convey, within their respective media, a sense of identity, place and history. Baudelaire writes,

The past is interesting not only by reason of the beauty which could be distilled from it by those artists for whom it was the present, but also precisely because it is the past, for its historical value. It is the same with the present. The pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present.<sup>2</sup>

In her portraits of classical gardens of antiquity and their modern day guardians, Shine acknowledges both past and present. In addition to their current value as artworks intended for exhibition, these are culturally-significant historical records for the future. Specifically, she is documenting contemporary aesthetics and environmental management for posterity. Her images convey tranquillity and a strong, though quiet, sense of purpose. They provide a welcome relief – a balm for the soul – in an increasingly fast-paced age otherwise dominated by industrial and technological advancement. Shine's practice appears to uphold Baudelaire's beliefs, that "a profound harmony controls all the components of history, and that even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest, the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction."

As an artist and not merely a tourist, Shine's eye is always roving for an especially striking angle or revealing light pattern which shows the garden, or a particular plant, at its best. In some images asymmetry reflects the quirk of the guardian. *Dr. Silvano Onofri, Orto Botanico di Viterbo* adopts the relaxed pose of the flora he is pictured next to. In many, formal symmetry speaks volumes about humankind's drive to tame nature but also acknowledge our continued desire to realise deep-rooted ideals of beauty and proportion, and the pleasure afforded by the aesthetics of the Renaissance. Others again are clearly understood to be continual works in progress. *Villa di Vico Bello*, Siena is undergoing replanting in parts. *Orto Botanico di Brera*, Milano (established in 1774





*Orto Botanico di Perugia*



*Villa di Vico Bello*

for students of medicine and pharmacology) is today a celebration of colour and rectilinear form. Shine's candid portrait of three women responsible for maintaining this large scale botanical artefact, goes some way in revealing why the appeal of the garden endures. In a nod to their purpose and heritage, Shine refers to them as The Three Graces. They are, in Shine's mind, charm, beauty, and creativity personified. Through their manual toil, their personalities are increasingly embedded in the landscape entrusted to them. Reciprocally, this multi-tonal green realm takes on some of their particular colour, evidencing their communion with the land. Like many contemporary photographers, Shine's practice is devoted to capturing the unique qualities of people and places. Her interest in, and portraits of, the gardeners of Italy, in some part, validate the importance of their vocations – as caretakers of culturally and historically significant treasures.

As in all work which privileges nature, Shine touches on themes which resonate universally: love and loss, regeneration, culture, ritual, strength in adversity, and ideals pertaining to beauty. The great rusting iron gates and slowly, gently crumbling pillars of *Villa La Pietra*, Firenze remind us of our own impermanence while the expansive green vistas beyond symbolise regeneration. Of course, as hinted at in the title of the aforementioned exhibition *Pleasure Zones*, gardens are, and always have been, highly-charged realms. They are steeped in symbolic significance, particularly around power and gender, evoking entrenched ideas which link back to the story of Eden and the notion of original sin. Shine prefers to let others address these debates within their artistic practice. Her work is a celebration not a critique of human interference. Like Eve before her Shine's journey is one of exploration and discovery. In this instance, the rewards are visually, historically and spiritually quantifiable. In paint and in prose artists have always paid tribute to nature. While Wordsworth and Ruskin wrote about its unrivalled perfection, Shelley evoked

its cruelty. In paint, Poussin upheld classical principles of ideal beauty while, some two hundred years later, Courbet scorned the picturesque and instead sought to realise a gritty authenticity in his landscapes. Additionally, artists have vacillated between diametrically-opposed ideas about nature, including its perceived transience versus its permanence. Shine seems to pay tribute to both. And as suggested in Rembrandt's instruction to artists – "Choose only one master - Nature" – she is a willing disciple in this labour of love<sup>3</sup>. Shine's work nods to the romanticism of Wordsworth, the transcendentalism of Thoreau and the modern ideals espoused by Baudelaire. Her artistic practice reveals the reciprocal forces at work in the natural world and the inseparability of all living things. And, unapologetically, she favours environments which epitomise beauty, constancy and unparalleled human tenacity.

Catalogue essay by Dr. Melissa C. Reimer, December 2013

<sup>1</sup> Monet to the art critic Gustave Geffroy, Monet by Himself, ed. Richard Kendall (London: MacDonald & Co: 1989), 172.

<sup>2</sup> The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays by Charles Baudelaire, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Rembrandt Drawings, ed. Paul N mo, trans. David Macrae (Italy, Miller Graphics: 1975).





