

Why Weeds?

Jim Banks

In 2009, I began the *Planters Project*. Essentially, it entailed filling planters with “wild” dirt taken from various neglected or disturbed areas around my studio in Medford and adjoining burgs and seeing what would grow. The idea had been percolating for some time, and it came from two major sources.

The first source is Mel Chin, whom I read about in the book, *Art At The Edge And Over*, by Linda Weintraub. He had an interesting problem. He was seeking to reclaim a portion of land from contamination using alternative processes and sought funding from the EPA. The EPA turned him down, so he sought funding from the NEA, who agreed. (Which proves the much debated point that *Art* is defined by its funding.)

The second influence, and more directly so, is Roxy Paine, who had a show at The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, in which he included work from his “replicant” series - realistic sculptural recreations of gardens in various states of neglect.

What I found intriguing in both cases was the use of growing things as part of a piece. True, I don't think that is what Chin's or Paine's work is about, but that is what I took from them.

On the other hand, *why* they influenced me, I haven't a clue. Other than having a preponderance of earth signs, it just may be that, having grown up barefoot in Southern California and now living in the urban zone, it allowed me to get real dirt under my fingernails.

I struggled with the whole “Is this art?” question, so I put some token sculptural element in the planters with the notion that said sculpture element would be engulfed and eventually obscured by the growth. I suppose it has to do with the marks of Man vs. the marks of Nature, which is a totally boring discussion ranging from Eden to Apocalypse, and we've all heard it before. It became something quite different.

What poured out of the dirt over the next several months amazed me. Not just the growth of X, but the growth and death of X, then the growth of Y taking its place. What began as the pursuit of one idea - to see how the weeds would obscure our monuments - became how the landscape within the planter itself changed throughout the season. If one of the purposes of Art is to abstract from Life details that draw attention to things often overlooked, then the changing nature of Nature is the real subject here.

Over the next several years, the shapes and sizes of my planters changed from small garden planters to those built into the earth itself. In thinking of this show, and how I wanted to have planters in it, last year I made two planters on wheels so that I could roll them into the gallery.

When I began doing the write-up of the first season in 2009, I realized I did not know the names of any of the weeds except the dandelion. That seemed immoral, so since 2009, I've been obsessed with identifying every weed I see. That meant taking lots of photographs. As I reviewed my photos, I became interested in drawing, then painting, these wild, urban plants. Some of the photos intrigued me because they took on elements of my college studies in Abstract Expressionism, namely the all-over image pressed up flat against the picture plane. I called these “Footscapes” because they are what you see when you look down in front of your feet. That angle, devoid of horizon, is

a unique way of approaching the structure of landscape. And of course I have violated the “flatness” by attempting to reveal the spacial passages from bud to dirt.

I’ve also included sculptures in this show – actual weeds or tree trunks arranged just so.

Finally, there is nothing political in my work. There is much to be said about caring for the environment, but that is not what my work is about. It is only about being amazed by observing what is happening *positively* around us all the time.