

The Garden Underground

Exhibition - March 18th - June 24th 2016

Venue: Jor Bagh Metro Station, New Delhi, India

Exhibition of photographs and text, curated by Tony Clancy

Photographs by Juhi Saklani, Arati Kumar Rao, Tony Clancy

Writing by Anita Roy

Exhibition organised jointly by The India Habitat Centre, Delhi Metro Corporation, University of Gloucestershire

Visitor numbers: the station has an estimated 20,000 users each day, the exhibition was in an open area near the ticket offices / train entrance area that all of these users would pass

Associated events: 1 day workshop at The India Habitat Centre on the theme of gardens and photography. 10 participants.

Talk at The India Habitat Centre, March 18th. Speakers - Dr Alke Pande (Director of Visual Art for India Habitat Centre) Tony Clancy, Anita Roy, Juhi Saklani

Press coverage: articles and interviews in many printed and online publications. Links to these further in this document.

Reflections on the Garden Underground

by Tony Clancy



From a tentative idea in early 2015 through to the enjoyable but exhausting adventure of actually putting the show up in early 2016, the project was a fascinating journey, a true learning experience on many levels and a collaboration that brought together some fascinating insights.

Anita Roy's first hand perspective on what gardens mean to people living in Delhi apartments as well as Hertfordshire suburbs was the initial impetus for the project – an article on her blog that I happened to read triggered the idea for the collaboration. The discussions between us were carried out over email, phone and sometimes whilst walking through spectacular gardens such as Gertrude Jekyll's Hestercombe, and ranged over the meaning of the garden in colonial discourse through to strategies for growing sweet peas. It was Anita's initiative to bring in two other photographers from India to collaborate with us, giving the project an appropriately cross continental perspective.

Working with Juhi Saklani and Arati Kumar Rao was a great pleasure and thanks to Skype and email, distance was not an obstacle (though time differences took some navigating), and ideas were able to flow freely in both directions. Juhi and myself ping ponged images back and forth, working on ideas till we finally arrived at the final set, using her wonderfully humane images of gardeners – the often unseen workers whose experience and knowledge make gardens possible – as the basis for a set of hand produced salt

and cyanotype prints (produced by myself in UK). Arati gave us the idea of a piece about the Rao Jodhpur Desert Rock Gardens in Jodhpur, a project which again opens up questions about the implications of the gardener's habit of moving exotic specimens around the world and the potential havoc they can inflict on fragile local ecosystems.

Four undergraduate photography students accompanied us to Delhi. None of them had been to India before and the trip provided some great photo opportunities for them all. The students did a great job of documenting the shows be-



ing put up (allowing me to concentrate on the production and hanging of the work) and their work made a great contribution to the project. They also became enthusiastic documenters of the breath-taking Islamic gardens and architecture that we saw in the Amer Fort in Jaipur.

So what of the exhibition itself ? Did the work succeed visually, and in its aim of opening up a dialogue about gardens ?

Visually the exhibition was a deliberately eclectic mix, bringing together sharply contrasting aesthetics. The bright primary colour palette, grid like structure and hard cropping of **The Digital Bouquet** piece hoped to

- address the highly traditional subject of a flower bouquet, but in a very modern style
- reflect the idea of gardens as spectacle, with images of flowers placed closely together for their sheer impact
- give the whole exhibition a strong focal point that was intentionally theatrical, a loud and consciously artificial presence.

The piece succeeded on its own terms, stamping a strong identity on the exhibition and it attracted much attention from passers-by. (I was gratified shortly after the show was put up to see a father and daughter



standing in front of it taking a selfie on their phone). As a large lightbox placed prominently in the station it did attract attention to the show and gave an otherwise quite dark space a sense of celebration of a garden at its height. There was reference to 17th century Dutch floral paintings with their mix of flowers from across seasons and the world, and also insects. Details from the piece were used extensively in press coverage. Some vibrancy of colour was lost in the final print, with the cool fluorescent tubes taking the edge off from warmer colours, especially the yellows.

