

Between Her Garden and the Studio: Jessica Stockholder on Laura Letinsky, Part II

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Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #52*, *Hardly More Than Ever* series, 2002, Archival Ink Print, 35 x 26.4 inches

This is part II of a text written in relation to the [Mellon funded Sawyer Seminar on Art and Urban Form](#) held at the University of Chicago in 2018.

Built landscapes reverberate with ethical and political choices, assert hierarchies and delineate property ownership. In this way the 'aesthetics' that drive the construction of

shared public space are as full of meaning as art is. There can be comfort, beauty, and pleasure evoked by the same landscapes. It seems to be part of our nature to insert order and narrative into the lay of the land that accompanies us a priori – land that we have limited control over – that has a life of its own – just as vegetables in the garden have a life of their own.

Abstract thinking drives the design of many rectilinear interventions: rectangles rarely occur in nature, but they proliferate in mind. Systematic organization of material and tasks are seen to be economically sensible, enabling predictability and quantifiable end goals. Often the aesthetics embedded in public spaces run parallel to the aesthetics driving most of the things now produced for mass consumption – an aesthetic that is simple, paired down, yielding products designed to be homogenous, replicable, and economically efficient. It is striking that the things we mass produce present little visual incident when compared to the experience of walking through forests or along the beach.

Production that is orchestrated to eliminate the need for decisions to be made during the process of making garners a quality of design governed by abstraction. This quality of production, together with the fact that our lives are accompanied by an accumulation of technology enabling us to avoid the complexity of our symbiosis with the embodiedness of life, are creating a landscape full of matter bent to conform to the abstract shape of our minds. We are more often operating in isolation from the visual and structural complexity presented by trees, soil, grasses, ocean, sky, weather, and entropy.





Community Garden at the University of Chicago

Laura's garden is at odds with the abstract overlay that is governing the design of the university campus. The intensity of her desire for the garden has been honored. That said, the garden is not exactly celebrated; it is tolerated. Some years ago, there was a public uproar that embarrassed the university when it reabsorbed Laura's original garden. In light of this history it is commendable, and indicative of the ambivalence pivoting around the question, that this garden is allowed to exist at all, hidden as far out of sight as possible. There are regular disputes about the nature of its fencing and the aesthetic disruption to the landscape caused by the equipment that services it. Some at the university deem the garden and its processes 'ugly'. Perhaps this is because, like art, the garden represents an insertion of personal idiosyncratic thought into a campus landscape designed to represent power, prestige, order, unity and corporate structure. In the context of the campus the insertion of the community garden replete with the unpredictable nature of its eventfulness is greeted with confusion. On the one hand, the university represents a collection of independent thinkers and purports to support free thought. On the other hand, the corporate power structures and aesthetics embedded in the campus are disrupted by the unwieldy garden.

The question of control is always being explored in the garden as it is in the studio. Laura's work in the garden enables a regular meeting of mind with matter. The garden is always changing, moving through cycles of growth and death in relation to the seasons. In addition, the plant matter has a life of its own akin to hers. Laura asserts control over one small area of the garden, working alongside other gardeners who harbor similar ambitions. The plants and animals attracted to the garden have ambitions too that sometimes align with those of the gardeners.

Laura describes her garden as small and personal; she is often alone in the garden and she compares her time in the garden to time in the studio; but, as it is a community garden, there are also occasions for unique social encounters with people whom she might not otherwise spend time with. This unusual and particular social space, where people share their passions for gardening – passions resonant with different kinds of value, sits a little to the side of the efficiency-driven economy that organizes much of modern life and the campus landscape.

The back and forth between Laura and the garden as she works it is mirrored by the

back and forth between her camera and her subject matter in the studio. In both cases, she works in relation to material things in the world that intersect and inform her thought processes, revealing those processes to be eventful and in motion– as are the growing plants. Her work – or her thought patterns – encounters resistance. In the studio, one is often surprised by the mismatch between mind and matter that inspires travel down roads hitherto unknown. In both cases, the friction that often arises between the contours of mind and the complex realities of matter necessitates acknowledgment of our embeddedness in larger structures of the world outside those our habits of attention constrain us to. This friction is generative, calling attention to the edges and limits of our capacities and, in the case of the garden, quite literally, to the ground we stand on.



Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #54*, *Hardly More Than Ever* series, 2002, Archival Ink Print, 31 x 26 inches

Beauty, as I experience it in gardening, in Laura's work, and in my own, is part of the subject. What is deemed beautiful and who deems things to be beautiful is linked to structures of power and control – and perhaps also mingles with what is good for us. Bottom line, everyone agrees food is good for us. So much meaning is packed into the aesthetic dimension of the campus; discussion of who finds the garden beautiful, who sees it as an eyesore, and why, would be valuable. Perhaps a university campus is precisely the kind of place where landscape design could be experimented with and

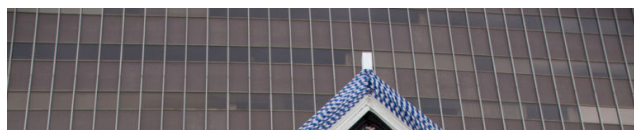
where such questions could be asked. This kind of inquiry would immediately intersect issues of social structure, governance, and sustainability.

Laura has agency inside the garden fence but not without. She told me that she had recently bought a peach tree and, as there wasn't enough room in her garden for the tree, she instead removed a nearby dead sapling and planted the peach in its place near the garden. The University gardeners removed the peach tree and berated her, asking, "What would happen if everybody planted trees?" As Laura told me the story she and I both hung on the unanswered question, our eyes widening.

Laura tells me that when she hears that the upper administration finds the garden ugly it makes her want to retreat into the garden where she can tend to her vegetables as well as herself. Gardens are good for that. But, in fact, Laura does a lot more; she makes pictures that explore the peculiar, alienated state of being that arises when public space become only clean, controlled, hygienic, and picturesque; when it too thoroughly eclipses access to 'nature' – or access to our *human* natures. Perhaps her gardening experience brings her into contact with something good enough, enabling her to articulate losses.

Interestingly Laura does not take photographs of her garden; she wants to be in the garden – not taking pictures of it. She feels the same way about food; she doesn't take pictures of her meals. She describes the camera as a form of mediation much like the grocery store. The camera is between the photographer and the thing pictured – the grocery store is between the customer and where the food comes from. In both cases there are gains and losses. Laura's work focuses on both. It's about the loss of knowledge that comes from direct experience and an accompanying loss of sensuality. Photographing magazine images – pictures of pictures of pictures – presents distance as the subject matter. There is beauty, atmosphere, romance, and sensuality in the photos – but it is all at a distance – and that distance is painful, dry, and desiccated, mirroring some of those same feelings that Laura and I share with dismay the few times a year that we buy food on campus.

I understand the aesthetic dimension of Laura's work to be informed and motivated by how our lives are enabled, managed, controlled, and celebrated in relation to the land we live and work on. Tending to the aesthetics that organize urban landscape, freighted with meaning and ideology, presents opportunities for thought and action, the nature of which is urgently needed.





Jessica Stockholder, *Sorrow*, 2017, Material CPU, oil paint, silk fabric, vinyl, table, hardware. 40.25 H x 24 D x 15 W inches

Jessica Stockholder is an internationally recognized multimedia artist. She is Faculty Chair of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago.