

EXHIBITION NEWSLETTER

Paradise Lost

Recent Pastels by Filomena Coppola

Thursday 10 to Tuesday 29 October 1996

c o p p o l a

Opus Topiarum

In *Bluebeard's Castle*, Bela Bartok's allegorical opera of the unconscious, Judith disregarded her husband's plea and opened the seven forbidden doors in his sumptuous castle. Each chamber revealed a hideous aspect to her new home, her husband and her future: a torture chamber, an expansive armoury, a vast treasury, a lake of tears, a panorama of the state. The fourth door opened onto a garden whose monstrous plants grew with such opulence that she was both repulsed by and drawn to them: an abject garden of perversion that only flourished under controlled conditions, fed by the blood of his previous six wives. For Judith, Paradise existed only briefly in her mind: she sealed her own fate by opening the seventh door.

Living in Paradise comes at a cost. In order to live there certain restrictions apply, usually as puzzling limitation to freedom: don't eat from that tree, don't open that door. These rules protect the inhabitants of Paradise from finding the 'truth', both of its existence and of the external world of untamed natural phenomena. Sooner or later a revolution occurs in Paradise. Rules are broken by the uncontrollable urge to know what lies beyond; peaceful ignorance is traded for pernicious knowledge. What appeared 'natural' is now revealed as perversion, an impossible ideal: nature is neither easily controlled nor harmonious.



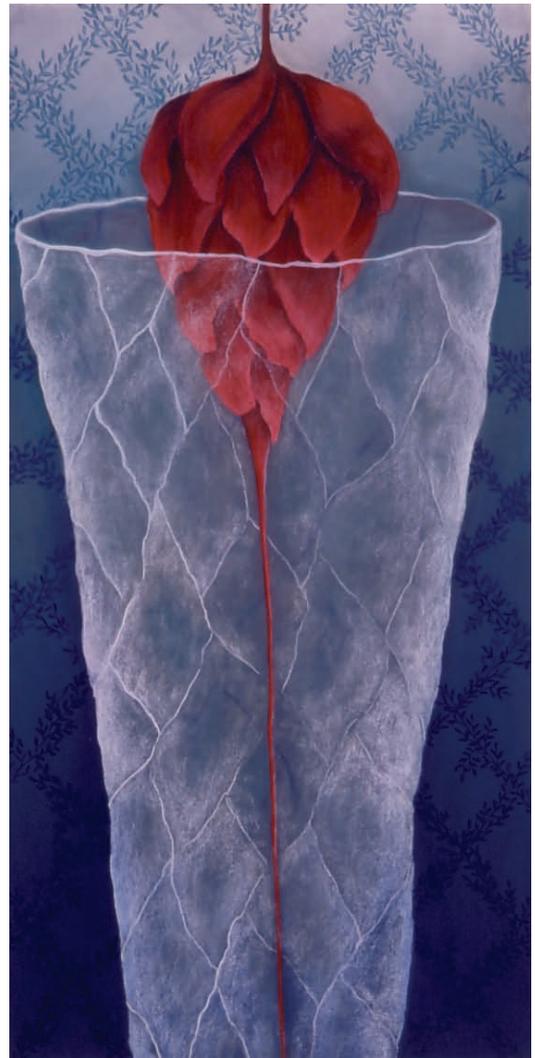
Paradise Lost V
Pastel on paper
112h x 56w cm
1996

Paradise is revealed as a topiaried garden to be maintained with extreme care, manicured by invisible hands that mortals cannot emulate. With this knowledge, it is impossible to stay in Paradise.

And the Lord said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil, lest he put forth his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden ... Genesis 22, 23

In Filomena Coppola's work we are witnessing the moment of expulsion that Milton wrote of in *Paradise Lost*, when the engineered richness of Paradise is revealed and collapse of the ideal state is rendered inevitable. The desire for order and measure, balance and care becomes passionate, obsessive and ultimately futile, as if the expulsion is sensed as imminent and trying to impose order becomes an hysterical attempt to maintain stasis. The impossibility of this task distorts the growth, the plants become increasingly tactile and fleshy, straining against such desperate restraint; the recently gained knowledge of the natural world erupts within Paradise itself. Disintegration accelerates from within, until there is no place to retreat. The inhabitants of Paradise have overstayed.

Coppola's *opus topiarium* is not grounded in earthly mortality: nature interacts with culture to produce botanical mutations that rise above and beyond the magnificent hybrids of genetic engineering and grafting. Deftly evolving and climbing in horrid splendour from succulent seeds and roots, these unreal plants are caught in the process of mutating into or from other forms, in a shifting space of ambiguity. This space parallels the undefined state of *becoming* implicit in executing a rite of passage, of moving from one state to another. Coppola's specimens are neither fruit, nor root, but appear to be in a state of constant impermanence.



Blood Red
Pastel on paper
112h x 56w cm
1996

The viewer is willingly seduced by the luscious surfaces of Coppola's drawings and etchings, only to be unnerved by a twist in the imagery within. Their detailed treatment pays homage to the Lady and the Unicorn and the Devonshire Hunting tapestries, works that are equally obsessive in their detailed imagery of flora and minutia of invented life. Coppola's intense working of the plate or the sheet parallels the myriad of tiny movements that the weavers used centuries before in creating the tapestries, involving the hand as much as the eye in building an intricate web of pattern and form. We become immersed in the detail, seduced into closeness, lovingly following the sinuous curves and shifts in tone with our eyes. They share a sumptuousness, elegance and visual magnetism which in this case attracts only to repel.

Like a sugar coating for an interior which is not the same, the eroticised surfaces belie a tumescent core, equally obscene in its swollen, veined or punctured state. We are caught by our own curiosity, but what are we looking at? Such beauty in conjunction with repulsion reflects an interdependency where one state can't exist without the other. Vanitas, life and death intertwined: there is no beauty without decay, no peace without revolution, no Paradise without expulsion.

Robyn Daw
Launceston, 1996



Crimson Forest
Pastel on paper
76h x 56w cm
1996