

LAWN: Artist Delves into an American Obsession by Mary Noden Lochner, 3 March 2010

Blue McRight has a thing for the American lawn. No wonder: it exists at a cultural locus where so many of the artist's interests converge.

The renowned painter, sculptor and installation artist said she's into paradoxes, contradictions, environmental issues and the tension between culture and nature. Conceptually, the American lawn is a point that contains all of these.

"If you look deeper into the theme of the American lawn," McRight said, "especially in the southwest, then water is the flipside of the lawn. The lawn is this inappropriate grafting of this European landscaping onto the dry climate of the West."

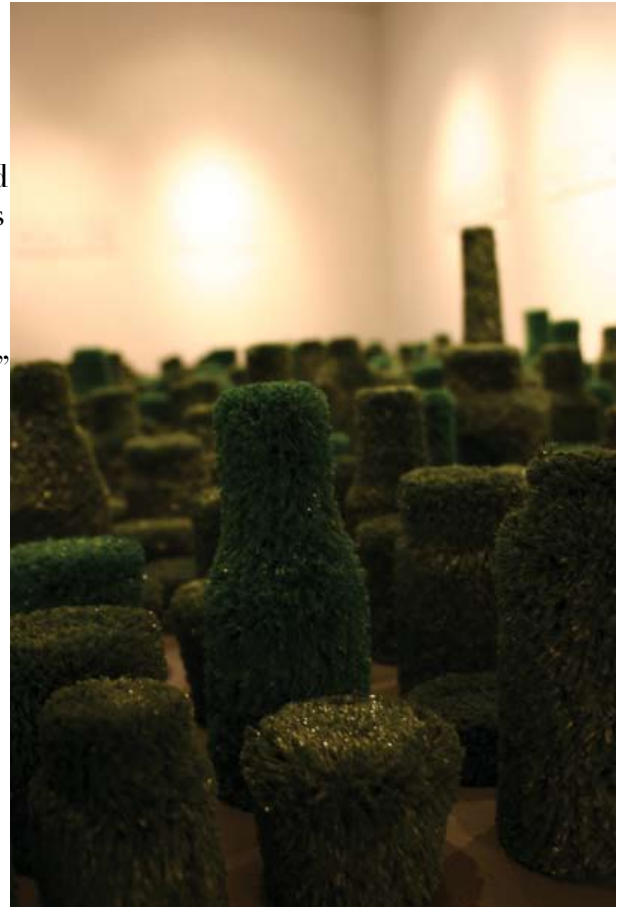
A casual glance at her installation "Morandi's Lawn" at the Kimura Gallery, demonstrates that McRight's fixation with the American lawn is serious. Row by glittering row of objects whose entire surfaces are perfectly fitted with artificial grass comprise a field both familiar and strikingly different from anything the viewer is likely to have seen.

At a basic level the objects evoke the whimsically-sculpted hedges so obsessively featured in West Coast landscapes. But underneath the surface they are ordinary objects: cans, beer bottles and empty liquid soap containers for example. McRight said she did something similar with other works that featured lots of tiny paintings on the same theme created over time.

But "Morandi's Lawn" was much more meticulous.

Every day for a year, from April 1, 2003 to April 1, 2004, McRight collected the objects she would normally wash and recycle at the end of each day, placed them in a still life arrangement, photographed them, and dated the photographs. Then she disassembled the arrangements and covered each piece individually with artificial grass.

"The first year I collected the objects, and I also covered them," McRight said. "But at the end of the year I wasn't finished covering, because it's a lot more time covering than collecting, so it took me another year after that."





The resulting work creates an at-odds interaction between the activity of recycling, which generally saves resources, and that of maintaining a lawn, which generally depletes an important resource, namely water.

The installation is also in homage to Italian still-life painter Giorgio Morandi, who died at age 74 in 1964.

“He’s adored universally by artists the world over for these very simple, yet incredibly beautiful and elegant still life paintings of objects from his household,” McRight said. “He did that his whole life with the excep-

tion of a few landscapes and floral paintings, but he never got tired of doing these minimalist still lifes, and they’re very gorgeous and resonant.”

The idea for “Morandi’s Lawn” came from McRight’s own daily ritual of washing recyclables in her home. She said she was finished rinsing bottles one morning and looking at them on the drain board when it occurred to her the group of them would make a great still life.

“I connected that to Morandi and I flashed on doing this project,” McRight said.

The work debuted in May 2005 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and also showed in Fall 2009 as part of a retrospective at San Diego State University, before coming up to Alaska.

Sean Licka, art history professor and co-curator of the show, said getting an artist of McRight’s stature was a coup for the Kimura Gallery.

“One reason we do exhibitions, is to expose students and the Anchorage community to new ideas,” Licka said.

He said he finds McRight’s work “provocative,” but admitted the work, essentially a large, minimalist still-life, “might not be everyone’s cup of tea,” particularly if they’re not already familiar with McRight’s work or its cultural context.

McRight said she did wonder about how the show might be received in Alaska. The state doesn’t have the same water scarcity concerns as the Southwestern United States. And, a lawn is something Alaskans only see during the few snow-bare months.

But McRight said that, while the work’s themes connect to her own region’s cultural and natural environment, they also relate to a more universal concern about the sustainability of clean water resources.

“If people can’t relate directly, I hope they would be able to appreciate the emphasis on the importance of water that underpins the work,” McRight said. “I also thought it would be a great contrast to the snow.”