

REVIEWS

west coast

LOS ANGELES

Using architectural elements from the classical Chinese gardens of Suzhou, Los Angeles based artist ELIZABETH BRYANT has created a compelling installation of works on paper, "Five Windows and a Gate," that investigates inside/outside as well as foreground/background dualities (*gallery 2211_SolwayJones, May 25—June 30, 2002*). Bryant is interested in the idea of an organized nature and explores the relationship of landscape to culture. In the past she has made modest sized collages in which diagrams of gardens and labyrinths were removed from kitschy reproductions of the landscape. As she states, "My work utilizes historic garden plans cut into contemporary scenic photographic posters and murals to examine our culturally mediated relationship to nature and how it might reflect and influence our sense of time and place." In these works, by merging two cultures she can impose one idea of beauty onto another.

The tracery windows found in Chinese gardens are lattice holes cut into garden walls that sculpt the view beyond. They act as frames that focus and direct our perception. To create her tracery windows Bryant has faithfully reproduced the pattern and scale of five of the windows from the Suzhou Garden, transforming them from three-dimensional stone works into two-dimensional collages. As in her past works, the trace, or pattern, is presented as negative space. However, in previous works the pattern was cut from a preexisting single image, whereas in these new works brightly colored reproductions from various sources are collaged to fill the holes in the window. The negative spaces between the reproductions form the pattern. Here images of the landscape photographs of storms, volcanoes, flowers, seeds, microorganisms and underground caves replace the ever-changing window view. In Chinese gardens the object is to create beautiful and meditative spaces that parallel what one

finds through the window in nature. They emphasize the harmony between heaven and earth. Bryant's works, rather than celebrating that harmony, look at the notion of opposites.

Tension is created through the flip-flopping of foreground and background. Does the image fill positive or negative space? The eye can move from color area to color area as easily as it can move along the path between. Like a visitor to a Chinese Garden, viewers of Bryant's work must be patient, for only those who travel all the way down the windy path find serene beauty. Bryant divides the spaces of her compositions to parallel the view through windows and doors, but presents idealized images of nature and spectacle and rather than a fluid and meditative view of the world. The bright colors and pastoral settings in her images are seductive, yet these pleasantries are often juxtaposed with more violent and unsettling images. For example in *Tracery Window #20: Above & Below*, photographs of underground caves and stalagmites fill the delicate pattern at the bottom of the composition. Within the pattern above are images of grand mountain peaks. Toward the center of the design are eruptions and flames suggesting that the seemingly benign mountains are in fact volcanoes. The images in *Above & Below* depict that which exists above and below the earth. Similarly in *Tracery Window #18: Inside & Outside* Bryant juxtaposes black and white images of microscopic organisms with color images of the natural landscape, suggesting that that which lives inside and outside must co-exist within the structures of the world.

All of this activity is caught within the elaborate frame of the lattice. What was open and real in the Garden window is filled with a representation. Although Bryant chooses her photographic materials carefully and is judicious in her juxtapositions, the fact that she uses mass produced reproductions representing ideal views of the natural world reinforces the notion that culture controls and orders our perceptions of nature.

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Elizabeth Bryant, *Tracery Window #20, 2002*, photo collage on rag paper, 51 by 58 inches (photo courtesy gallery 2211_SolwayJones).