Juhi Saklani's panel beautifully explored broader themes. It depicted gardeners from nearby public parks through documentary portraits and their work (in particular their hands). Gardeners are more often than not invisible workers, their years of skill and accumulated knowledge both



underappreciated and underpaid but vital to the workings of gardens. (In the UK the importance of gardeners could be illustrated by the case of the gardens of Heligan in Cornwall; in the early 20th century these were a superb example of a wealthy country garden that feature many exotic specimens and also fed the household, until the First World War called up all the local men leaving no workforce and an overgrown ruin that has only recently been restored). Juhi's panel gave a face to this workforce, recording their words and fragments of their story.

We decided to print them using cyanotype and salt print techniques, lending a hand-produced feel that reflected a far less industrial, less high tech way of making images. (In reality the images were digitally



produced and transmitted, but the intervention of craft printing methods shifted the aesthetic back a century and a half.) This sharp contrast with the images on the other 2 light panels emphasised the very different voice of this part of the exhibition.

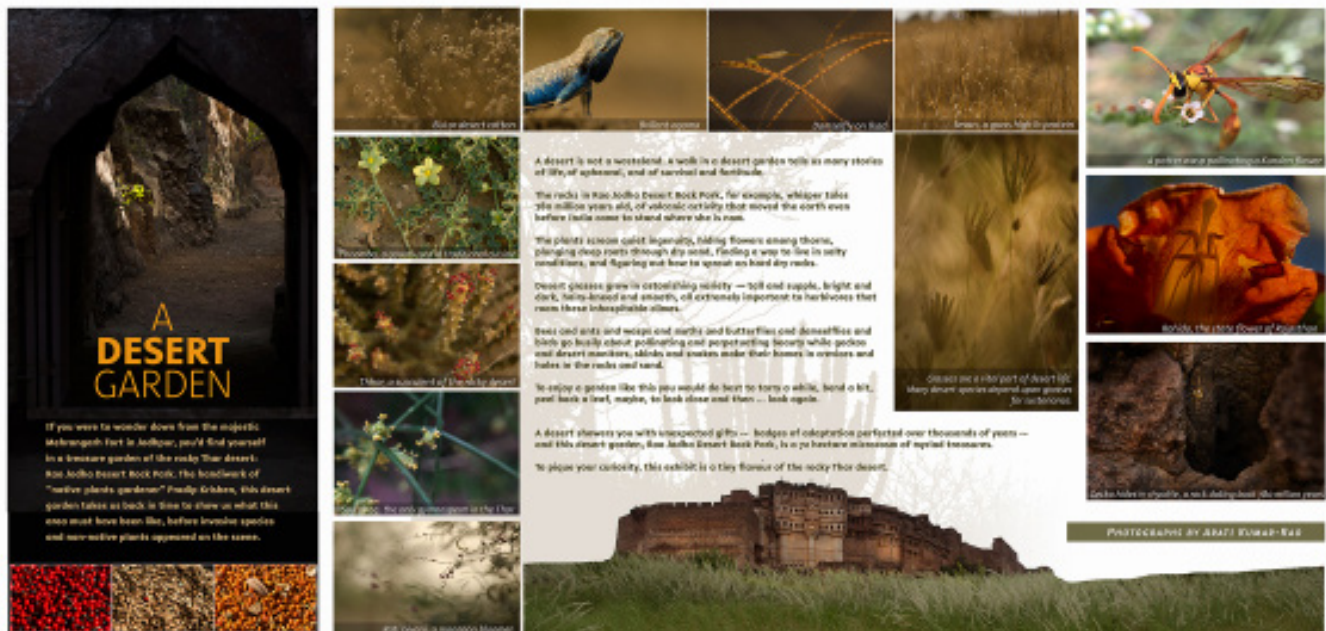
Perhaps we made the classic mistake of trying to incorporate too many images in this panel – a harder edit might have simplified it, giving more impact. Each image was powerful and it was hard to think of reducing the number included. On reflection we might have made this panel for one of the larger light boxes. This would have given the portraits a more human scale and further emphasized the importance of the workers. (We were unsure whether the production techniques for the 19th century processes would have produced high enough quality images – with more time and resources this would have been worth testing). It is a challenging design problem to make an exhibition that urgently wants to explore complex ideas yet must work in a space that people move through on their way to somewhere else – as Diderot said of tableau painting, it should “attract, arrest and engage”.

