ALYSON SHOTZ

Cross Sections

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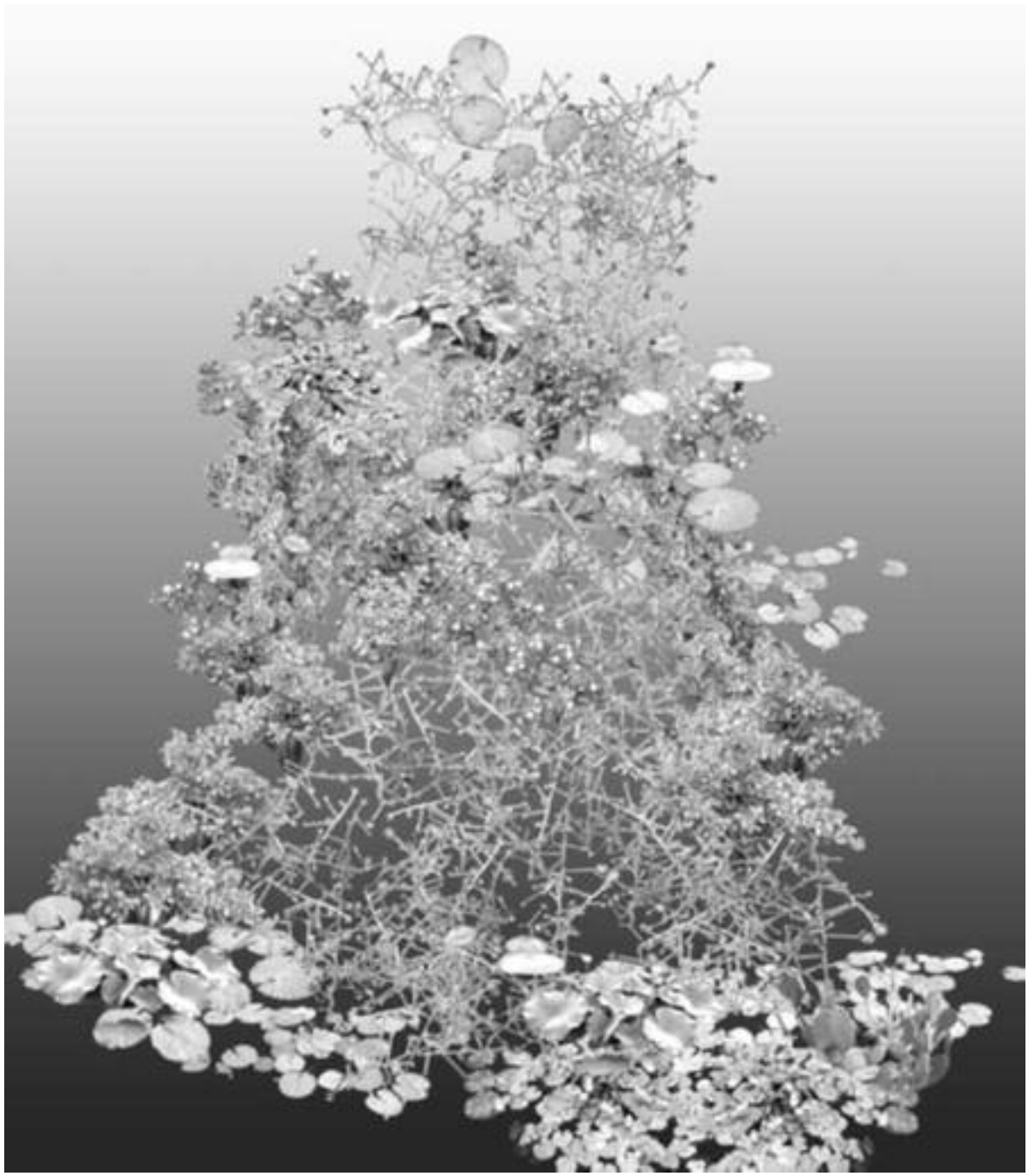
Essay by Matthew Guy Nichols



The Nature of Things To Come

Matthew Guy Nichols

A few years ago, Alyson Shotz produced a striking series of black-and-white photographs titled *False Branches*. Aided by a computer, Shotz combined pictures of plants, flowers and her own sculpture to create hybrid images of organic profusion. In each of these photographs a thicket of crystalline stems appears to sprout cacti, lilacs, morning glories, chrysanthemums and dozens of lily pads. Witnessed from oblique angles, the lily pads recede against fading gray backgrounds, as if floating on invisible bodies of water.

When I first encountered these digital photographs I was surprised to find myself thinking about the late work of Claude Monet, especially the celebrated pond paintings he created in Giverny during the final years of his life. The obvious trigger was the abundance of lily pads in Shotz's pictures – a motif that may forever be associated with Monet's name. But aside from this facile correspondence, this shared interest in a particular aquatic plant, what other affinities could possibly exist between a French Impressionist painter and an American multi-media artist working at the dawn of the twenty-first century? What significant insights might one gain from such an unlikely comparison? After thinking more about both artists' work, I would like to suggest that there are some.

