

Making Sugar – Catalogue Essay

Margo and Gerald Would Be Pleased (excerpt)

Victoria Harbutt's response to the request for a garden-themed exhibition, has its basis in science and philosophy and is grounded by such fundamental questions as 'Why are plants green? What is energy?' As she points out, not only does the process known as photosynthesis provide the ultimate source of life for nearly all plants and animals, it is also responsible for virtually all oxygen in our atmosphere. The Macquarie dictionary defines photosynthesis as 'the process by which light energy is converted to chemical energy' but scientists have been more lyrical, with one text calling it 'the only mechanism of energy input in the living world'.

The gallery is transformed into an experiential journey of 'photosynthetic artifice', an elaborate multi-disciplinary collaboration involving contemporary visual art, lighting design, classical physics, horticulture, floral design and installation work. Regina Walter and Angie Summers were engaged to create plant installation works and Geoff Cobham to design lighting for the exhibition. Environmental scientist Julie Medana has been responsible for plant propagation, species, material and technical research.

Making Sugar offers viewers a choreographed set of experiences through the creation of functional aesthetic forms. The artists explore aesthetic form, scientific function and natural effect via contemplative moonlit installations, a fresh dawn jungle, a misting rainbow forest, before a sequence of intensely coloured light and a tactile microscopic experience of leaf and floral forms. In contrast to museum practice which most often presents an idea and interprets it for visitors, *Making Sugar* interprets scientific concepts and information aesthetically, relying on what Harbutt describes as our 'emotional imagination'. For those with a thirst for further information about biochemistry and plants, *The Lab* will be a self-help interactive laboratory and information centre.

Harbutt has described the project as a 'passionate demonstration of the relationship between light and growth'. Like a symphony, the exhibition is comprised of a number of artistic expressions that as a whole constitute an orchestrated sequential experience. *Making Sugar* begins with utter darkness. When a beam of light enters the space we are immediately aware of its importance as a vital source. Revealed one after the other by Geoff Cobham's masterful lighting scheme, the indoor gardens beyond poetically assert their role in photosynthesis.

From the hanging water tanks, each with different combinations of soil, water and water plants, viewers are directed by light to Regina Walter's *Moon Garden*. Walter's early drawings for the installation show a debt to the forms of the Mayans who were sun worshippers. Instead, her chosen form is European in origin, an occasion to appreciate that moonlight is reflected sunlight. With its faux moonlight hitting a large pond and silver and grey foliated plants and white flowers, the monochrome artifice of *Moon Garden* is exquisitely cinematic.

Around the corner the *Rainbow Forest* announces the bright light of day. A forest of trees is replete with misting and rainbows – which again make visible the energy created by the sun. From there viewers are saturated with the colours that plants use for photosynthesis – some blue, but mostly reds, oranges and yellow. The polychromatic light introduces *The Pervatory*, the project's climax of tactility and physicality. Designed by Angie Summers, a hanging three-sided 'observation tunnel' tilts down from the ceiling. The walls feature woven leaves, rare flowers and strategically placed magnifying glasses. The structure's scale diminishes, so that at the end viewers crouch as they emerge from the tunnel. Here the illumination blast is 'grow' lighting.

...Harbutt has choreographed a 'ride' in which the viewer is dazzled by sunlight. In a big finale the viewer's mind – dizzied by *The Pervatory*, then blinded by the grow light or stunned by science – may segue to sun worship.

...The final installation is a domestic planting of nasturtiums and geraniums around the exit door. Re-acclimatization to familiar idioms may be a necessary transition before leaving this imaginative, otherworldly exhibition.

Anne Loxley