

Painting Landscapes

*Artists are
breaking new
ground, from
Maryland
horse farms to
Coconut Grove.*

Landscape architect Michael Del Giudice rescued this garden in the Coconut Grove historic Rickenbacker estate. He lined its paths with visual surprises, including a metal face spouting into the koi pond and plants like waterlily and white bullrush. Outdoor furniture from Prunich & Associates.

By Peggy Wolff

TROY CAMPBELL

“When I was in my 20s, my mother took me to see some English gardens.

The delphiniums were so tall that you had to walk around the gardens, not through them,” says Iva Gillet, a painter who recently put aside her brush and picked up a spade to sculpt the land on her Maryland horse farm.

Like Gillet, many budding landscape designers link garden design to art, claims John Furlong, chair of landscape design for Radcliffe Seminars. According to Furlong, the garden inspires art, and art inspires design in a creative cross-pollination. In theory, we may want a natural-looking garden, but the artist in us wants to put it in order.

“Artists see light, shadows, and textures in their art and gardens in the same way. And when you hear them talk about their work, they even use the same words,” he says. And Gillet does exactly that, describing her landscape in terms of symmetry, asymmetry, abstraction, proportion, color, dimension, and scale.

Gillet began her outdoor project by combining practical requirements with her own creativity. First, she laid a garden hose as a ground line for a dry wall of Pennsylvania blue stone. This separated the swimming pool from the rest of the grounds, while also dictating the depth of the garden. “I wanted everything to blend: the grounds outside the house, the horse operation, the stables. It just evolved like a painting,” she says.

According to Gillet, she created an informal layout of island beds connected by paths by “just moving things around.” She took plants from her former farm in Kentucky and used blue stone left over from the dry wall to rim an eight-foot-diameter water garden. Bronze sculptures of Gillet’s own children, which her mother had commis-



sioned, scamper in the gardens and add a playful personal touch.

"I'm not about light like the Impressionists. I am probably more Expressionist. I'm about shape and color," says Gillet. For example, Gillet found that yellow tends to assert itself and dominate everything else in the garden. She softened the color's powerful effect by harmoniously positioning bitsy and happy return daylilies next to purple-blue heliotropes.

Alan Summers, Gillet's nurseryman and owner of Carroll Gardens in Westminster, Md., confirms the artist's sense of balance. "She calls me and says, 'Let's have dinner.' This means she has changes in mind. She needs height, she needs structure, she's thinking of widening a path, she needs color. An artist can look at a canvas and see it all done, so I try to get her to articulate what she sees, and then I help her select the plants. Sometimes it's just a few perennials. Or, if she has a plant that's done well, we may have to replace the plants around it, because the growth has changed the balance," he says.

Interior designer Lorraine McKenna also assessed the garden of her Kingston Bay, Mass., home in artistic terms. "I think of garden design as a composition, because you start with all the elements of painting: shape, mass, and scale," she says. For McKenna, who has taught animated filmmaking and textile design for the past five years, such living compositions are a series of pictures revealed by walking the grounds.

McKenna's vision of turning a once-barren site into a multifaceted retreat came to fruition only after she solved the logistics. "I needed to find a way to control the excessive water flow coming from surrounding hills, underground natural springs, and storm drains," she says. The designer made the land drier and easier to work with by implementing a "stadium" shape. A front-end loader dug a 10-foot-deep bowl of soil, which was then used to



Interior designer Lorraine McKenna created a series of artistic studies in color, texture, and contrast. She used a simple, Amish-built bridge as a focal point amidst swamp maples, sapling pines, and weeping birch. A heated bubbler allows three Peking ducks to patrol the grounds year-round.

LORRAINE MCKENNA





Painter Ive Gillet's mother gave her these bronze sculptures of the grandchildren, which the artist placed by the pool on her Maryland horse farm.

create an embankment 12-feet high. McKenna planted the mound with *spirea nipponica* and evergreens to suppress sounds carried from the main road.

