

Elizabeth Bryant
Works on Paper, Inc.
6150 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, 90048
323/964-9675

"Is that it?" I remember wondering after waiting 40 minutes on an asphalt walkway with a hundred others for Old Faithful to shoot its load—rather unenthusiastically, I thought—into a clear blue Wyoming sky. By age 14, this spectacle had already been so mediated for me by folksy Disney documentaries that the real thing was a letdown. I don't recall whether afterwards I trudged into the nearby gift shop to scarf up a souvenir, but I doubt it.

Elizabeth Bryant has harvested for us the residue of similar encounters as captured by various representations of nature. She prefers older polychrome postcards with their luridly saturated color schemes. Her choice of media tips us off that she intends to traffic in nostalgia, that is, our sometimes lame attempts to valorize experiences of place that may never have truly happened.

Bryant literally excises from the surfaces of the postcards a landscape diagram from various European and Asian gardens (always identified in the titles),

creating paper-snowflake-like gaps in the vista. However prettily executed, the act of cutting is laden with implications. To circumcise is to cut away a specific zone of knowledge (and in its more archaic sense, to cleanse from sin). This indelible act of circumcision, for example, visually separates the "social" body from the "natural." A source of bodily pleasure is sacrificed for the pleasure of identification and belonging. Bryant's work brings to mind the sense in which nature as garden is similarly disfigured, a miniaturized sublime, defanged and housebroken for our scenic pleasure.

During an aesthetic shift in the West's view of nature from the highly geometricized and muscle-flexing, late-seventeenth-century French garden to the humbler and more contemplative eighteenth-century English garden, the term "picturesque" emerged. Describing both gardens and nature, picturesque literally means "like a painting," and specifically references idyllic landscapes of shepherd-poets lolling in vast verdant plains, their flocks gamboling near tranquil streams. Suffused with neo-Platonic idealism, the English garden was a carefully arranged depiction of a purer (clearly imaginary) nature as it

may have existed in Virgil's Arcadia (a fictional place). Hence, gardeners and painters were encouraged to edit their compositions, cropping out those elements nature had gotten wrong.

Taken a step further, a nascent class of people, tourists, were advised by the writers of a new genre, the tour book, to seek out the picturesque beyond their backyards. In order to see the pastoral countryside properly, nature had to be framed in a peculiar act of shuttered vision. We still do this; skimming the text of the land in fast-moving vehicles until we get to the good part. Presented with the payoff, we take it in, more like the sheep and less like the shepherds, with a collective and predictable murmur of "Wow!"

But the interesting thing about boundaries is our inherent temptation to cross them, to trespass into unknown territory. Elizabeth Bryant's postcards float against a background with the lattice-work cuts left open. We are invited to peek through the imposed order of the garden diagram and to imagine what else may be out there.

Kristina Newhouse is a writer and curator living in Santa Monica.



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*California Desert Wildflowers/French Garden
Labyrinths*, 1998. Cut print in shadow box,
9" x 12". Courtesy of the artist.