(Still) Life in the Garden City

Dr Wenny Teo

The Gardens by the Bay is a verdant spectacle of epic proportions, unfurling along a three-kilometre waterfront promenade and occupying 250 acres of prime land in the heart of a small city-state. This enchanted forest symbolises the efflorescence of Singapore's remarkable politico-economic and social evolution from an unruly trading colony to one of the world's most prosperous nations. As we move through its magical enclaves as if in a dream, dwarfed by tree-like structures as tall as skyscrapers and enraptured by the lush vegetation that drips over its meandering paths, it is easy to forget that every detail of this sumptuous terrain has been meticulously planned, mapped out and implanted with absolute care and precision. We would much rather lose ourselves in this illusion of urbanity overrun by nature, to believe that almost overnight, the raw splendour of an untamed wilderness has somehow crept over the ordered steel and glass monuments of modernity that so rigidly dominate the landscape of our everyday lives.

Gardens occupy a particular place in the global imaginary, evoking a deep sense of longing for a more innocent time, far removed from the fugit exigencies of the here and now. We think of the lost gardens of Eden and Babylon, or the kaleidoscopic wonderlands and secret gardens of our childhood. It is fitting that at some point along this fantastical journey, we encounter *Planet*, Marc Quinn's colossal sculpture of a seven-month-old infant that appears to hover over the ground, impossibly suspended. The viewer is made to orbit the work, contemplating the remarkable feat of engineering that gives this seven-ton, ten-metre-long bronze sculpture the illusion of weightlessness. Its scale disrupts our sense of space and time, and we are made aware of how small we are in comparison to the world around us, which is in turn just one star in an infinitely large cosmos. While the universal symbolism of its form makes Quinn's *Planet* infinitely approachable as an art object, it would be a mistake to assume that the work lacks gravity.

Quinn's oeuvre has undergone a number of significant transformations since he first revitalised a moribund art world in the early 1990s as a leading figure of the Young British Artists (YBAs). The groundbreaking movement's violently confrontational aesthetic was encapsulated by Quinn's iconic sculpture, *Self* (1991): a life-sized cast of the artist's head made up of nine pints of his own blood, cryogenically frozen and displayed in a glass vestibule. A 'still life' incarnate. At first reading, the smooth sculptural solidity and emotive tenderness of a work like *Planet* appears to be far removed from the visceral abjection of Quinn's earlier *Self*. Yet both works embody similar material, aesthetic and philosophical concerns that run through the artist's multidimensional practice – probing the dialectical boundaries between nature and culture, art and artifice, civilisation and barbarism, life and death, self and society. The myriad forms and wide-ranging conceptual trajectories of these artistic investigations are anchored by the centrifugal force of the questions relevant to us all: is the modern, industrialised, scientifically and technologically enhanced world we so narcissistically fashioned in our own likeness a dream or a nightmare? What exactly is it that makes us who we are as individuals, as a society and as a species? Where have we come from, and where are we going?

Intriguingly, the vital forms that recur throughout Quinn's oeuvre have a particular resonance when situated in the context of a nation so commonly referred to as the 'Garden City'. The origin story of how this tropical city-state was founded is a narrative that problematises the symbolic connotation of the garden as a womb-like sanctuary or a state of innocent wonder; and one that draws curious parallels to Quinn's artistic exploration of how human desire shapes nature.

In 1818, in the rainforests of Indonesia, an expedition funded by the British East India Company stumbled upon a curious sight: a plant with fleshy red petals festooned with white patches that spilled directly out of the earth in a virulent heap, emitting a grotesque stench. This parasitic organism, as we now know, bears the largest single flowers in the world, each capable of growing to over a metre in diameter with a weight of ten kilograms. Whereas locals refer to it as 'the corpse flower' or 'meat flower' for obvious reasons, its botanical designation is *Rafflesia,* named after Stamford Raffles – the leader of the British expedition that brought the knowledge of this strange specimen back to Europe, and the same man who would just a year later go on to establish the trading colony of Singapore.

Raffles was a keen botanist, which was not a surprising inclination in an age characterised by the supreme belief that only an empirical system of knowledge could unearth the universal principles that structure nature, society and humanity at large. A brave new world of unimaginable riches suddenly appeared on the horizon, ripe for the picking for those equipped with the right modern, scientific and technological tools. With this came the idea that humanity itself could be taxonomically categorised, cultivated, pruned or weeded of its less desirable elements through the same rationalising principles. In this totalising worldview, the state was to be the landscape architect of social, and even global, evolution. Examining the brutal legacy of such a pathological drive over the *longue dureé* of European modernity, the twentieth-century social theorist Zygmunt Bauman has observed that 'the power presiding over modernity (the pastoral power of the state) is moulded on the role of the gardener.'[i] The seeds of this 'gardening' impulse were planted during the age of imperialist expansion and first brought to fruition on colonised soil.

This idea of 'social horticulture' was duly reflected in Raffles' designs for the city of Singapore: the multi-ethnic migrant population was neatly segregated into discrete zones, and the best land was reserved for the colonial rulers, cultivating their sense of bioethical superiority over the unruly, uncivilised masses. Order was imposed through impersonal bureaucratic means and disciplinary force, sowing tame bodies and docile subjects. Over a short period of time, Raffles was thus able to transform a semi-anarchic trading port into a flourishing, ordered city. If the parasitic, grotesque

‘corpse flower’, secreting its foul stench deep in the heart of the rainforest, can be thought of as a metaphor for the barbarism and violence of imperialist desire, the gardening impulse is the suppression and disavowal of this dark unconscious.

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the city quickly expanded and evolved. The population had already spilled over the ethnically divided constraints laid out during the colonial era, and the shape of the modern city we recognise today, with its famously clean tree-lined streets and towering architectural wonders, began to take shape. In the late 1970s and ’80s, the government embarked on a series of campaigns to cultivate national pride and nurture cultural cohesiveness in a young nation-state characterised by its ethnic and religious diversity. Like in many other countries, the designation of a national flower was part of this strategy. Although Raffles has lent his name to several schools, buildings, public institutions and of course a world-famous hotel – still scattered throughout the island today as a reminder of Singapore’s colonial past – the symbolic flower of modern-day Singapore is not the off-putting *Rafflesia*, but the far more delicate *Vanda* Miss Joaquim, a species of orchid first bred in Singapore in 1893. The flower is in fact an artificial hybrid, a cross-fertilised product of human engineering that does not exist in nature. It was precisely for this reason that this breed of orchid was selected to be the symbol of Singapore’s modern, cosmopolitan, cross-cultural identity. In fact, the overall layout and conceptual framework of the Gardens by the Bay is modelled on the national flower’s exquisite form.

Quinn has a particular fascination for orchids, drawn to their sculptural contours as well as their symbolic and mythical intimations. In Greco-Roman mythology, as the story goes, Orchis was a satyr who one day happened to stumble upon a wild Bacchanalian feast in a forest glade. Caught up in the revelry, he forced himself upon a high priestess, and was brutally torn apart by wild beasts for this transgression. The gods took pity on Orchis and transformed his sundered remains into the delicate, fragile blossom that now bears his name. This dynamic of desire and death, raw violence metamorphosed into elegant form – reminiscent too of the ‘garden culture’ of western modernity – is a recurring leitmotif that Quinn continually returns to in his work. The orchid, in Quinn’s iconology, is the avatar of desire.

In 2008, he began a series of orchid sculptures, blowing up this most intricate embodiment of nature’s artistry to gargantuan proportions. There is something monstrous, even vulgar about these blooms when rendered on such a scale, reminding us of the biological function of flowers as instruments of reproduction and making explicit the orchid’s likeness to human sexual organs. One version of these sculptures, *Stealth Desire (Etymology)* (2012), is particularly mesmerising as well as menacing – a florid black hole that tears through the space-time of the everyday and threatens to engulf us in its folds. The work alludes to the invisible forces beyond our immediate perceptual awareness that manipulate and mediate human desire itself, perhaps akin to how the ‘prison house of language’ both enables us to communicate with each other as social beings, but also entraps us within a specific cultural system of thought and behaviour. For Quinn, every image of desire has its ‘unconscious version’, which is always present in the way that ‘whatever you do, you’re always followed by cultural things you’re not even aware of.’[ii] Indeed, much of his artistic practice has been marked by the attempt to step out from the shadow of these grand narratives, or rather to bring them to light, exposing their illusory and ideological power as such.

Quinn's recent focus on the orchid motif stems from earlier formal investigations into the evolution of artistic style and the nature of materiality. In a body of works from 1998 entitled 'Eternal Spring', he turned his attention to one of the long-cherished genres of the European art historical tradition, the still life. Although the roots of such practice can be traced back to the time of the Greeks and Romans, the highly illusionistic rendering of inanimate objects from the natural world reached mature expression across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, precipitated by the explosion of interest in horticulture, botany and zoology. This was coincident with the flowering of the Enlightenment – the philosophical roots of the 'gardening culture' that Bauman chillingly described. In seventeenth-century Dutch painting, sumptuous arrangements of fruit and flowers routinely appear in an allegorical topiary of signs that often served a moralistic function, intimating the vivacity and material pleasures of earthly existence, only to remind us of the ephemerality of our time on earth; reminiscent of the dynamic of desire and death that inform the orchid's mythology. Lavishly painted floral displays were often juxtaposed with a *memento mori*: a skull, a burning candle or watch for instance, that served as grave tokens of the inexorable passage of time.

Adopting the same technique he used in *Self* – his own *memento mori* in a sense – Quinn froze assorted bouquets of flowers in silicon oil, simultaneously killing and immortalising these delicate organisms. The chosen sunflowers and lilies are perhaps references to Van Gogh and Monet, the impresarios of western modernism. In this, the frozen flowers, forever enshrined and put on a pedestal, invite us to question the nature of art itself, to ask what is it about the art object that moves us and shapes our understanding of the world. Is it an essential property of the medium or material? Genetically embedded in the mind and body of the artist-as-genius? Is art a metaphysical truth, or a grand delusion? We might conversely read the work as a parody of the astronomical value we place on such cultural constructs, and the hidden structures of power that support them: the cold hard fact that art is also an industry.

In 2000, Quinn extended this line of questioning towards the socio-cultural ecology of our globalised, modern world at large. *Garden* was a large-scale installation comprised of hundreds of flowering plants, frozen in a large glass tank, itself contained within a climate-controlled steel bunker; a hothouse turned igloo, terrarium turned aquarium, garden turned laboratory. The diverse species of flowers brought together in frozen concert were from different parts of the world, a dazzling symphony of wildly clashing floral notes that could not possibly be harmonised in nature. *Garden* is an entirely artificial ecosystem. A sterile environment of artful illusion in which life is not sustained but suspended, shaped and sustained by human desire and the scientific and technological powers we have at our disposal.

Much of Quinn's practice warns of the bioethical dangers of modernity's 'gardening' impulse with its sinister connotations of social and even genetic engineering. As Bauman wrote, 'a garden culture ... defines itself and nature, through its endemic distrust of spontaneity and its longing for a better and necessarily artificial, order … (it) determines what is a tool, what is raw material, what is a weed or pest.'[iii] Quinn has long sought to highlight the plight of the marginalised, disabled and 'imperfect' members of society that exist only on the fringes of our collective consciousness, most powerfully realised in his groundbreaking work *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), a monumental sculpture of a fellow artist born with no arms and shortened limbs that was powerfully installed in Trafalgar Square, in the very heart of the city of London; a version of which was also seen by an audience of billions during the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

The 'Labyrinth' sculptures (2012), beautifully rendered wall pieces sculpted from the fingerprints of real people, reference an ornamental feature found in many botanical gardens. The series is evocative of the paranoiac gaze of the surveillance society with its biopolitics of control and classification, suggestive of how the elaborate electronic and technological systems we have constructed to better understand and control the world around us also entrap, isolate and disorientate us. Like Daedalus, we have designed a perfect prison that we ourselves cannot seem to find a way out of.

