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Odes to Nature, Grand and Demure, at Two Bronx Gardens



"Yellow Boat and Walla Wallas" (2006), by Dale Chihuly, at the Peggy Rockefeller Rose Garden at the New York Botanical Garden.
By [KEN JOHNSON](#)
Published: July 14, 2006

Summertime and art in the garden; what could be better? Especially when the gardens are two such beautiful places as the [New York Botanical Garden](#) and Wave Hill. These blissful, pastoral sites in the Bronx are offering displays of nature-themed contemporary art. The Botanical Garden has an ambitious production by the world's most popular glass artist, Dale Chihuly, and Wave Hill has a low-key group show of conceptual works.

"Chihuly at the New York Botanical Garden," continues through Oct. 29; Bronx River Parkway and Fordham Road, Bronx, (718) 817-8700. "Garden Improvement" continues through Aug. 27 at Wave Hill, 675 West 252nd Street, Bronx, (718) 549-3200.

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On paper, inviting Mr. Chihuly to distribute his large-scale glass sculptures about the formal gardens and reflecting pools at the Botanical Garden sounds like a logical idea. His richly colored works often resemble plants, albeit, with their often garish colors and surrealistically exaggerated forms, plants from another planet. They come in shapes like big melons, onions and seedpods; slender, reedy structures; open vessels like exotic blossoms; clusters of curly forms; radiating spiky leaves; and standing leaves that curve sinuously as though under water. He has even created a series of sculptures in the form of large glass vases containing cartoonish imaginary flowers, some of which he has placed among the real plants growing in the Botanical Garden's fabulous Enid A. Haupt Conservatory.

The problem is that Mr. Chihuly's works are similar enough to natural specimens that you tend to compare them unfavorably to the real thing. In each of the Haupt Conservatory's outdoor reflecting pools, for example, he has floated color-coordinated fleets of pod and onion-shaped bulbs and a rowboat heaped with more glass objects. The theatrical effect is initially impressive, but then you find your gaze slipping off the sculptures

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Shannon Greer for The New York Times
"Cattails" (2006), another glass sculpture by Mr. Chihuly, at the Botanical Garden's Enid A. Haupt Conservatory.

to fix on the different kinds of lily pads floating on the water, or to follow the darting goldfish below the surface. The glass pieces are pretty, but they are too quickly known and understood. They cannot compete with the infinite subtlety and inexhaustible strangeness of nature.

Mr. Chihuly's sculptures may seem to fare better in isolation, as in a big, explosive cluster of yellow tendril shapes called "The Sun" elevated on a pole so that it hovers above a round pool near the Botanical Garden's main entrance. A tower of raw, lavender-colored solid glass chunks rising in front of the Haupt Conservatory also stands out. Some works, like a 20-foot tower of green serpentine neon tubes, promise spectacular lighting effects on Thursday evenings in July, when the garden will stay open until 8:30.

With the bigger sculptures, however, a problem with Mr. Chihuly's art comes to the fore. It has an immodest, showboating character. In its technical virtuosity and material extravagance, it seems to be crying out: "Look at me! Look at me!" But then when you look closely, there is little more than a sloppy and repetitive decorative opulence to hold your attention.

At Wave Hill there is no problem with immodesty. On the contrary, the exhibition, "Garden Improvement," could use a little more moxie. Here, the prevailing spirit is of earnest didacticism mildly leavened by gentle humor. Remember "The Whole Earth Catalogue"? Two pieces in the show are solar powered. Charles Goldman's is a mobile outdoor fountain made from hardware-store materials. Water burbles up from a central pipe and spills down into a plastic basin mounted along with solar panels on a wheeled cart. Marguerite Kahrl and Paul Ruff have assembled from scavenged parts a remote-control lawnmower in the form of a small car that drags a reel-type mower.

Adding to the educational tone, Andy Yoder has replaced parts of the cafe's picnic tables with hardwood planks etched with the names of the trees they came from. Austin Thomas has installed in a woodsy enclave a set of stools with seats made of Corian, a synthetic material used for kitchen countertops, to serve as a gathering place for small groups.

Indoors, Paula Hayes presents a collection of lovely small jewel orchids, each in one of the softly contoured silicon planters she designs. Philip Ross has built a cylindrical structure resembling a small military bunker with a panoramic slotted window through which you can view plants growing in their own electronically controlled ecosystem. And, focusing on olfactory experience, Laure Drogoul has turned one of the galleries into an aromatic environment of hanging dried plants and sweet-smelling infusions in bottles.

In more conventionally sculptural terms, Karen Rich Beall and Cassandra Lozano have each created decorative hanging sculptures combining artificial materials and more or less realistic flowerlike forms. Rachel Selekmán adds extra spouts to watering cans, to absurdist effect. Catarina Leitão has created a personal, portable landscape in the form of a wearable small tent with stuffed fabric plants inside. Back outdoors, Joan Bankemper has installed birdhouses made of fragments of kitschy ceramics, which she hopes real birds will occupy.

The show's most engagingly complicated effort is a parody of a low-budget educational exhibition by Jimbo Blachly and Lytle Shaw. It narrates the life of a fictional eccentric named Bashford Dean, who, while living at Wave Hill in the early 20th century, designed military helmets and a grotto centered on a miniature volcano that he hoped to build on the grounds. A large model of the volcanic grotto nicely simulates the amateurish, grungy look you'd expect of such an old, supposedly recently unearthed artifact.

Related but not officially part of "Garden Improvement" is an outdoor sound sculpture by Nina Katchadourian, who has attached to selected trees speakers that emit the quiet sounds of people imitating bird calls. A booklet explains that the voices are those of [United Nations](#) translators guided by diagrams, phonetics, written descriptions and mnemonic devices. So her project is about language and cross-cultural communication. Standing near one of Ms. Katchadourian's trees is

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also kind of spooky, as the soft, part-human, part-avian sounds suggest the presence of invisible fairies.

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