

## Charlotte Verity: A Year in Tradescant's Garden

Sarah Langton-Lockton, 2011

Charlotte Verity began her year as the Garden Museum's Artist in Residence, she recalls precisely, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2010; her slight figure, absorbed in the garden, observing and drawing, quickly became familiar to staff and volunteers. Before she took up her residency, she had been painting material from her own garden, bringing it indoors to paint. Slightly uncomfortable with the term 'still life', she found herself increasingly drawn to work outside, directly from nature.

When she came to the Garden Museum she spent some time wandering about the garden. She had no particular plan, and as an intuitive painter no overriding concept such as the production of one painting a week. She found that even in the winter months she could work outside for quite a few hours each day – every day except Tuesdays when the volunteer gardeners fan out across the garden, tending it with exceptional care. As summer came along, Charlotte got up early and spent a couple of hours in the garden before it opened to the public and again in the evening when people had gone. She found she could not paint with people around, but could readily draw. When it rained, she worked at home or in her makeshift studio at the Museum, a garden shed tucked away in an unvisited passage. Her aim was to get into the Garden Museum all day for at least four days a week, and to immerse herself in the life of the Museum by attending events and talks.

As she worked, Charlotte assimilated the seventeenth-century spirit of the garden, conscious that life and death are very much entangled here, 'a huge sense of the seasons and of decay is acknowledged and worked with, giving the garden an orderliness that is always a part of it'. She also thought about nature in the city, and how in the enclosed London space the silence drowns out the scream of traffic.

The garden has a feeling of great age and timelessness, but it is in practice a recent creation, a mere thirty years old. Technically, it is a tour de force, accommodating gravestones, the great wall of Lambeth Palace on the north side, the bulk of the church to the west, and yew hedges planted against listing stonework topped with wrought iron on the Lambeth High Road side and on the west to complete its enclosure and seclusion. At the garden's heart, providing formality amid the romance of high walls, gravestones and elegant small trees, is the knot, designed by the Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury in memory of the John Tradescants, whose weathered tomb is a focus of the garden. The knot, outlined in box, has the initial 'T' on each side, planted in cotton lavender, *Santolina chamaecyparissus*, and is full of species bulbs and old roses, the martagon lilies and crown imperials familiar to gardeners in the seventeenth century.

The garden, Charlotte and I agree when we talk, is not an adjunct to the Museum, but an intrinsic part of it. Her paintings and drawings are not primarily about recording the garden, although there is an element of that, nor are they a plant inventory; they are simply about the life of the Museum as expressed by its garden. Charlotte's immersion in the garden began in winter. She painted and drew the bones of the garden, the gravestones just detectible through a covering of snow, like medieval field patterns revealed by aerial photography, the bare branches of the medlar, with behind it the curvaceous tracery of a climbing rose against the Lambeth Palace wall. There are several paintings of snowdrops piercing the dark winter soil, and a dramatic image of the pink lily of the valley, *Convallaria majalis* 'Rosea', its leaves unfurling with an arching grace that mimics the church's Gothic windows. A painting of an amelanchier just losing its leaves, lit intensely by a Belisha beacon, with the unlovely bulk of the Novotel behind, illustrates the enclosed garden with the predator city all around.

Moss and lichen are an insistent motif, emblemising for Charlotte the ebb and flow of life through their extraordinary sensitivity to light and damp. Moss features in a glorious yellow patch on a buttress above the director's office and in a number of drawings and paintings of the table top of the Tradescant tomb. Moss settles into the concavities of the incised letters, occluding their meaning. The tomb top, comments Charlotte, is incredibly difficult to paint. She could, she says, have easily spent a year painting just this; she worried about the riskiness of her passion for the tomb top, because people might think it perverse. For me, these paintings are the most accomplished and affecting of this fruitful year in residence. They capture the spirit of the place, the celebration of life and death and the glorious cycles of regeneration and decay that are the essence of a garden, and are singularly potent in this one. The paintings and drawings that feature the tomb also provide a new way of observing the garden, setting one year's luxuriant growth within the context of centuries of less hectic but constant interaction between stone, moss and lichen.

Charlotte Verity describes herself as 'not a good gardener', since every minute of her thinking day is taken up by her painting, and she knows 'how all-absorbing proper gardening is'. She could not, however, have understood the complex energies of this wonderful garden, were she not herself a proper gardener. Her work shows her delight in the life of the plants – the unfurling of flowers, the swelling of buds, leaf fall and the skeletal outlines of tress in winter. 'I feel incredibly lucky sometimes', she said to me of her year as the Garden Museum's Artist in Residence. 'You just feel you're in on something'. This is communicated with a fine sensibility in these paintings and drawings.

Like the mosses and lichens on the tomb top, Charlotte's work captures the ebb and flow of the life of a singular garden that is a metaphor for all gardens, and in doing so reveals the significance and value of the Garden Museum's mission and its work.

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