

Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Michelle Stuart/MATRIX 102
September 18 - October 30, 1988



In the Beginning... Yang-Na, 1984

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Silent Gardens: An American Landscape was organized by the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, with the assistance of funds from the New England Foundation for the Arts, a private, non-profit organization developing and promoting the arts of the region. This is a traveling exhibition of the New England Foundation for the Arts.

Michelle Stuart/MATRIX 102

Michelle Stuart's *Silent Gardens: An American Landscape* is a reverential, highly personal statement about the beauty of this country's natural environments. Some of these expansive, substantial canvases bring to mind the lyrical bliss of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* while others touch the sense of primordial flux so moving in Jackson Pollock's large allover paintings. Using small, eleven inch squares as her building blocks, Stuart constructs eight commanding statements honoring eight distinct geographical locations in the United States. These sites are: the prehistoric landscape of the La Brea tar pits, the Southeastern everglades, the Pacific Northwest coastline, the Arizona desert basin, the great Southwest, a Pacific coral reef, the star-filled Alaskan sky and a New England woodland garden. In each, Stuart conveys the feeling and complexities of a particular region or ecosystem.

Silent Gardens is also an artist's call on behalf of the endangered magnificence within our national boundaries. The monumental grandeur of this suite of eight encaustic relief paintings, which Stuart sees as related to Buddhism's Eightfold Paths to self-enlightenment, inspires a quiet contemplation appropriate to the vastness of the subject. As viewers are drawn to the works for a closer inspection of their tactile surfaces, richly encrusted with earth, shells, vegetation and other fragments, the experience becomes more intimate, more specific and more provocative. *Silent Gardens* renews our awareness of the fragility of a global balance now so unrelentingly compromised by the innovations of man.

The American landscape has long been a forceful influence upon many of our most important artists, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Not only was the subject of landscape then a primary source of inspiration to artist and viewer alike, but it was also used as a forum by some artists, Jasper Cropsey, Albert Bierstadt and George Inness among them, to elucidate such epic and controversial dilemmas as westward expansion and industrialization. In some ways, Stuart is a kindred spirit to these distant predecessors.

Since the early 'seventies, Stuart has drawn on landscape, geology, cartography, ecology and other related fields in order to explore our relationship to the planet and to the universe. Her interests are intriguingly both practical and spiritual. She embraces the sensuously appealing physical characteristics of earth itself along with its most far-reaching and awesome implications.

Over a decade ago, Stuart wrote in her journal (called **Return to the Silent Garden** and begun in 1970), "...the universe 26,000,000,000 light years in diameter pulsating in a vast period of 82,000,000,000 years. It's about time we arrive at a new state of consciousness about that and our physical presence in that continuum. Personal and universal. It must be beyond "Art" and all the petty measurements and boundaries. . . ." Such an ambitious statement read now seems to presage the scope and intensity of Stuart's **Silent Gardens: An American Landscape**.

In these works, Stuart, strong in a diverse heritage from the nineteenth-century American painters to Pollock, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson and Sol LeWitt, makes a powerful and original artistic statement which encourages us to re-engage politically and spiritually with the world in which we live.

Michelle Stuart was born in Los Angeles, California. Both of her parents emigrated from Australia to Southern California. She often accompanied her father, a water-rights engineer, in his travels through uninhabited areas of the state. She also worked briefly as a studio assistant for Diego Rivera in Mexico. Following study at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, she was employed as a topographical draughtswoman for the Army Corps of Engineers which influenced her use of map forms and grids. Over the years, Stuart has travelled extensively in Central America, Europe, Africa and Asia. She has made a number of large-scale outdoor installations at locations in Niagara Falls Gorge, Alaska, Finland and elsewhere. Stuart has received many individual artists fellowships from organizations such as the Guggenheim Foundation in 1975, the National Endowment for the Arts in 1975, 1977 and 1980, and the New York State Arts Council in 1975 and 1987. She currently divides her time between New York City and Oregon. Stuart is represented by Max Protetch, New York City.



Red...Earth. Dream Wall of the Big House, detail, 1985-86

Silent Gardens: An American Landscape

. . . Her most recent body of work, a series of eight encaustic relief paintings, **Silent Gardens: The American Landscape**, is a metaphor for the inevitable passage of time on this Earth. . . . Emanating from them is a rare quality of belief in the infinite mutual relationship between nature and humanity.

