



PLATFORM **13**

roberley bell

PLATFORM 13: Roberley Bell, *The Shape of the Afternoon*



Roberley Bell is a sculptor who spends a lot of time looking out the window. Whether it is through the glass in her studio in upstate New York, or in hotel rooms during sojourns in Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, Bell is deeply invested in the threshold separating nature from culture.

It is the constructed view that beguiles Bell. Every day that she travels she takes a photograph from a window. While these photographs are never shown as her artwork, this daily practice seeps into much of her thinking and making. For Bell, windows act as framing devices, defining a view onto the elements. However, it is the tension implicit in the duality of the window—inside vs. outside, artificial vs. organic, the orderliness of society protecting us from the unruliness of nature—that activates creative output

like *Cardinal*, a video work from 2007. Filmed through a kitchen window, the video features the dramatic failings of a cardinal either attracted by its own image or by something inside, working to get through the divide. It is a visually stunning piece, the bright red of the cardinal set against the deep evergreen forest, but the darker Sisyphean plight of the bird conveys her conflicted perspective on our relationship with the natural world. In watching *Cardinal*, we, like Bell, share the view and witness a physical confrontation between nature and culture.

For nearly twenty years, Bell has questioned the “natural” in daily life, taking up the copied, chemically altered, and designed flora populating our built landscapes and placing it in direct relationship to real living nature. Nature and its

synthetic simulacra are her sources and her materials. Whether it is the cardinal tapping at the glass or her sculptural installations embellished with flowering plants, Bell’s works invite us to revisit our assumptions about what we consider to be our natural environment today.

In her new commission for deCordova, *The Shape of the Afternoon*, Bell again takes up the window as a device to frame a conversation about the trappings of nature through the indoor/outdoor dialectic. For PLATFORM 13, Bell has transformed The Phyllis & Jerome Lyle Rappaport Roof Terrace into a whimsical gardenscape. The three-sided glass gallery and adjacent terrace provide the perfect stage to enact this confrontation. Visitors step out of the elevator and into a plush lime carpeted terrarium that looks out on a deck populated with islands of hot colored Astroturf and sculpture, complete with benches and flowering trees. Instead of pitting interior space against exterior space, Bell blends the two, extending the language of the domestic to the out of doors. The carpet that begins in the glass cube gallery bleeds across the architectural divide and continues as Astroturf outdoors. In this installation, Bell conflates the worlds of interior design and horticulture in a dramatic fashion. Made of resin, her *Blob* sculptures—protoplasmic shapes in hot pinks, blues, and greens—double as vases and planters set atop curved

grey tables. By placing these sculptural amphorae on Astroturf, Bell creates an alternative outdoor living room complete with benches, potted plants, and displays of tag sale kitsch. Flowering cacti, decorative plastic fruit, and pitted plaster ducks make their way into her installations. She explores the impulse to fashion our surroundings in nature’s likeness as well as the artificiality of these displays.

Bell’s interest in creating situations that incorporate the authentic, the cultivated, and the artifice in nature stems from her own work in the soil. She is an avid gardener with expansive flowerbeds. Brightly colored blooms are a continual source of inspiration, as is the garden as a symbol of perfected, tamed landscape. Through history the garden has been understood to be an aesthetic expression of cultural domination over nature. It has taken different forms over time—from the rigidly geometric French jardins of the seventeenth century to eighteenth century English gardens known for their carefully constructed wildness to Frederick Law Olmsted’s designed parks in the United States, each demonstrating a certain aesthetic of control. At home, Bell’s flowerbeds are physically distinct entities set in contrast to an unhewn forest, requiring her constant attention. As in her sculptural gardenscapes, she explores the line separating “cultured” nature from “wild” nature that unchecked will overtake all that we have built. By engaging both sides of the window at deCordova, she considers how this binary gets framed culturally, historically, and architecturally.



In a series that directly preceded her *Blobs*, Bell created a number of small faux flora and fauna tableaux. In these *Wonder* sculptures Bell constructed her own fanciful microcosms by embellishing cast foam with plastic flowers and novelty birds. The *Wonder* worlds were inspired by the sixteenth century tradition of *Wunderkammers*—cabinet of curiosities—designed to showcase exotic collections. These cabinets physically framed natural specimens within collectors' homes. They aspired to relay tales of foreign journeys, and in doing so, transformed natural artifacts into fetishized objects with commercial value. Beautifully detailed, Bell's *Wonder* works similarly catapult these composite worlds of real and fake into the realm of product-hood, commercial design, and into a conversation with art history and pop culture.

