

Text: Sibylle Burckhardt – Art and garden (translated)

Even during my first visit to the artist's house in Riehen and her studio in Frenkendorf, I was struck by the immense productivity of Claire Ochsner's artistic work. At first, one notices the monumental sculptures that turn in the wind — windwheels and spirals, powered by wind or solar energy. Then, there are the smaller but equally original artworks, sometimes hidden behind bushes or trees. Especially at dusk, the evening light transforms the illuminated garden with its reflections into a magical world. Likewise, winter frost, dancing snowflakes, or even frozen ice on the sculptures draw the viewer into a mystical dreamscape. For centuries, gardens have been places of longing and inspiration. Claire Ochsner's sculpture garden also has the power to enrich the imagination and is truly a place of joy.

“A garden is not merely an amusement for the outer senses, but a true inner uplift of the soul, an increase of the imagination, a refinement of feeling; an expansion of the realm of taste and art; an engagement of the human creative spirit with a space where it had until then played little role.” “A garden is an ennoblement of nature's works and a beautification of the Earth, which is our temporary home.” These words come from the four-volume “*Theory of Garden Art*” by garden theorist Christian Cajus Lorenz Hirschfeld, written between 1779 and 1782 — and they still hold true today.

A Brief Look Back at the History of Gardens

The oldest gardens in the world date back to Pharaonic Egypt. Ancient texts describe many gardens, often with detailed accounts of their trees and flowers. There is evidence of gardens in the residences of high-ranking officials, palaces, and homes of the elite, as well as temples and tombs. A 3850-year-old garden from an administrative site in Abydos-South (Middle Egypt) is enclosed by a high wall and shows a typical arrangement of plants in rows. Many tomb paintings depict lush garden landscapes with shade-giving sycamore fig trees, date and doum palms, papyrus, pomegranate trees, tamarisks, and a variety of flowering plants — blue cornflowers, red poppies, yellow mandrakes, white and blue lotuses — giving these landscapes a truly paradisiacal character.

Even then, gardens were understood as places of rest, reflection, and delight in both earthly and spiritual life. Across many cultures, gardens embody a longing for harmony between humans and nature — a Garden of Eden, full of peace and contentment. In Islamic tradition, paradise is understood as the ideal garden, described in the Qur'an. Like Eden, the Islamic garden is square, with a central stream dividing into four arms.

The medieval cloister garden — the *hortus conclusus* — is seen in the St. Gall monastery plan, with various garden types and descriptions of plantings, mainly medicinal and useful plants. The term “paradise” (from Greek *paradeisos*) appears here. The word itself comes from Old Iranian Avestan, where *pairi-daeza* means “enclosed space,” and was the Persian term for walled royal gardens.

In the Renaissance, paradise became associated with beauty, peace, spiritual harmony, and love. A new relationship with nature emerged. Garden art followed geometry, harmony, and what was considered proportionally beautiful. A prime example is the Villa d'Este in Tivoli/Rome (16th century), a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk) where architecture, nature, art, and philosophy form a new artistic language, including alleys, fountains, grottoes, sculptures, and dramatic water features.

The “Sacro Bosco” of Bomarzo (near Viterbo), also known as the Park of Monsters, is one of the most mysterious gardens of the 16th century. This mannerist masterpiece features grotesque monumental sculptures and antique-style architecture integrated into a forested landscape. It was forgotten until the 20th century, when artists like Salvador Dalí helped rediscover it.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, rule-based, unnatural garden designs gave way to more individualistic approaches, aiming to imitate and enhance nature in a natural way.

What’s Unique and Innovative About Claire Ochsner’s Sculpture Gardens?

At both locations, colorful sculptures stand within large gardens, complete with a villa and water basin, harmoniously integrated into the natural environment — among plants, trees, flowers, and shrubs. These gardens might evoke the Garden of Eden, a place of serenity and contentment, and today serve as a retreat from the stresses of everyday life.

Claire Ochsner’s gardens in Riehen and Frenkendorf can be compared to the famous Labyrinth of Versailles (1679) — which, with its 39 fountains and animal figures (illustrating Aesop’s fables), sadly no longer exists.

Just as the walk through Versailles was one of discovery and surprise, so too is a visit to Claire’s gardens — where visitors encounter colorful sculptures in acrobatic poses, floating, mysterious creatures with poetic names, fantasy birds, and oversized flowers. These flowers might bring to mind the line from Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*:

“Que vous êtes belle!” (How beautiful you are!)

“N’est-ce pas, répondit dou- cement la fleur” (Am I not? the flower answered softly.)

“Et je suis née en même temps que le soleil...” (And I was born at the same time as the sun.)

Not to overlook are the heavenly bodies “sun, moon, and stars” a recurring theme throughout her entire body of work.

During the garden walk, one may encounter sculptures and wind objects named:

- La Femme Soleil
- Stella
- Fabollo
- Giraffa
- Libelotto
- Fioretta
- Nocturna
- Papagalla
- Spikuk
- Vogollo
- Clown mit zwei Gesichter (The Clown with Two Faces)

...to name just a few.

There is even a fairytale-like bench inviting visitors to sit and rest, and children can swing in a giant spiral.

In Claire Ochsner's gardens, the historical idea of a paradise garden is playfully and imaginatively translated into the modern age.

Through years of dedication, the artist has created two sculpture gardens that offer a dreamlike world — one that delights both adults and children alike.

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