

# A brush with nature

THIS is the Year of Gardening, designated so in honour of the Royal Horticultural Society's bicentenary. To coincide with this illustrious occasion the Tate is staging Art of the Garden, the first major exhibition to explore the idea of the garden in British art.

The thematic show takes a broad sweep, bringing together, not entirely successfully, work from the past 200 years, from Turner and Constable to Marc Quinn and Anya Gallaccio, with much else in between, including Howard Sooley's pictures of Derek Jarman's garden in Dungeness.

Despite its mild incoherence and unnecessary weighting towards contemporary work, the exhibition provides an interesting excuse to explore Britain's schizophrenic relationship with Nature. It was this green and pleasant land, of both domestic and foreign imagining, that gave birth to modernity, pioneering industrialisation and urbanisation. Its wealth and power largely founded on the creation of the world's first urban proletariat, whose lives were about as far from being pastorally idyllic as is possible to imagine.

Art, however, has a happily laissez-faire relationship with Truth and the British have an incredible capacity for self-delusion. So it was that Constable's soft-focus domestic romanticism, represented here by two small oils of his family house in Essex, came to be central to Britain's self-image. It spawned a kind of faux realism that saw the wildness of nature as the prime source of authenticity and it triumphed over an older Classical view of nature, as something to be sculpted by human reason and art, as it is here in Turner's small study of a garden in the Isle of Wight.

Elsewhere, we have the garden playing other roles, such as the stage for a bourgeois idyll, either in reality, as in Tissot's lively canvas of a picnic, or in fantasy, as in JW Waterhouse's saccharine depiction of Psyche Opening the Door into Cupid's Garden.

In stark contrast, stands the series of

## EXHIBITION

**Art of the Garden**  
Tate Britain  
**The Other Flower Show**  
V&A

**Nick Hackworth**

mediocre but historically fascinating works painted during the Second World War, of grand London squares turned into communal kitchen gardens.

In still starker contrast, stands the contemporary work, most of it proving only that the garden has ceased to be a meaningful symbol in visual art.

The best modern engagement with the idea of the garden is shown here in a photograph. Marc Quinn's garden of gaudy exotic plants, frozen in perpetuity in liquid nitrogen, stands in the Prada Foundation in Milan, an acute aestheticised observation of our contemporary relationship with the natural world, a far better piece than his gigantic sculptural representation of an orchid which lurks embarrassingly in the Tate's front garden like a badly dressed triffid.

The V&A boasts something even nastier in its woodsheds, all 10 of them. The Other Flower Show is its contribution to the current nationwide horticultural orgy and consists of 10 sheds, erected in its courtyard, customised by a variety of artists and designers, including Tracey Emin, Graham Fagen, Tord Boontje and Fat. Most are frivolous, pointless affairs.

The greatest interest is being generated by Emin's shed entitled Something for the Children, the contents of which include a large kitchen knife resting on a table, suggesting something pretty unsavoury for the unfortunate children in question. Something almost as bad as having to look at her shed.

● *Art of the Garden opens tomorrow and runs until 30 August. The Other Flower Show runs until 11 July.*



The plot thickens: one of Howard Sooley's pictures of Derek Jarman's densely-packed garden in Dungeness

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## Bach with menace

### CLASSICAL

**Academy of Ancient Music/Egarr**  
St John's Smith Square  
**Nick Kimberley**

NOBODY ever accused the Academy of Ancient Music of being overweight, but this concert devoted to "Bach and the harpsichord" presented a radically stripped-down band of eight players, not all of whom played in every piece. Directing from the harpsichord, Richard Egarr was the focal point, but he allowed ample room for the unexaggerated virtuosity of his colleagues, not least Rachel Brown, who took the flute solos in the second of Bach's Orchestral Suites, and in the fifth Brandenburg Concerto.

Brown's playing was a magical fusion of wood and air, and there were moments in the Brandenburg when the phrasing and timbre of her flute seemed so precisely attuned to Pavlo Beznosiuk's violin that they might have been the product of a single instrument. Like Egarr,

both players allow tiny inflections to speak volumes. Egarr's playing shaped the performance with a keen sense of musical drama. There were passages when his instrument seemed to sing, others when it had the richness and warmth of something played with a bow: a remarkable range of colours.

In one or two slow passages the improvisatory freedom of his timing threatened the momentum, but in the first of two harpsichord concertos (BWV 1052 in the catalogue of Bach's work), his solos had all the Storm-and-Stress energy of JS's son CPE. This was Bach with a hint of menace, and it was exhilarating.