"I knew I needed a focal point, like a gazebo or bridge," she says. Just as a painter selects a central object and then allows a host of other figures and objects to share the canvas, McKenna chose a gray, weathered, locally built Amish bridge and placed it carefully on an angle to catch the visitor's eye.

The designer brought height to the garden and its five native swamp maples and sapling pines by elevating plant beds, enriching and lightening the clay soil with mulch and compost, and adding a weeping birch underplanted with blue flag irises. From her house, a raised bed of *magnolia soulangiana* and lavender can be seen on a kingston block wall. Three Peking ducks from North River Feed and Grain preside over the grounds all four seasons. They never need to migrate because McKenna chose a bubbler, complete with thermostat and pump, to keep the pond from freezing.

Dawn Woltz, who studied at the former California School of Gardening on the Stanford Campus, was influenced by her visit to the Alhambra in Grenada, Spain. Echoing the Spanish castle's garden, Woltz constructed a strong geometry outside her own Charlottesville, Va., house.

"I got so excited by their formal gardens and vistas," says Woltz, who, in particular, liked the long allée of boxwoods.

With her academic training, Woltz knows that the first step usu-

ally is to sit down with paper and pencil for planning, "but we had two acres of seven different levels and this one space that was going nowhere," she says. "My husband got his pick and shovel, and I got the cuttings from the Graham Blandy Farm. They were only two inches." Today, the 15-foot-tall Blandy *buxus* cuttings work because they have grown in proportion to the house.

Over 15 years, she and her husband, Charlie, recreated the bold linear shapes, balance, and symmetry of the European ideal by installing their own 30-foot grass path lined with 13 boxwoods on each side. Woltz under-planted the vertical jet of evergreen with violets, ajuga, and yellow daffodils, which she phases out when they get too big. The retaining wall of recycled bricks came from Charlie's great-great-grandfather's house in Buchanan County, Va., on the James River.

Though Woltz achieved her grand landscape by a method she calls boggling along, another way to approach design, say landscape professionals, is to first evaluate what's there.

"When I first walked through the giant ornate wooden doors, the garden felt very Oriental with its artist's studio, odd-shaped pavers, koi pond, and simple walls. We wanted to retain that simplicity," says landscape architect Michael Del Giudice, who, with Gerlas Marston, initiated the three-month restoration of one corner of Coconut Grove's historic Rickenbacker estate. The 1940s garden had to be rescued from overgrown palm species, "volunteer" plants that had



DENNY KANE



sneaked in, and a path system that had been destroyed over time.

"This secret garden was meant to be walked through by one person on a discovery," says Del Giudice.

Now the charm of the walled garden, which unfolds in a series of vignettes, is revealed in hidden elements that catch your attention, but do not take away from your sense of containment. A glimpse of sculpture, as in the metal face that shoots water into the koi pond, the introduction of water plants, like a mix of night and day blooming waterlilies,

umbrella plants and white bullrush, and the lime-rock stepping stone paths that go over the water all demand that you watch your step and slow your pace.

The illusion that the secret garden feels bigger than the 40-by-40-foot square it really is, was achieved by a sort of horticultural triumph. Hidden under a canopy of trees that, because of the climate, never lose their leaves, is a coherent layering of areca and Macarthur palms, blended with tropical foliage plants, including Australian tree

fern, red banana, sword fern, calla lily, ginger, peace lily, ti plant, and lirioppe.

Led by a walkway or a burst of color against a muted background, our eyes follow the patterns set for us by master artists. And just as media matters to an artist, a gardener's choice of materials adds to their fine creations. Colors and textures create the desired effect—a three-dimensional composition that can be appreciated for its visual beauty, calming energy, and sweet aromas.

Gillet, a self-acknowledged Expressionist gardener, says her landscape, above, is all about shape and color. When yellow bitsy and happy return daylilies enter her palette, she sets the scene off with purple-blue heliotropes.

When Dawn Woltz visited the Alhambra castles in Spain, she was so impressed with its form that in her gardens she designed an allee of boxwoods for her own Virginia property, right.