Juhi's work brought a strong sense of the human to the project, explicitly about the impact of gardens on lives. Her portrait subjects look at the viewer and address them directly. Her classic studies of hands

at work brought into view the labour that lies behind the spectacle of gardens, and rooted the whole project in the real.

Arati Kumar Rao's panel introduced the Rock Garden in Jodhpur. Her work looked at another dimension of the work of gardens, conserving nature rather than celebrating human artifice and ingenuity. The images were very enjoyable and with their more





editorial style, very accessible. Arati worked more independently of ourselves and delivered a professionally designed panel and text. Again, a different style, a different voice and a different set of concerns and ideas, that contributed to the rich set of themes that we were interested in.

Finally, there were spaces around the concourse that we used to put more conventionally framed images in. I made a set of 5 images of tradescantia flowers, again using cyanotype and salt print techniques – the same technique as used for Juhi's panel, but with very different subject matter, and we were able to place original prints here. We did not use glass in the frames, in part to simplify the hanging of the show, but also to allow the actual print to be seen directly. There were also two framed digital reproductions of hand tinted prints of plants, placed opposite the main wall on a small area. These prints all echoed some of the earliest representations of plants and were designed to be enjoyed purely for their visual qualities. My feeling is that they would perhaps have been initially 'outshouted' by the larger pieces around them, but any user of the station who walked through regularly would have started to notice them – almost as small plants growing between the larger blooms.

As with many group shows, visual cohesion was not being aimed at; diversity was used instead to take the interested viewer through a number of different perspectives and hopefully keep them entertained and engaged with the themes. Text panels (in English and in Hindi, translated by Juhi) helped to open up the



ideas. I feel that we did manage to use the space well and put on a stimulating show that brought a mixture of colour and more quietly meditative images, and offer a range of ideas about gardens and plants in the contemporary world.

The users of most stations, passing through, are accustomed to seeing advertising with its instantly accessible messages in large prints and direct texts. Jor Bagh is close to the cultural centre of Delhi and hosts a rolling programme of art installations and exhibitions – the regular station users no doubt expect to see work that demands more attention than adverts. Our show provided some pieces to draw attention, but also more detailed images and text that hoped to engage viewers more fully. Sadly, we were under some time pressure (leaving Delhi the day after the opening) so were not able to do a survey of how people interacted with the work or judge its effectiveness for ourselves. A short visit before we left suggested that people were intrigued by the show and drawn to it (it was gratifying to see some pleasure being taken in the images).

In retrospect The Garden Underground was ambitious (thematically, visually as well as logistically), and was a genuine collaboration between practitioners across two distant countries. A great amount was achieved. There were compromises made necessary by time, budgets, distance and the space itself, but for three months we offered rich mix of work for the thousands of users of Jor Bagh metro station.



Typologies in the garden

The idea of series of images showing things that are similar, but slightly different, was perhaps first tried out by the scientist and illustrator Robert Hook in the early 17th century. He worked at a time when the first microscopes began to be developed. The ones he used were lower powered than the devices that Antonijn Leuvenhoek used in Delft to see bacteria and other life forms that had previously been invisible, but Hook was nonetheless able to see and record nature in intense detail. His best known image is perhaps his spectacular drawing of a flea; this was just one among many examples of the images that he

He looked at a few seeds of the thyme plant and observed that although broadly similar, each seed also showed differences.

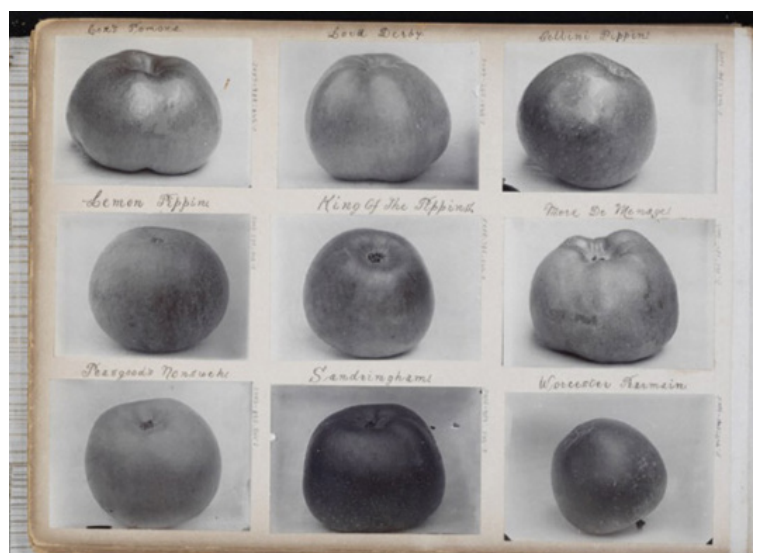
As with humans and most other complex life forms, there is a general pattern for how a particular species looks, but also differences that mark them out as individuals. This was later explored through discoveries in genetics and Darwin's ideas on evolution – the differences are not only external but built into the fundamental make up of each animal and plant.