Monet, as is well known, left the Paris region in 1883 to settle in the rural hamlet of Giverny and paint its bucolic surroundings. Although his extensive flower garden offered ample subject matter, Monet's attentions were eventually focused on the lily pond bounded by his property. From 1900 to 1926, Monet painted hundreds of pictures of this pond, capturing its fleeting reflections of sun and shadow, as well as the islands of water lilies that blossomed on its surface. Collectively titled *Les Nymphéas*, these canvases were exhibited to widespread acclaim in 1909. One favorable review from that year recorded Monet's own explanation of this series. "The richness I achieve comes from nature, the source of my inspiration," he stated. "I have no other wish than to mingle more closely with nature and I aspire to no other destiny than to work and live in harmony with her laws."[1]

Harmony, of course, is a relative term. While *Les Nymphéas* may indeed be the products of Monet's intimate engagement with his environment, we do well to question his respect for nature's laws. When Monet arrived in Giverny the pond on his property was small and stagnant. After gaining permission from the local authorities and enlisting the labor of his six gardeners, Monet diverted a section of a nearby river to greatly enlarge and refresh the pond. This ambitious excavation created a continuous flow of water that nourished the ginkgo trees, bamboo groves and other foreign species that Monet imported to France and planted along the pond's banks. The diverted waters also sustained his exotic

Opposite page: *False Branches #9*, 2002, edition of 6, Lambda print on Fujiflex, 53 1/2 x 46 inches

water lilies, whose fragility actually required annual removal to a protective greenhouse during the cold winter months.[2]

Even after his water garden was thriving, Monet continued to oversee its day-to-day upkeep with a perfectionist's eye for detail. Elizabeth Murray has described the obsessive extent of this maintenance, which ensured that nature would conform to the artist's vision.

"Monet saw to it that his pond was well cared for. The flowering surface was maintained by one gardener who spent his entire day tending it. His first assignment began before dawn, when the master would come to set up his canvases to catch the first light. The water gardener would row out in the pond in a small green flat-bottomed boat to clean the entire surface. Any moss, algae, or water grasses which grew from the bottom had to be pulled out. Monet insisted on clarity. Next, the gardener would inspect the water lilies themselves. Any yellow leaves or spent blossoms were removed. If the plants had become dusty from vehicles passing by on the chemin du Roy, the dirt road nearby, the gardener would take a bucket of water and rinse off the leaves and flowers, ensuring that the true colors and beauty would shine forth…The gardener was also instructed to keep the floating pads of the water lilies in informal circular patterns with the water surface clear between each lily plant. Monet issued explicit instructions that the rampantly growing plants not be allowed to touch one another and thus obscure too much of the water's surface. For the surface gave Monet his surprise gifts of sky and inverted landscape. It was an essential part of the overall design."[3]

By calling attention to the careful cultivation Monet's water garden, I am not attempting to denigrate his creative achievements. Indeed, Monet's horticultural skills are generally admired as much as the paintings they eventually spawned. Yet it is worth remembering that *Les Nymphéas* are not depictions of nature in its raw, unadulterated glory. They were born, instead, of a dramatic alteration of the local landscape, a deliberate redirection of elemental forces, and a fastidious nurture of non-native flora. To a large extent they are visual records of one man's artful modification of natural processes.

This idea is a central concern of Alyson Shotz's work. In her paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs and videos, Shotz addresses the human impulse to manage and control nature. Deeply aware of her unique historical moment, Shotz creates a timely art that speaks to recent advances in cloning, genetic engineering and other millennial mutations of the environment. But her work also compels us to look back and reconsider a long history of representing the natural world. By renouncing images of organic purity, Shotz interrogates the construction of nature as a mythic ideal. She reminds us that Eden never really existed, that nature has always been manipulated to satisfy human needs, desires and aspirations.

These layered allusions may be detected in *Still Life*, the large installation at the center of this exhibition. Here Shotz arranges a number of mirrors on the gallery floor. Cut into irregular circles, they resemble a series of small ponds. Mirrors frequently appear in Shotz's work, and she often cites Robert Smithson as an influence on her use of this medium. But they also invite comparison to Monet's paintings. Reflection, after all, was one of his signature pictorial devices. In *Les Nymphéas*, for example, Monet essentially used his lily pond as an immense mirror. He painted reflections of the sky,

the clouds and overhanging tree branches in its glassy surface. Nature is certainly depicted in his pond paintings, but it is often doubled, inverted, abstracted and thereby transformed into something separate and distinct, something better described as art.

The mirrors in *Still Life* perform an analogous feat. Disposed on the floor like shimmering puddles, they only pretend to slake the leafy green stalks that sprout from their surfaces. What the mirrors mostly offer are reflections, insubstantial images, optical approximations of what is real. As vessels of illusion, they underscore the artifice of Shotz's vegetation. For when we look closely we notice that she has replaced the roots of each plant with a small, prosthetic wheel. These are strangely mobile flora, nourished by a network of intravenous tubes and seemingly adaptable to the most unforgiving environments. Their uncanny portability can even remind us of Monet in Giverny, transporting his precious water lilies from pond to greenhouse and back again.