For **Silent Gardens** Stuart has selected a subject that embodies the essence of her heritage—the American landscape. In one sense, the series is a homage to the vast, unspoiled environments she has encountered throughout the country. Yet, her pervasive autobiographical attitude toward nature and her self-identity with the cosmos extend these abstract landscapes into the realm of personal narrative. . . .

. . . The singularity of her vision resides, in part, in this ability to address both the tangible world as well as the intangible—our senses, dreams, emotions, memories—the powers of life that are entirely invisible while nonetheless existent. Stuart alludes to these metaphysical realities where our lives are lived, all the while paying attention to the minutiae of matter that visibly present themselves throughout nature. In the face of **Silent Gardens**, our

impoverished sense of what the world includes is momentarily replenished. . . .

In *Silent Gardens* Stuart evokes environments steeped in silence, places that induce contemplative explorations of the soul, the spiritual self. Looking into the multi-colored, flowing layers of *Reef*, or the everglade reaches of *Green...Tropical Lily Roots the Swamp Turtle*, each of us, as Thoreau observed in *Walden*, "measures the depth of his own nature." Stuart reminds us that revelation as an experience of the sublime in nature need not be apocalyptic; the sublime also can be discovered in what [Thomas] Cole described as the "silent energy of nature." The star-filled blackness of the Alaskan sky, the convergence of land and sea along the coast of the Pacific Northwest, the underwater universe of a coral reef—in these uninhabited sweeps of nature we witness an endless continuum. Each of these paintings encourages us to return to it and experience anew the density of information held in the layers of its surface. Like repeated walks through wooded acres or strolls along a stretch of beach, each journey across a single painted expanse remains unique, revealing an esthetic experience rivaling that of a single, primal encounter with the most undefined nature. . . .

Spawned by travel, dreams, memories of childhood experiences, and her own photographs, *Silent Gardens* is the cumulative result of the artist's own intense feelings for the American land and her identification with place—the great Southwest, the New England woodlands, the Pacific Northwest, California's La Brea tar pits, the Arizona desert. In these open spaces Stuart rediscovered a landscape that corresponded to the size, transience, and silence of her own inner self. . . .

It would be impossible to discuss meaningfully Stuart's art without addressing the appearance of the grid in her work. Repeatedly since the 1960s, the grid has been employed as a principle of syntax by artists as diverse as Eva Hesse, Andy Warhol, Agnes Martin, Alfred Jensen, Sol LeWitt, Gilbert and George, Jennifer Bartlett, and Katherine Porter, among numerous others. This single format, however, can be applied toward very different ends: that of recurrent patterns (serial repetition) or thematic variation. In *Silent Gardens*, where the latter is true, these lattices of abstraction running throughout the paintings are representations of a reduced order of nature that act to bring us closer to understanding the physical structures within nature itself. The grid simulates the "radical law" of nature, described by Emerson as the "unity in variety which meets us everywhere." . . .

. . . Underlying the visible order of the grid, Stuart emphasizes those intangible qualities of nature—the mutable, transient, and infinite. In her paintings, we look at matter through the transparency of time. We see the physical things—shattered shells, fossilized feathers, imprinted leaves, fragmented bones—and also the indefinite states of change among them. Gradual alterations in the coloration and density of the wax, the slightly worn and irregular edges of the paper units, and the subtle imperfections of the grid echo the shifting evolutionary aspects of the land. Countless layers of pigment, wax, and sundry matter emulate nature, appearing not fixed but fluid, at times volatile and at others obedient to the hand and spirit of the artist. . . .

The environments of *Silent Gardens* are sanctuaries for the mysterious, settings where knowledge comes as much from intuition as from reason or science. Joining with nature's forces, much in the manner that Isamu Noguchi approaches stone, Stuart prefers to let things appear in their natural states, and paints with the understanding that seeing and knowing involve intuitive discernment. Painting, like nature, is not a condition of the ideal; it does not proceed in a straight line. Its course is vital and unpredictable. Working with multiple variables—wax, pigment, earth, paper—Stuart's process allows for the effects of chance and mystery to unfold. . . .

Susan Stoops

Curator

Rose Art Museum

Brandeis University

Waltham, Massachusetts

The above text is excerpted from *Michelle Stuart, Silent Gardens: An American Landscape*. This catalogue is available in the Atheneum bookstore.

PLEASE NOTE:

Michelle Stuart will give an informal MATRIX Afternoon Lecture on Sunday, September 25, 1988 at 3p.m.



Photograph of Michelle Stuart, 1985
Photo: Anna-K. Ortengren

Works in MATRIX:

In the Beginning...Yang-Na, 1984, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, bones, shells, plants, silver leaf and encaustic.

