

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

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Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #40*, from the series *Ill Form & Void Full*, 2013, Archival pigment print, 46 1/2 × 58 inches

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

I wish to explore how pictorial and picturesque structures of thought are rooted in

gardening, intersect landscape design, and function in Laura Letinsky's photography as well as in my own work. I aim to understand how art and gardening intersect and why I care so deeply. Taking Laura's urban garden situated on the campus of the University of Chicago as a point of departure I will explore how picture making might be, at least in part, rooted in our relationship to landscape and resonating with issues of sustenance, nourishment, control, power, and point of view. The pictorial and picturesque are human inventions that, much like wearing eyeglasses, inform how we understand what we are looking at – both literally in terms of how we map the edges of things and place, and meaningfully, as the frames we impose on the landscape are resonant with hierarchy, ownership and judgment.

I am not a farmer or a gardener; I am a city person. That said human life pivots around growing things, as everything we eat comes directly or indirectly from the ground. When my mother wasn't on the couch with her head in a book she grew vegetables and made wine from the Transparent apples that grew in the yard. I remember the bathtub full of apples and her stomping and crushing them with her feet. She also made some paintings: one that I always loved, of rhubarb leaves that grew along the back fence, is still with me.

Years later, living in Hamden, CT. I spent twelve years watching my husband turn our suburban yard into a small farm of sorts with vegetables growing in the front and compost – for him more compelling than the vegetables – in the back. I did occasionally leave the window through which I gazed to help weed and insist on planting a thing or two.

The gap between gazing through the window that turned the yard into something picturesque, and being in the yard with dirt under my fingernails, can be understood as one subject of my work. Many of us live at a remove from our sources of sustenance. And as farming has embraced technology, diminishing the need for dirt to accumulate under fingernails and relying on the energy in oil based fertilizers, most of us have developed a distance from the myriad ecosystems that fuel us.

I love the picturesque as I love the comfort of shopping for food. Indeed my life's work in the studio is possible because I have been freed from having to grow my own food. Circling around the extant gap between my way of life and the organic processes that sustain it is like picking at a scab – exquisitely full of pain and pleasure.

The word *picturesque* is an adverb whose origins date back to the 1660s, and the Italian word *pittoresco*—meaning pictorial—is also related to the Italian *pittore* meaning painting. In 1703 the word was used in French as *pittoresque*, and now *picturesque* in English is

defined by Dictionary.com as:

1. visually charming or quaint, as if resembling or suitable for a painting: *a picturesque fishing village.*
2. (of writing, speech, etc.) strikingly graphic or vivid; creating detailed mental images: *a picturesque description of the Brazilian jungle.*
3. having pleasing or interesting qualities; strikingly effective in appearance: *a picturesque hat.*

In all three cases the sense of this word includes an acknowledgment of the distance that accompanies the consciousness that we bring to looking. That consciousness occurs in time and at a distance from sensorial experience, creating a built-in sense of distance in lived experience. To define the word *picturesque* as being 'suitable for a painting' is a way of pointing to that distance, as painting from life is always at a distance from the thing painted. The words *charming* and *quaint* attached to the picturesque imply a kind of frivolousness, suggesting that the picturesque is not serious. Perhaps the picturesque is sometimes seen as frivolous precisely because it explores life from afar. This even though it is also associated with 'striking, graphic or vivid' images and the possibility of 'creating detailed mental images,' which is a valuable human ability that contributes to our capacity for communication. The ambivalence embedded in what the word means dovetails with the complicated pleasure/pain and ethical dilemmas inherent in establishing distance in life generally, and resonates with the view of the garden through the window and with shared cultural distance from the organic complexity of our beings.





Community Garden at the University of Chicago

Moving to Chicago in 2011 to join the University of Chicago's Department of Visual Arts as Chair I was immediately drawn into conversation with Laura Letinsky about her community garden that was about to be reabsorbed by the parks district. She was lobbying to make space for a new garden near the Logan Center for the Arts, then under construction.

The community garden she successfully lobbied for now sits awkwardly on the University campus in a far back corner, as far away from public view as possible, behind the Logan Center for the Arts and Midway Studios where Laura and I both teach and have studios. It is relatively small and rectilinear with a fence around it, and occupying a piece of ground measuring 48' x 30'. She and her co-gardeners grow mostly vegetables. I imagine that they don't save money by growing these vegetables. Economy isn't a motivator here; I suspect that there are many overlapping motivations, one of which is that the garden fuels Laura's photography – and from afar it fuels my own art making enterprise too.