Less lively, perhaps, but no less compelling, is the untitled sculpture that lies on the floor nearby. Here Shotz presents another clutch of tall leafy plants, their stems bound together like a bouquet or bandaged like a patient in triage. In this instance, two thick hoses descend from the wall to pump a bright green substance into the stems. But the numerous yellow and brown leaves betray a defective artery, or at least the need for more respiration. In contrast to the more vital installation of *Still Life*, this sculpture is a gardener's nightmare, an experiment gone awry. It invokes the unpredictable hazards of modifying nature.

As this exhibition confirms, Shotz has also created a number of abstract paintings in the past couple of years. These are complex pictures, premised on drawings that Shotz makes from nature and often manipulates on a computer. The drawings are then collaged onto wood panels and colored in with gouache and oil paint. Digitally altered photographs may also be added to the mix. They mingle with the painted drawings under multiple layers of clear resin. "The result," Shotz has recently explained, "is a painting that has physical depth; one can look into them – like looking into a pond."[4]

Shotz's aquatic description of her new work leads us to Monet once again. Yet despite the presence of water lilies in some of these paintings, Shotz's ponds are a far cry from Giverny. Instead of reflective surfaces, our eyes perceive deep and fertile waters. Swirling currents of creamy color overlap each other, cast internal shadows, and seem to support thriving ecosystems. By freely combining her diverse media, Shotz produces a teeming variety of hybrid creatures. Their bodies are amorphous and elastic. They stretch, swell and wriggle their way through these warm, milky shallows.

Take, for example, *Organic Bloom*, a large, vertical panel awash in translucent layers of yellow, orange and pink pigment. Several mushrooms and water lilies dangle from the top edge of this painting, grounding us ever so slightly in the recognizable natural world. The rest of the panel features unfamiliar abstractions that nonetheless express a vital biomorphism. Most notable is the odd, striped accordion shape at the center of the painting. Although this organism evades classification, it still

seems to ingest and excrete the liquid environment through its valve-like orifices. Perhaps this is not a large pond after all, but only a small sampling of one's waters. These paintings remind us of simple science experiments, wherein a few drops of clear water prove to contain an entire universe of tiny life forms when viewed under a microscope.

Throughout 2002, Shotz produced a related series of paintings from a similar mixture of drawings, photographs, paint and resin. In these earlier works, various organic motifs are arranged in four-sided symmetry, creating colorful, kaleidoscopic patterns on each panel. These controlled compositions can also suggest microscopic phenomena – cells in the midst of mitosis, for instance, or the equally formal logic of crystallizing minerals. Yet now, in her most recent paintings, Shotz's flora and fauna are unmoored and adrift. Their growth is irrational. They appear to breed and multiply at random. Natural law seems broken in these pictures, or at least amended. What could account for this change, this surprising shift from systematic reproduction to disorderly mutation? In light of the themes that dominate Shotz's oeuvre, we may well suspect that scientific intervention is to blame.

A struggle between science and nature is certainly illustrated in *Undersea*, the largest painting in this show. Although Shotz unifies this diptych with blushing ripples of cream-colored paint, she also signals a clear contrast between the two panels. On the left we notice several highly developed organisms. Encased in protective membranes, their multiple internal organs imply both complexity and agency. Indeed, one of the largest forms appears to give birth to the smaller oval pods that swim throughout the painting. These natal waters are disrupted by the shiny silver spheres that dot the panel on the right. Introduced as photographs, they are truly foreign objects, allied with the world of technology. They resemble small satellites or sleek pharmaceuticals, and yet their purpose is unclear. Are these menacing man-made molecules, destined to destroy a fragile ecosystem? Or are they more welcome pollutants, designed to suppress a rapidly replicating virus? To her art's credit, Shotz tends to leave such questions unanswered.

The ambiguity we detect in *Undersea* is a hallmark of Shotz's work more generally. Although she consistently plays culture against nature, synthetic technologies against organic forms, and the human desire to control the world against its entropic forces, Shotz rarely privileges any one of these terms over another. She is a learned artist, deeply versed in the subjects her work addresses. Yet she does not proselytize and ultimately surrenders interpretation to her audience. Some may derive a cautionary tale from her provocative forms and images, a warning, perhaps, against meddling too much with the business of Mother Nature. For others these same objects may signal a brave new world of hybrid possibility. Regardless of one's fears or enthusiasms, the art of Alyson Shotz illuminates our profound and consequential relationship to our environment. Whether we wish to paint pictures by a lily pond in France, or simply desire the company of a trouble-free houseplant, she reminds us that nature is always made over according to somebody's vision.

1. Claude Monet, cited in Paul Hayes Tucker, "The Revolution in the Garden," *Monet in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1998), p. 50.
2. Tucker, p. 17.
3. Elizabeth Murray, "Monet as a Garden Artist," *Monet: Late Paintings of Giverny from the Musée Marmottan* (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995), p. 55.
4. Alyson Shotz, quoted in Ian Berry, *Alyson Shotz: A Slight Magnification of Altered Things* (Saratoga Springs: The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, 2003), p. 19.

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