Green...Tropical Lily Roots the Swamp Turtle, 1985, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, stones, shells, plants and encaustic.

White...Moon Minister in the Marriage of Earth and Sea, 1985, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, stones, shells, plants, and encaustic.

Red...Earth. Dream Wall of the Big House, 1985-86, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth and encaustic.

Bone Land...Chinle Crystal Dwelling, 1985-86, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, bones, plants and encaustic.

Reef, 1986, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, shells, plants and encaustic.

Black Star...Sky Dome of the North, 1986, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, plants, rocks, silver leaf and encaustic.

Woodland Garden Seeds the Eastern Wind, 1987, doubled rag paper on muslin and mounted on panels, earth, plants flowers and encaustic.

Each work is 99" x 198".

All works are from the collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch, New York City.

Selected One-person Exhibitions :

Galerie Schmela, Dusseldorf '74, '76, '77, '79, '82;
 Max Hutchinson Gallery, NYC '74, '75, '76; Fine Arts
 Center Gallery, State University of New York at Oneonta,
 '75; Artpark, Lewiston, NY *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated*,
 '75; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
 '77; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA
 '77; Fine Arts Gallery, Wright State University, Dayton, OH
 '78; Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporaines de Bordeaux,
 France '78; Institute of Contemporary Art, London '79;
 Galerie Ahlner, Stockholm '80, '83; Galleriet
 AndersTornberg, Lund, Sweden '80, '83, '87; Joslyn Art
 Museum, Omaha, NE, *I-80 Series: Michelle Stuart* '81;
 Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland '83; Walker
 Art Center, Minneapolis, MN '83; Neuberger Museum, State
 University of New York at Purchase *Sacred Precincts:
 From Dreamtime To The South China Sea*, '84; Gallery Ueda
 Warehouse and Ginza, Tokyo '84, '87; Hillwood Art Gallery,
 Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus, Greenvale, NY
Michelle Stuart: Voyages, (travelled extensively) '85;
 Max Protetch, NYC '86, '88; The Arts Club of Chicago, IL
*essence of place: paintings, objects and drawings from the
 earth*, '86; Grand Lobby, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn,
 NY *Paradisi: A Garden Mural*, '86; The Visual Arts Center
 of Alaska, Anchorage and Fairbanks Arts Association,
 Alaska State Museum, Juneau, *On Part of Memory Being
 Alaska: Black Star...Sky Dome of the North*, '86; Rose Art
 Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA *Silent Gardens:
 The American Landscape*, (also *Ashes in Arcadia*), '88.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT
Contemporary Reflections '73; New York Cultural Center,
 NYC *Women Choose Women* '73; Indianapolis Museum of
 Art, Indianapolis, IN and The Taft Museum, Cincinnati, OH
Painting and Sculpture Today: 1974; Vancouver Art Gallery,
 Vancouver, B. C., Canada *Strata: Graves, Hesse, Stuart,
 Winsor* '77; Kassel, Germany *Documenta 6* '77; *Artists'
 Books USA* organized by Independent Curators, Inc., NYC
 (exhibition travelled extensively) '78; P.S.1, The Institute
 for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., Long Island City, NY
The Great Big Drawings Show '79; Hirshhorn Museum and
 Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C. and Sarah Campbell
 Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, TX *Directions 1981*;

Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., NYC *Bookworks: New Approaches to Artist's Books* (exhibition travelled extensively) '81; Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT *Large Drawings*, '84; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* '84; Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus, Greenvale, NY *Reflections: New Conceptions of Nature* '84; Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY *Land Marks: New Site Proposals By 22 Original Pioneers of Environmental Art* '84; Centre Georges Pompidou, Bibliotheque Publique d'Information, Paris *Livres D'Artistes* '85; Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onondaga County, Syracuse, NY *Sacred Spaces* '87.

Selected Bibliography about Michelle Stuart:

Alloway, Lawrence. "Michelle Stuart: A Fabric of Significations," *Artforum* vol. 12 no. 5 (January '74), p. 64+.

Lubell, Ellen. "Michelle Stuart," *Arts Magazine* vol. 48 no. 7 (April '74) p. 67+.

Alloway, Lawrence. *Michelle Stuart*, Fine Arts Center Gallery, State University of New York College (Oneonta) 1975.

Robins, Corinne. "Michelle Stuart: The Mapping of Myth and Time," *Arts Magazine* vol. 51 no. 4 (December '76), p. 83+.

Hobbs, Robert. *Michelle Stuart*, