

Coming Home to the Sunrise Garden

The Art of Wendy Cain

by Archie Graham

When you arrive at Hooper's Mill in the little town of Newburgh just west of Kingston, Ontario, you feel as if you have just crossed into another time zone in which the past is very much alive and well in the present. The quarried limestone walls of the 1864 mill are almost pristine, as if they had just been erected, even though at the same time the house looks like it was formed eons ago by the land itself. The recently built, skilfully handcrafted foot-bridge that crosses the mostly dried up north branch of the Napanee River and connects the mill-house to the garden, only enriches the deep sense of history. When you lift the latch of the carpenter's lock on the sunny yellow door you find yourself in a space that has been masterfully transformed from a historic

workplace into a contemporary home, but one that refuses to disconnect itself from its origins: 10-foot high ceilings, exposed beams, deep-silled windows, 12-inch vintage baseboard, stencilled period pine floors, a Rumford fireplace, wood stove, and antique wood-trimmed bathtub. A variety of playful animal folk art figures from the Lunenburg Folk Festivals, coupled with a section of old Ontario cherry wainscoting hung on the wall in a moment of sheer artistic whimsy, seems only to energize this marvellously re-created traditional interior.

To say that all this is the labour of love of artists Wendy Cain and David Hunt does not do it justice. It is in fact nothing less than the work of their joint venture together in this planetary existence we call a life. They arrived here in the heady days of 1975, a

young married couple with a keen sense that something special was embedded in this ragged part of the earth and its weary ruins. What they created is more than art. It's a vessel for their long journey together towards the beautiful place of their dreams, a place to which, ironically, they seemed to belong to all along. They forged their relationship and cultivated the growth of a rich soil from which eventually not only flowers and plants would sprout, but also artworks that themselves seemed to embody the natural beauty of the place. Together they are a synergistic partnership, David the artist/metal worker with

him. David created the organized plots of the garden, and Wendy filled them up. In the summer the garden is teeming with life: a profusion of pea, pole bean, carrot, kale, swiss chard, squash, zucchini, potato, tomato, pepper, lettuce, beet, celeriac, cucumber, herbs, peony, heliopsis, anemone, day lily, iris, scilla, fern, hosta, and Japanese weeping grass. The marvelous hodgepodge of multicoloured vegetation in this terraced garden cascades down towards the dark water of the Napanee River which curls around this property like an oversized protective eel shimmering and glistening in the midday sun. It is a garden that



his remarkable gifts for organization and technical execution, and Wendy the artist/printmaker with the intuitive and tireless creative energy endlessly looking for an outlet.

They pooled their considerable artistic and design talents to collaborate not only in the transformation of the mill into a beautiful house but in the development of an exceptional garden, one that was cultivated out of “a scoured limestone river valley,” as Cain puts it, where there was originally “no soil, no sun,” and no irrigation. They succeeded in creating a garden that was bountiful in more ways, as we shall see, than the conventional sense of this term. “I give David full credit for creating the structure of the garden,” Cain declares. “You need to build me something to plant these things in,” she would tell

both delights and soothes, a happy smiling garden that, with the brilliant colours of its diverse flowers, the extensive greenery of its food plants, and the sway and undulation of its tall grasses, holds you in its thrall. It literally welcomes you to the tranquilizing silence and stillness of this special place.

If I fondly dwell on the place, it is not simply because it is bewitching, but because it is critical to the understanding of Cain's art. There are multiple themes at play in this art, but I will limit myself to discussing the following: the garden and its influence on the process of making paper and artworks, the excursion into social commentary, the quest for self-identity in the vase “paintings,” and the “here-and-now” experience in the strikingly coloured landscapes.

One might speak of the process involved in any

given piece of Cain's work in purely technical terms, of course, but one would be closer to the truth by thinking of it more as organically evolving from the garden like a cultivated indoor flower. It is no coincidence that the core of her art, papermaking, is a process that is intimately linked to the natural surroundings. Cain makes no secret of the fact that one of the great pleasures of her garden is "the aesthetics of the plant foliage, its scale and its relationships," and the fact that it serves as her palette and toolbox and even as an extension of her studio.

The process of producing the fluid paper starts with a natural plant product, cotton linter, which is placed in the water-filled basin of a Hollander beater. The beater, with its rotating steel wheel, turns the fibre into pulp. The artist then pours the pulp slurry onto a vacuum forming table, covered by layers of papermaking felt and fabric and bordered by a moveable metal frame which holds the slurry in place until it "weeps" sufficient liquid to become stable enough to press. After carefully removing the metal frame, the pulp is covered with more fabric and a rubber blanket while a vacuum pump sucks out the air to produce the pressure needed to remove excess water. This provides a much more controlled and gentler pressure than is possible in the hydraulic press. The end result of this process is a somewhat less fluid, spongy paper that is stable enough to "paint" on.

For the pulp "painting" stage, the artist creates

a fluid paper pulp processed in the paper beater for up to three hours until it is a fluid, creamy slurry that contains no visible fibre. This can then be coloured with pigments to produce the "paint" that she then can apply to the freshly pressed paper surface. Sometimes she just pours it on, other times she uses a squeeze-bottle or syringe to "write" it on, or even a cumbersome but effective industrial pattern pistol to spray the coloured liquid paper onto the surface. The result is that the surface and the image are far more intimately integrated than they are in painting. In fact, they are more or less one and the same thing, a fluid paper landscape with the "image" as the artist herself says, "embedded in the physical surface."

The naturalistic process does not stop here. The deep connection to her immediate environment is invested in this process and disclosed in her language. "As a gardener," she tells us, "I harvest plant material from the garden the same day I am doing a studio session and the plant material acts as a direct stencil in conjunction with layers of finely beaten paper pulp which are sprayed" or "rained" onto the spongy surface of the pressed paper pulp. She does this "in sequence to get the layers of coloured plant shapes." It is difficult to convey how laborious this process is and at the same time how capricious. But the inevitable unpredictability serves as the dynamic force behind the artist's creativity. It requires meticulous attention, a razor sharp eye, and consummate skill to

Left: Wendy works with the sprayer and (right) applies coloured pulp with a mustard bottle.





Sunrise Garden, Paper pulp painting, 72.5 x 94 cm.

calibrate the numerous accidents that can occur at the different stages of the proceedings, to produce what turns out to be remarkable art work.

This work is all of a piece with the house, the garden, the river, the natural environment, so much so that you find yourself marvelling at the extraordinary continuity. No artist ever creates without borrowing from other artists and other sources, but Cain is acutely conscious that she is “living off the idea of appropriation,” most of all the appropriation of the earth, and particularly the garden. It’s as if the artist is a conduit between the earth and the art, the garden and the studio – a vehicle of the natural forces she benefits from but cannot quite control. Just as the gardener in planting and cultivating her landscape accepts and adjusts to the shifting moods of nature and unpredictability of the outcome, so too does the

artist who uses natural materials in the process of creating her own extended garden. “You can think you are in charge,” Cain says, but the “best way is to move with it.” In each case, the gardener and the artist must become a conjurer of happenstance who can turn natural “accidents” into works in progress.

It would be unfair to take one piece and elevate it above the many other truly excellent works this artist has produced, but *Frosted Landscape Series #1* is a noteworthy example of the naturalistic process of art creation that we are speaking of here. She starts in the garden, picking the plant material the same day she plans to work, cleaning off any debris. She next sprays “a colour over the entire surface of the freshly pressed paper layer. I then place plant material on this fresh colour, overspray the next layer of colour, and continue with layering plant material and different



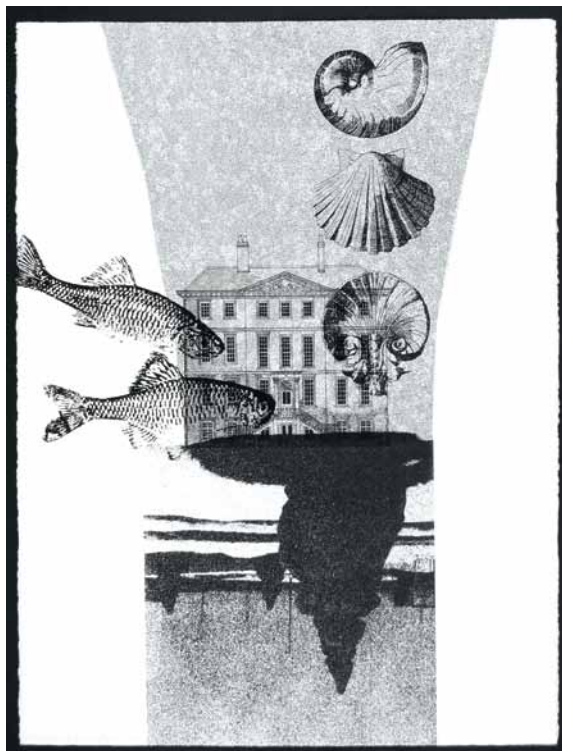
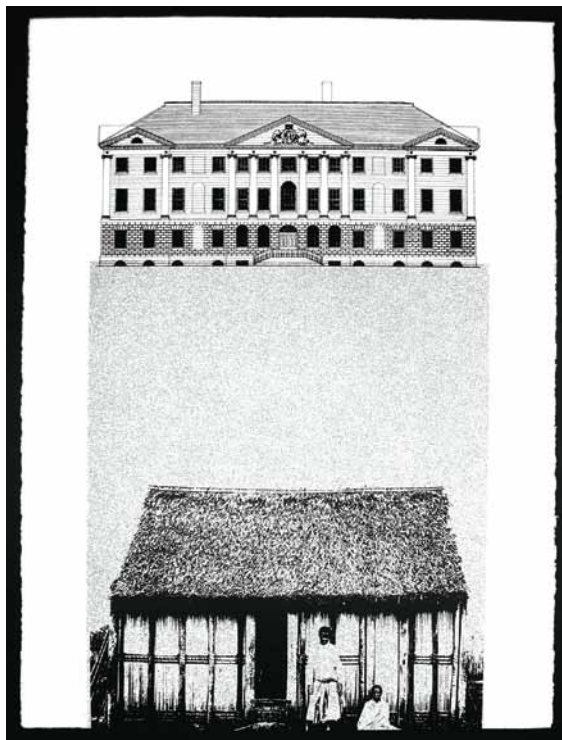
Untitled (Frosted Landscape Series) – corydalis, fern, sorbaria. Paper pulp painting and stencil, 28 x 43 cm.

colour layers until I am finished. There are usually four or five colours.” Blurring the line between representation and object, these works are a virtual outgrowth of the garden. The natural here evolves via the subtle stewarding of the artist. Materially, these prints have a rough uneven texture, almost like the bark of a young tree. The rough edge of the hand made fluid paper when dried seems to mimic the natural edges of the vegetation. Imaginatively, this piece and the many variations that she makes of it are a function of a playful use of fern, corydalis, and sorbaria masquerading as trees on a hillside, all rendered in rich colours laced with mica to produce a reflective quality like the stage in a child’s magic garden.

Most of Cain’s work fits into distinct series of boldly colourful variations on a landscape, with the exception of one group of black and white screen prints that constitute what the artist calls a “foray into social commentary.” There is a dramatic difference in mood between her landscapes and this group of prints. While the former seem unprompted, intensely coloured, of the moment, full of vitality, sometimes throbbing with energy, and full of celebration, the latter tend to be much more reflective, cerebral, shadowy, sombre, brooding, and mournful. In the artist’s own estimation, there is a kind of artistic “schizophrenia” involved here.

In *A Question of Power*, for example, the former architectural history student sees in the diverse habitats of the colonist and the colonized, evidence of a profoundly exploitative relationship. By contrasting architectural structures, the artist highlights the hidden power built into the design. Here the hardline precision, mathematically calculated lines, mechanical form, and monumental weightiness of the courthouse is opposed to the rough-hewn and unfinished handiwork of the native. The relationship of top to bottom can hardly be mistaken or reversed. It is clear which was considered by colonists to be closer to “heaven” and the presumably “ordained” supremacy of calculative reason, and which was viewed as all too close to the “earth” and its powerful, unpredictable, and uncontrollable undercurrents.

This political theme is further developed in



Top: *A Question of Power*, Screen print on Rives BFK paper, 76 x 60 cm. Below: *Shipwreck Dreaming / Exploring Forth*. Screen print on Rives BFK paper, 76 x 60 cm.

a whole series of screen prints called *Shipwreck Dreaming*. Much of this work seems like a strange kind of interlude, or perhaps even a disturbing intrusion by the dark forces of the larger world into the magic landscapes and their earthly delights.

The artist always returns to the landscapes, back to the time and place she seems happiest in. Among the landscapes I'm referring to is a series of "vase 'paintings'" that are, in contrast to the black-and-white screen prints, quizzical, quirky, mischievous, whimsical, probing and exploratory. It is in these works that we see Cain's sense of humour which often serves as an antidote to the kind of laborious intellectualizing and ponderous theorizing that frequently masquerades as profundity in too much contemporary art. This does not mean that she is not interested in serious matters, only that her way of addressing them is sometimes indirect and circuitous.

It would be naïve to take the vase in these works, long associated with women's work, body and character, sometimes empty, sometimes overflowing, in some ideologically motivated sense as a negative expression of women's femininity. On the contrary, it comes out of Cain's childhood experience on her parents' farm in eastern Ontario, and seems to serve as a very positive visual metaphor for the quest for self-identity. So much of the life of her family was "harvesting" and "storing of crops." The artist in her wished that she could harvest and store "the environment and its colours," the lush vegetation and the huge blue skies. Even though the human figure is distinctly absent from Cain's work, it haunts her art in the form of the pervasive ghostly vase. The vase paintings in fact can be read as an extended metaphor for the quest for self-identity, a quest that here, ironically, turns out to be nothing less than a paradox.