However, Quinn's artistic engagement with these forces is highly ambivalent. Our fingerprints are unique to each and every individual, attesting to the complexity of human subjectivity and the fundamental mystery of what it is that makes us who we are. Science and technology have greatly facilitated our understanding of ourselves, and more importantly, made us aware that we are all interconnected as unique individuals, as society and as a species. Science and technology have no doubt been instrumentalised towards unimaginable violence and barbarism, but also used to sustain and nourish the very fragility of life on earth. In 'Chemical Life Support' (2005), the artist created a series of seemingly perfect, white human forms that were actually cast from the bodies of people suffering from life-threatening conditions who relied on chemical medication to survive. The most vulnerable of these figures is *Innoscience* (2004) – the prone body of the artist's own son, who was born violently allergic to milk, and relied upon a chemically developed formula for sustenance. Quinn poignantly mixed some of this powder into the synthetic polymer clay used to sculpt this most endearingly fragile of forms.

Innoscience is a small-scale prototype of *Planet*, and together with an earlier piece, *Lucas* (2001), the three works form a deeply personal narrative, mapping out the early childhood of the artist's son. *Lucas*, fashioned after the artist's *Self* with all that entails of family ties, is a frozen cast of the child's head and face made of the two biological elements that sustained him in utero: the placenta and umbilical cord. If there is a shift in the critical orientation of Quinn's work that occurs from *Lucas* to *Planet*, it is one that is both material as well as conceptual: a shift from an economy of signs as in the direct use of bodily matter; to what might be considered an ecology of signs – an exploration of the systems and structures of the world at large that matter to us all.

In this vein, one detects a populist and accessible quality to Quinn's art that makes it similar to the process of photography, which the artist himself likens to 'frozen sculptures' – illuminating inscriptions that capture as well as reflect the sheer heterogeneity of the world around us with all its brutality and beauty; still moments of compressed space and time. However, his practice goes a step further, transforming the raw material of the world around us into brilliant, vital forms that bring the intricate web of human relations that sustain us to light, in a process that might more accurately be described as a photosynthesis.

These elements are powerfully felt in a work like *Planet*, and made particularly resonant in the context of the magical kingdom of the Gardens by the Bay. Like a palimpsest of Quinn's aforementioned *Garden*, Singapore's new cultural landmark is a rigorously controlled, artificial environment that houses some two hundred and fifty thousand rare plant species from all over the world that would not be found together in nature. It is interesting that this vast public space is, according to the state, symbolic of its desire to transform Singapore from a 'Garden City' to a 'City in a Garden.' This is to suggest a de-evolution of sorts, in which a modern, urbanised, scientific and economically advanced culture desires to be reabsorbed back into the disorderly splendour of the natural world that surrounds us. Our encounter with *Planet* in this wondrous mise-en-scène reminds us of the urgently critical function of art, not artifice, in any mature society. As Quinn has said, 'I think of art as the flower of the human spirit. But it's a flower that doesn't die. It's a permanent celebration of the beauty inside people.'[iv] On this positive note, we can hope that Singapore's Gardens by the Bay is the symbol of a more tender age in bloom.

Dr Wenny Teo is the Manuela and Iwan Wirth Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Asian Art at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

i. Bauman, Zygmunt *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 52
ii. Marc Quinn, in conversation with Olga Svlibova. *Marc Quinn: The Big Wheel Keeps on Turning* (Moscow: Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Exh. cat., 2012), p. 27
iii. Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 92
iv. Marc Quinn, *op. cit*. p. 30