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# Unnatural Beauties

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## Sebastian Di Mauro's evergreen topiary artworks are rare forms indeed.

text | Kathryn Casey

To look at topiary art by Australian painter and sculptor Sebastian Di Mauro is to imagine the stage set for *Sleeper: The Sequel*. In Di Mauro's landscape of faux verdure, eerily comical sculptures with names like "Astroflirt" and "Turfsweet," pose in evergreen stillness. One seems to be an oversized watermelon, another a pitted olive, another an acorn (or is it a dreidel?). This is a landscape of strange green beings befitting an artist who says that, in fact, his favorite movie is *Dune* and favorite movie setting *The Lord of the Rings*.

Di Mauro's work is an artist's rumination on our world and the ways in which we try to shape it.

But behind the seeming play are sober questions—questions, Di Mauro says, of metaphysics, of ecology, of cultural displacement and assimilation. Indeed, like all of those cinematic offerings, Di Mauro's work is an artist's rumination on our world and the ways in which we try to shape it.

Di Mauro's work alludes simultaneously, he says, to rituals as banal as lawn mowing and

to the traditional art of topiary—an art form that is by definition unnatural, that fashions shrubs or trees into shapes nature never intended, that supplants native environments. One could say topiaries are akin to a stunning landscape fresco painted on a wall built to cover a splendid view.

But Di Mauro's artworks are still more contrived than traditional topiaries because his are carved from polystyrene or steel and coated in Astroturf. And it seems that's just the point: a question of real and artificial, intrinsic and alien underscored.

In creating these works for public spaces (some of which are sold subsequently to private collectors), Di Mauro invites viewers, presumably, to stop and consider certain questions about the "nature" of things, and whether or not we humans can change or improve it. Moreover, when we try, are the results beautiful or beastly?

Di Mauro's own creations are both. Some have a living-yet-dead quality that's a little unnerving. "Snuffle," for one, seems an inherently amusing shape until one notices that it looks much like a disembodied elephant trunk.

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Humorous, ironic, dark? Di Mauro says his work is intended to investigate the connections among living things—plants, animals, and people. It asks if one thing is destined to represent a particular place in our world, or whether it can be transformed to occupy another. And if it can, to what result—a work of art or a parody of one?

Di Mauro, a Senior Lecturer at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, exhibits in major art galleries in Australia and overseas. His sculptures, installations, paintings, and books are featured in the collections of Australia's leading art institutions.

Di Mauro is represented by the Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne ([www.dianne-tanzergallery.net.au](http://www.dianne-tanzergallery.net.au)). |

A freelance writer based in New York, Kathryn Casey writes articles, essays, and special sections for a host of magazines and newspapers.