

Foreword

Christopher Woodward, 2011

Two years ago, the night we reopened as the Garden Museum, a newcomer with sparkling eyes introduced herself as Edwina Sassoon, and said: 'I have an idea.' The idea was a residency by Charlotte Verity, one of the few artists whose writings and drawings convince both artists and gardeners. We met, and talked, and visited Charlotte's tenderly planted garden at Love Walk. Driving back, Edwina reflected that the strength of Charlotte's work is a consequence of her absolute immersion in a subject. 'We need someone to sponsor the residency.' Opening the car door she added 'I have an idea.'

The Cochemé Charitable Trust, a discreet Trust with a decisive eye for a worthwhile project, generously agreed to fund a year's residency. This is exceptional in a museum world where a "residency" has become something closer to a short holiday. My office looks out onto the tomb of John Tradescant, where at the beginning of January Charlotte erected her easel in the snow – wrapped up, it seemed, in every piece of winter clothing in her house. The essay by Sarah Langton-Lockton – the writer, and a volunteer at the Museum – describes beautifully Charlotte's evolving response to the iconic knot garden designed thirty years ago by our President, the Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury.

What struck me is how Charlotte's eye alighted upon the scruffier life in its edges and crevices but, above all, what I have discovered is how the garden has a life of its own, independent of the flowcharts and memoranda piled up on my desk. 'Is there a brief?' people ask. No. The self-seeding spontaneity was a refreshing antidote to our structured, institutional calendar.

Sarah's essay is followed by an appraisal contributed by the curator and critic Simon Wilson – although 'appraisal' is hardly the word for such a gorgeous swish his art historical cape. His reflections upon the context of her work is appropriate to an artist so conscious of her tutors and mentors: in the Journal, for example, a glimpse of the orange glob of the Belisha beacon across the road conjures up a recollection of the layered, luminous camasses by Bernard Cohen that she saw at the Tate in the 1970s.

Charlotte can be placed in the particularly English tradition of the 'painter-gardener,' exemplified by Cedric Morris and John Nash. To paint a garden – that is, to paint a garden from *within* – requires a particular combination of interests and qualities: physical persistence, patience, and alertness of observation; the gardener's awareness of transience; artistic self-doubt, and the need to justify each brush stroke; a respect for plants too – indeed, an empathy, and an ever-renewing wonder at their unpredictability. Charlotte's Journal is one of the best descriptions that I, at least, have ever read of the

challenge of reconciling the vigour of a garden with the determination to create a “finished” work of art. Charlotte painted until the last day of 2010, and we already miss her.

A final thank you to Abigail Hampton, who produced the exhibition, and to Tim Harvey, who designed the catalogue. And again to Edwina: in the Journal Charlotte compares her sudden arrivals, and her benign touch to Mary Poppins. We are very grateful for the wave of her magic umbrella.

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