Hook's drawings were systematic and highly observed, and an important contribution to how science recorded the world in order to build an understanding of it that was not based on supposition and superstition. In Holland, painters and illustrators were also using new skills in high realism to record the diversity of life. Joris Hoefnagel and Jan van



Kessel were among these and, though not as systematic in their science as Hook, brought the natural world to life in a way not surpassed until the invention of photography about 200 years later.

There are some very noteworthy examples of camera images that take forward Hook's exploration of similarity and difference. In 1890s / early 20th century, a gardener, Charles Jones, documented the varieties of fruit and vegetables that he had grown. Whilst he did not (as far as is known) train as a photographer, he intuitively placed items on a blank background. This focuses our attention on them as specimens, and takes away distractions and aesthetic enhancements. The beauty of these images lies within the object itself as rendered by the camera and print. Detail and tonality give his pictures a powerful



impact, we enjoy them perhaps more than looking at real garden produce; they are commonplace, everyday items but we see them with a new attentiveness

The idea of the typology in part informed my series of images of tradescantia flowers. the actual flowers are small (about 2cm across) and appear in large numbers over summer; purple flowers against bright green broad grass shaped leaves. The flowers open up in the morning and by late afternoon have faded, to be replaced daily. Seen en masse they appear to be fairly homogenous, I myself didn't initially notice the differences between them. Whilst scanning some flowers from my garden for possible use in the project, I scanned several tradescantia, saw them enlarged on my computer screen and became aware of the differences between them - in fact, looking closely, no two i found were ever the same. Different shaped petals, various defects such as holes and ragged edges, all characterised the flowers. Recording these differences is a far cry from, say, Robert Mapplethorpe's technically perfect images of perfect flowers, deliberately fetishised images that seduce us and present an idealised vision. Tradescantia remind us of Darwin's model of nature, where constant mutation drives evolution. As with Robert Hook's observation of thyme seeds, seeing the flowers in series shows us how nature reproduces similarity, but also difference.

The printing processes used reflect this mutability. Using hand coated rather than industrially standardised processes means that no two prints will ever be identical. For many reasons, there will be shifts in tonality and areas of imperfection in the coating of the photosensitive materials. Presenting the original prints here shows the unmediated effects of the process (although the negatives used have been digitally tweaked and processed).



Links to selected press articles about The Garden Underground in the Indian press

India Today :

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gardens-of-life-tony-clancy-photographers-explore-gardening-exhibition-jor-bagh-metro-station/1/624203.html>

Hindustan Times:

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/gardens-in-india-and-the-uk-the-soothing-power-of-flowers/story-RioI06E0pvHEgoBhBrTpRP.html>

The Hindu

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/gardens-in-the-limelight/article8391228.ece>

The Statesman

<http://www.thestatesman.com/delhi/uk-photographer-to-showcase-delhi-gardens-129829.html>

The Indian Express

<http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/a-blooming-underground/>

Delhi Events

<http://www.delhievents.com/2016/03/exhibition-garden-underground-group.html>

Hardnewsmedia

<http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2016/04/photo-feature-garden-underground>

Artslant

<https://www.artslant.com/9/events/show/412708-the-garden-underground?tab=EVENT>

Cheezydeals.com

<http://cheezydeals.com/bustle-delhi-wall-covered-flowers-provides-pause/>

A short online review / article by Sristy Saha

(April 2016 - original article illustrated with press release images and author's images)

IN THE BUSTLE OF DELHI, A WALL COVERED WITH FLOWERS PROVIDES A PAUSE

A photo exhibition at the Jor Bagh metro station celebrates the evocativeness of gardens.