**Silvano Onofri**  
Orto Botanico di Viterbo



**Antonio Riolo**  
Orto Botanico di Palermo





**Mario Mirano**  
Isola Bella



**Fulvio Battellino**  
Orto Botanico di Pisa













**Fabrizio Cipriani**  
Orto Botanico di Roma



**Fausto Molinari**  
Orto Botanico di Ferrara





**Gianni Bedini**  
Orto Botanico di Pisa



**Parco Donato**  
Orto Botanico di Roma













Lindabrina Granata, Angela Bizzarrio, Elvira Gerosa  
Orto Botanico di Brera, Milano



Alessandra Vinciguerra  
La Mortella, Ischia





**Selina Bonelli Zondadari**  
Vico Bello, Siena



**Maria Grazia**  
Isola Bella, Stresa













Amarpal Dutta, Amerino Ferri, Borgo Storico Seghitti Panichi  
Ascoli Piceno



Ilario Collina, Simone Colongo  
Isola Madre





Giuseppe dalle Vedove, Stiliano Berzocola  
Giardini Giusti, Verona



Luca Menghini, Annamaria Ricci  
Orto Botanico di Perugia









Villa D'Este, Como









Villa Medicea di Castello



## ARTIST STATEMENT

In 2005 and 2011, I travelled extensively in Italy and created photographs of Medieval and Renaissance gardens and interviewed gardeners, garden curators and professors of Botany. My photographs provide some sense of the sensual intoxication delivered by the gardens as historical vehicles of pleasure and botanical explorations. I am intrigued by how 15<sup>th</sup> century gardens are viewed in current society, how the archival plant collections are preserved and how conservation and fashion in garden design have a contemporary currency due to issues of global warming, sustainability and loss of the world's species. This research is collaborative and is undertaken with the generous support of many Italian universities, private institutions and private gardens.

Cathryn Shine

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Associate Professor Cathryn Shine teaches and researches in photography and printmaking at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Her creative and academic research has been recognised as influential as there are few academics researching Rare and Archival Plant Collections in Contemporary Italian Gardens. Shine has produced numerous solo exhibitions and has participated in invitational international exhibitions as well as in many group exhibitions. In 2011 she was the inaugural Droste Research Fellow in Fine Arts, University of Hawaii at Hilo, USA and in 2005 she was a Visiting Research Fellow in Fine Arts at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Shine is the Director of the Pacific Rim International Print Exhibition.

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## WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr Melissa Reimer undertook her formal studies at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, majoring in English Literature, and Art History and Theory. Reimer completed her Doctorate in 2010, with a thesis examining the influence of modern art on writing at the fin-de-siècle. Her particular fields of interest include the life and literature of Katherine Mansfield, and Impressionism in the Arts. She has both published and presented her findings in New Zealand and internationally

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

My research and exhibitions are dedicated to countless gardeners who through the previous six centuries or so have developed and maintained the beautiful Italian gardens and plant collections that exist today. Present day gardeners give their selfless commitment to this work and the world would be poorer for not having world heritage sites, rare plant collections and the potential to use the plants unique qualities for future discoveries.

## LOCATIONS

Giardini Botanici di Villa Taranto  
Giardini Botanici Hanbury  
Giardini La Mortella  
Giardino Boboli  
Giardino Giusti  
Giardino di Villa Gamberaia  
Isola Bella  
Isola Madre  
La Reggia e il Parco Reale di Casserta  
La Mortella  
Orto Botanico di Brera, Milano  
Orto Botanico di Camerino  
Orto Botanico di Catania  
Orto Botanico di Ferrara  
Orto Botanico di Firenze  
Orto Botanico di Lecce  
Orto Botanico di Luca  
Orto Botanico di Napoli  
Orto Botanico di Padova  
Orto Botanico di Palermo  
Orto Botanico di Perugia  
Orto Botanico di Pisa  
Orto Botanico di Roma  
Orto Botanico di Siena  
Orto Botanico di Toscolano Moderno  
Orto Botanico di Urbino  
Orto Botanico di Viterbo  
Parco della Villa Palavicino  
Parco Storica Seghetti Panichi  
Villa Aldobrandini  
Villa Averdi  
Villa Carlotta  
Villa Cicogna Mozzoni  
Villa D'Este, Como  
Villa D'Este, Tivoli  
Villa Farnese di Caprarola  
Villa Hanbury  
Villa La Palazzina  
Villa La Pietra  
Villa Lante  
Villa Medicea di Castello  
Villa Melzi d'Eril  
Villa Monastero  
Villa Pallavicino  
Villa San Remigio  
Villa Taranto  
Villa di Vico Bello







