

GARDENS OF EARTHLY DELIGHT

A new exhibition digs deep to explore our love affair with gardens in life and art. It sheds light on some amazing talent working confidently on their interpretations of the popular genre, writes **Phil Brown**

When artist Leo Robba looks out his studio window he has a view of the garden and he figured that since it was there he might as well paint it.

Is his garden as beautiful as his paintings of that garden? He thinks so and we have to take his word for it.

Robba, who is a Queenslander (he was born in Bundaberg, he says, enthusiastically) lives at the historic property of Hillston at Springwood, in the Blue Mountains, not far from where Norman Lindsay lived and painted.

Robba is one of the artists featured in *Garden*, an exhibition that opens at QUT Art Museum, Brisbane City, today.

His work was drawn to the attention of curator Vanessa Van Ooyen, who cannily included two of his exquisitely detailed works. He's chuffed that she did.

"It was a good fit," Robba says. "I have been painting these garden works for five or six years now and the large diptych in this show, *Big Autumn, Hillston*, is the view from my studio."

And what a view it is. This painting displays all the natural splendour and artifice of a historic garden that dates back to the 1890s.

Gardens are something Robba thinks about a lot. In fact, his PhD subject was about how artists humanise the landscape – and that includes gardens.

Robba confesses that he has visited Giverny in northern France and while there was inspired by the garden that was Claude Monet's most famous subject, but insists he's not in that league.

He is in a league of his own, actually, and like Monet he paints what is beautiful and close at hand.

"It's amazing how much I can extract from such a small part of the world," Robba says.

And this is exactly why Van Ooyen chose him for this exhibition, which was something of a rushed job. A previously scheduled touring show fell through and Van Ooyen had to come up with another idea fast to fill the slot.

"And since QUT Art Museum is at Gardens Point, opposite the City Botanic Gardens, the garden theme seemed a perfect fit," Van Ooyen says.

"Gardens Point was the site of the first garden in Brisbane. Gardens are loved by all – there is something fundamentally human to be found in taking pleasure from a garden. Whether it is a simple plot of green grass in our backyards, flower pots in a window sill or balcony, the elaborate grounds of estates or public parks, they all hold special meaning and are powerful



SEE IT GARDEN

When: Until May 3

Where: QUT Art Museum, Brisbane City

Cost: Free entry

More info: artmuseum.qut.edu.au

places to reflect on life. They offer a respite for body and mind."

Van Ooyen points out that the development of gardens and galleries converged from the 16th century onwards, "allowing nature and culture to be realised on one site".

She says the exhibition is partly a nod to the Enlightenment thinker François-Marie Arouet, known by his

nom de plume Voltaire, who exhorted people to cultivate their own gardens.

In his canonical novella, *Candide*, the main character finds that the true meaning of life is to tend one's own garden on both a physical and metaphorical level.

Another of the artists in this show, Brisbane academic and sculptor Sebastian Di Mauro, unwittingly followed Voltaire's advice as a young boy growing up in north Queensland.

Di Mauro has installed works that continue his *Suburban Abstractions* series for this show and his installation features artificial grass boxes that are displayed on the gallery wall.

Di Mauro is from an Italian immigrant family and has fond memories of his grandparents' vegetable garden.

"I grew up in South Johnstone and my grandparents' veggie garden was the size of any normal block of land in Brisbane," Di Mauro recalls.

"So I think of that when I think of this show. I use grass because it was my job to mow the lawns as a boy and I loved doing that. I would experiment with that, making patterns in the grass."

Di Mauro's artificial grass suggests layers of meaning, particularly for migrants who thought "the grass was greener here", which it was, symbolically and literally.

Meanwhile, Van Ooyen's contention that gardens are places of respite is also accentuated, particularly in the work of Melbourne artist Lauren Berkowitz. *Idyll*, a video collaboration between Berkowitz and fellow artist Lisa Andrew, was filmed over a seven-year period from 1993 in Central Park in New York, concluding in 2000 in Melbourne and Sydney's main botanic gardens.

Berkowitz says that when she lived in New York, Central Park was in-

deed a place of respite from life in the concrete jungle.

"We were living in the heart of the city so we would go there as much as we could," Berkowitz says.

"It was crucial to our sanity. *Idyll* looks at the landscape as a constructed space as well as a site of pleasure, sensuality and artifice ... Piercing sounds of nearby sirens, aeroplanes and helicopters shatter the tranquility of these arcadian retreats."

Berkowitz is also creating for the show an installation, *Verdure*, which will feature water bottles hung from the ceiling with plants growing inside them – pigface (*Carpobrotus glaucescens*), a plant used by Aboriginal people for food and medicine.

Other artists featured in *Garden* include Janet Laurence, Ian Smith, Sybil Curtis, Peter Daverington, Ruby Spowart, Alexander McKenzie and Kristin Headlam.



BRUSH UP: (Clockwise from top left) *Monument*, *The Everglades* by Leo Robba; *A Topiary Garden* by Alexander McKenzie; *Big Autumn, Hillston* 2012-13 by Leo Robba; *Living Room Interior* 2011 by Peter Daverington; *The Grey and the Green* 1983 by Sybil Curtis; *Work* by Ruby Spowart; *The Hanging Gardens of Nineveh* 2014 by Peter Daverington.