In her sumptuously colored *Blobs* on display at deCordova, the forms have absorbed their subjects. The soft curved shapes appear as if viscous ooze has coated one of her *Wonder* sculptures. The *Blobs* are slick, hybrid forms that alternatively feature an outgrowth of colorful lines and in others totems of abstracted birds. To create these blob-ular sculptures, Bell begins by sketching in watercolor and then sculpting clay models which are then drawn in a computer program and output in foam via a CNC router, a computer controlled cutting machine. At this point she hand works the foam sculptures, further abstracting the forms, until they are ready to be coated with resin. The resulting veneers of the *Blob* sculptures highlight their obvious artificiality in contrast to more natural tree stump bases. This sharp juxtaposition, in addition to their titles: *For*





Above: *Flower Blob #64*. 2005, cast foam, dyed plastic and flocking, covered with plastic flowers, plastic balls, and flocked bird. 16 ½ x 18 x 7 inches. Collection of Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO.

HM, for now (an homage to Henry Moore), positions them in an art historical dialogue with early twentieth century sculptors like Barbara Hepworth, Jean Arp, and Henry Moore known for their biomorphically abstract sculptures inspired by living organisms. In the wake of World War I, Hepworth, Arp, and Moore found expressive potential in the simplicity of natural forms. Decades later, artists like John McCracken and Craig Kauffman brought the sexy slickness of car paint and surf wax emblematic of West Coast living to bear on minimal forms. Bell's lustrous *Blobs* combine the interiority of psychologically charged biomorphism with the exteriority of the candied shells of 1970s "finish fetish" California sculpture.

The cumulative effect is of a lustrous, globular spectacle: part garden, part Candy Land, part Disney © park. It is, in a sense, the anti-rooftop garden. In today's parlance the rooftop garden is synonymous with ecologically conscious city dwellers looking to offset their carbon footprint, reduce energy usage and promote sustainability. Rooftop gardens help absorb solar heat, reduce rain runoff, and provide space for vegetable gardens. But instead of greening our rooftop, Bell has shellacked it. Blanketed in Astroturf and resin, Bell's installation questions what the new natural is today. At a time when more people live in cities than in the countryside, Bell's slick, designed rooftop garden suggests that our 'natural' habitat may look more like a hybrid between what has traditionally been understood as the inside and the outside.

Bell's gardenscape asks us to consider how we frame, chemically and genetically engineer, and shape nature to suit aesthetic or societal needs. This year NAFTA

(North American Free Trade Agreement) celebrates its twentieth anniversary, providing Americans access to tomatoes and strawberries year round. The 365-day distribution has its benefits—strawberries in February are one; however, it also has some serious drawbacks, including the tasteless varieties of produce picked before its had time to ripen in order to ensure unspoiled delivery. From watery imported tomatoes to the dredged palm tree-shaped islands off Dubai, abstractions from nature or in nature's image surround us in supermarkets, news segments, and in our own backyards. Bell's chromatic garden invites us to reflect on our increasingly complicated and contentious relationship with the environment, as well as our new natural habitat.

Lexi Lee Sullivan, Assistant Curator

¹ Celia W. Dugger, "U.N. Predicts Urban Population Explosion," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/28/world/28population.html?ref=urbanareas>.

Above: Roberley Bell, *For HM, for now*, 2014, steel and painted wood, Astroturf, foam, resin, flower, terra cotta pot and cactus, plaster ducks. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston.
Below: Jean Arp, *Sculpture to be Lost in the Forest*, 1932, cast c.1953-8, bronze, 90 x 222 x 154 mm © Tate, London, 2014.



BIOGRAPHY

Roberley Bell (born 1955, Massachusetts) lives in upstate New York and teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She attended the University of Massachusetts and received her MFA from Alfred State College, SUNY. Bell's work has been exhibited internationally, including at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; Dieu Donne Gallery, New York; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; and Paul Petro Gallery, Toronto. She is the recipient of two fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, a Pollock Krasner Fellowship, and a Fulbright to the Netherlands.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ROBERLEY BELL

THE SHAPE OF THE AFTERNOON, 2014

OVERALL INSTALLATION

Courtesy of the artist

Photography by Clements Photography and Design, Boston

deCordova | Sculpture Park and Museum

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PROGRAMMING

Thursday, June 5 at 6:30 pm

Rain date: Friday, June 6 at 6:30 pm

Meet the Artist: Join Roberley Bell and Assistant Curator Lexi Lee Sullivan for cocktails on The Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Roof Terrace as they discuss Bell's installation.

Sunday, August 24 at 4:00 pm

Conversation with a Curator: Samantha Cataldo, Koch Curatorial Fellow

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of solo exhibitions by early- and mid-career artists from both the New England and national arts communities. These shows focus on work that engages with deCordova's unique spaces, both indoors and outdoors, and social, geographical, and physical location. The PLATFORM series is intended as a support for creativity and expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

This PLATFORM exhibition has been generously funded by James and Audrey Foster.

MAY 16–OCTOBER 6, 2014