The vase wafts through these pictures like an elegant lady, a hollow, apparitional, diaphanous presence floating in the landscape looking, perhaps, for a place to rest. In the earlier stages, the vase is an empty vessel—as in the *Vase in a Landscape #26*. Here the spectral Greek vase is carried along in an oddball marine landscape made up entirely of fish. It takes



Vase in a Landscape #26. Paper pulp painting and screen print, 76 x 56.5 cm.

on another more serious guise in the Japanese Tea Bowl series where it is no longer a container of Greek origin but Japanese, no longer empty but containing recognizable plant material. *Japanese Tea Bowl #12* and *Japanese Tea Bowl #24* radiate with the colours of foliage like a pleasure garden in a drinking bowl.

In this series, the border between the bowl/vase and the natural landscape has vanished. The once elegant lady drifting like an apparition now constitutes the entire picture, and she contains in her own being the landscape itself. The two have become one and the same. The empty elegant lady floating precariously like a phantom across the rolling hills of fish in *Vase in a Landscape #26* has been filled up in *Autumn Landscape Bowl #5*, for example, with the landscape itself in a flurry of intense colours and the rich ambrosia of an immense sky. She is brimming over with life, the life of the other that is now also herself.



What is curious about this quest for self-identity is that it issues in its opposite. The elegant lady of the vase landscapes finds herself, it seems, by losing herself, by embracing the landscape that is so prominent in all of this work. In reality, neither she nor the landscape are lost, but each has become the other in the fullness of time.

The question of time is fundamental in Cain's landscapes. It is clear that her love of the past is revealed in her passion for the historic house she lives in, the traditional equipment for producing her paper and art, and some of the ancient sources that inspire her. Her pure fluid landscapes, in contrast, issue from the "here-and-now" experience of the moment. Cain speaks repeatedly of trying to "capture the moment. The landscape pieces are a reflection of the brief moments when I get my eyes unglued from the garden work and look up at the sky."

Like other eminent colourists, she knows how effectively vivid and intense colour brings us into



Clockwise, from above: *Japanese Tea Bowl #12*. Paper pulp painting and stencil, 53 x 40.5 cm. *Japanese Tea Bowl #24*. Paper pulp painting and stencil, 81 x 61 cm. *Autumn Landscape Bowl #5*. Paper pulp painting, 53 x 40.5 cm.

the vicinity of time in this sense, actively luring us into the unalloyed pleasure of the immediate experience of the moment. In re-creating this rather enigmatic moment, landscapes like *Sunrise Garden* dispense with borders and even clear linear distinctions, and unabashedly abandon themselves to fields of intense and striking colours which dissolve into one another. These are the direct outcome of the artist's experience as a gardener taking inspiration from the flower beds, tall grasses, other greenery and the big sky. It comes from the kind of image that seems to be imprinted on the retina after spending hours in bright sunshine. *Sunrise Garden* exudes a powerful magnetic aura from its palette of splendid energetic colours that seem to have literally rained onto the surface in a profusion of globules and drops. This piece might very well have impressed Klimt, whose work inspired it, Monet, of whom it is reminiscent, and perhaps even Bonnard who set the standard for the truly sunny garden. The purples, blues, and greens seem to bubble up from the ground to evaporate into the all encompassing yellow of the almighty sun, while the orange lilies on the tall thin stems, "drawn" with the fluid colour pulp squeeze bottle and subsequently sprayed with water, seem to have burst into flame. *Sunrise Garden* is not so much *about* unlocking the memorable reality of a sunrise the artist once experienced in her garden as it is a precious experience in itself, a *thoroughgoing*

celebration, an inspirational moment embodied in a magnificent artifice, this inferno of glorious colour on a fluid landscape.

One can't help wondering if, like the elegant lady in her landscapes perhaps, the artist herself has discovered that the journey she was embarked on ends in the here-and-now she is already in, the beautifully restored Hooper's Mill with the magical sunrise garden sprung from limestone. The landscape she never really left, the one she has always belonged to in the first place. The answer may lie in her response when asked about the spirals that often appear in her landscape vases. They reflect her view that "there is no path, the path is made by walking." Seeing her and David her husband and partner, helper and supporter, technical wizard and troubleshooter, in their home environment makes it easy to understand why Cain's luminously coloured landscapes so consistently testify to a profound cheerfulness. It seems to come from a deep instinctive and unspoken connection to the *singularity* of this place and the *particularity* of the time, to the *absolute uniqueness* of this little patch of the earth she calls "home."

Nothing short of a retrospective of the large body of work stored in her studio, with sufficient space to allow us to be surrounded by the vase "paintings" and the fluid paper landscapes among others, could begin do justice to the compelling magnetism of this work and its tantalizingly elusive qualities. •