Saloni Shah's daily commute to Gurgaon has lately been filled with a little colour. As she walks into Jor Bagh metro station every morning, her eyes cut through the crowds to focus on a wall covered with flowers.

These photographs and artworks, which illustrate the connection between gardens and cultural backgrounds, are on display at the station as part of Habitat Photosphere, a year-long photo festival organized by India Habitat Centre. The aim of The Garden Underground, which features the work of Tony Clancy, Arati Kumar-Rao and Juhi Saklani, is to promote environmental awareness through art.

Shah finds that the evocative, colourful images punctuate her humdrum routine – “My grandfather goes for a walk in our housing society's garden every day and has been trying to get me to come along for years. He tries to tempt me with the idea that if I see beautiful gardens and flowers every morning then my day will go well. I can now tell him that I do look at flowers every morning and don't even have to wake up early.” And even as others rush past the exhibit, she stops to take a selfie in front of one of Clancy's photographs.

Between themselves, he, Saklani and Kumar-Rao present three organs of a garden's ecosystem – flowers and plants, insect species and the gardeners who maintain these islands within increasingly suffocated cities.

Clancy's riotously colourful, textured images celebrate the exuberant beauty of flowers; Saklani's work recognises the hard work and expertise of gardeners; and Kumar-Rao focuses on the unique desert garden around the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur.

The exhibit ends June 21.

Clancy, who is also the curator for the exhibition, said “This exhibition brings a small oasis to the depths of the metro system, where passing passengers can enjoy images that evoke the pleasures and spectacle of gardens... the pictures open up a dialogue between East and West, tropical and temperate, between those who create and tend for gardens and those who come to enjoy them.”

A Garden in Reverse

I was inspired by Arati Kumar Rao's images in The Garden Underground exhibition to visit the Rao Jodhpur Desert Rock Garden myself on my trip to India for the Garden Underground exhibition.

The story of the desert park is that of a garden in reverse. About 90 years ago the then Maharasha of Jodhpur took advice on how to make the apparently sparse rocky landscape around the spectacular Mehrangarh fort, into a lush green oasis by planting the Baavlia tree, a plant native to Mexico. The plan worked – the tree loved its new home and rapidly took over, but at the cost of displacing the native plants that had co-existed with the wild life there for many thousands of years. The shrub also spread beyond the walled grounds of the Maharasha's palace and out into the countryside beyond, very firmly establishing itself as part of the native flora.

Environmental activists have been working with the current Maharasha since 2006 to eradicate the Baavlia tree within the walled lands of the fort and to re-establish the desert plants that once grew there, replanting some of the species and restoring their place in this unique landscape. The Rao Jodhpur Desert Rock Garden is now a nature reserve on the ancient basalt rockscape around the palace where native plants have been re-established, providing part of the ecosystem that supports native creatures.

In many ways, this is reverse gardening. Gardeners have for centuries moved plants around the world to beautify the land, seeing native species as weeds to be eradicated; here the keepers of the space actively remove the exotic imports and encourage natural shrubs. A reminder that we should not always be seduced by spectacle and beauty (in the garden and elsewhere), but that we need urgently to recognize the value of the local, and to allow ancient systems to support a chain of life.

The brilliant diversity of wildlife in the park is proof of this. When I visited my excellent and informed guide Harsh pointed out, among others animals and birds, Indian cuckoos, franklin partridges, red wattled lapwings and Indian vultures. Thorny plants provide shelter for nests and are used by humans for, eg, medicines and incense.

Gardens can act as expressions of the sacred, or as social or private spaces, as markers of wealth or personal recreation and self sufficiency. The rock gardens in Jodhpur are a more recent but no less important reason for attending the land – to preserve habitats and help maintain the diversity and survival of different species. A reminder to us that sometimes nature needs our intervention to undo the damage, however well intentioned, that we inflict.

If you are able, do visit Jodhpur and the wonderful Mehrangarh fort with its architectural and artistic treasures, but also make time to visit the desert gardens that surround it.