Meeting with Laura she shared her thoughts and passions about gardening, about cooking and about making photographs – three passions intricately connected as they all involve taste, sensuality, and beauty. She talks about the wastefulness of lawns, about the pleasure of foraging for food; and we both shared that we find bliss picking serviceberries and mulberries and crab apples on campus. Why, she asks, can't we plant more fruit trees, and herbs instead of annuals? She is in constant search of foods that tastes good; she is acutely aware of how agribusiness creates food with less flavor, and she talks about how influential childhood experiences of food and gardening were for her, and perhaps are for others. She also notices something important about self-sufficiency as it plays out in the garden. We talk about how genetic diversity is important in the garden and about how Michelle Obama's garden was an important symbol.



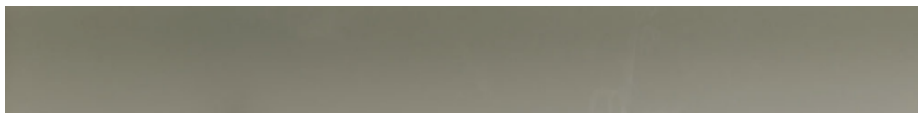


Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #7*, *Albeit* series, 2010, Chromogenic print, 11.7 x 8.5 inches

In relation to her photographs Laura talks about how people are more involved with cooking shows and food on Instagram than with actually cooking. She likens the distance between these activities to watching sex instead of having sex, and to one particular case when during a rape the victim was shown and told to replicate pornographic pictures of people in India as seen in shared phone pictures of rape. She talks about the thinness of the photographic image in contrast to the feel and smell of dirt. She says that “pictures have rhetorical power; they announce a truth – but there’s no *there* there.” It seems to me that she is using this quality of photography to resonate with cultural, and perhaps spiritual losses, as so many people now live without any experience of where food comes from. Perhaps she and I both are motivated by a sense of urgency, as we feel this loss and understand it to be a societal weakness and vulnerability.

Pictorial structures frame Laura’s garden as she asserts ownership over the rectangular plot of land and works with the elements to grow vegetables; and pictorial structures are also central to her work in the studio as she imagines and wrangles with things in space as seen through the rectangular picture plane of her lens, and on photographic paper.

The rectilinear outline of Laura’s garden, like most urban gardens is resonant with the buildings around and with the grid of the city. It’s interesting to think that gardening has not always been this way; there are other models. For example, the native peoples in North America planted beans and corn at opportune places in the forest; their gardens were not bounded.

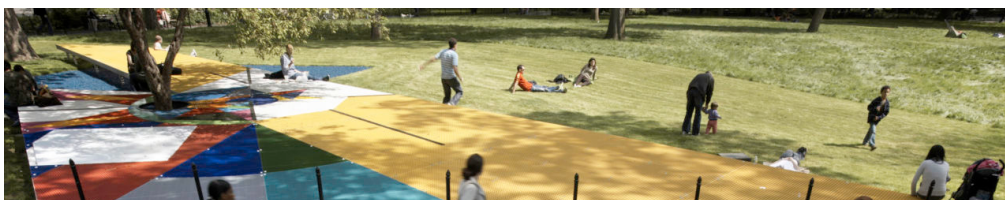




Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #4*, *Albeit* series, 2010, Chromogenic print, 11.7 x 8.5 inches

The food/garden connection is clear; the relationship between Laura's photographs and her garden is perhaps subtler. In any case, a substantial body of Laura's photographs from around 2009 -15 have incorporated many images of food – or more precisely, most often, pictures of pictures of food. The earlier work often focused on mirrored images and complex framing of the camera's, and therefore the viewers, point of view, directed through multiple doorways and around corners. In both cases the pictures are about the distance that is inherent in picture making.

These photographs are beautiful – and then they're not. The images are lush and sensual. It's food after all – and then it's not. The food turns out to be paper-thin. The pedestal holding the food is an antiseptic plastic. There's fruit paired with a Styrofoam cup. And the space that all of this happens in is full of artifice. The light is real enough but the space is not to be trusted as it's filled with perceptual tricks. In the end the story being told about our state of being is beautiful because we need it to be. Story telling functions to create maps and diagrams with which we navigate the world; we need them to make sense of experience, and as we are by nature pleasure seeking, we need stories to make life bearable; they enable us to feel in control as time unfolds with great unpredictability. So though the story may be about discord and loss, generally its outlines are nevertheless beautiful. Gardens too are beautiful, and also not, as they always contain unfolding dramas involving birth, death and decay.





Jessica Stockholder, *Flooded Chambers Maid*, 2009, Bleachers, powder coated aluminum grating, paint, plants, concrete footings, concrete pad

Jessica Stockholder is a pioneer of multimedia genre-bending installations that have been described as “paintings in space.” Her work has been exhibited at Dia Center for the Arts, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City; SITE Santa Fe; the Venice Biennale; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; among others. She is faculty chair of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago.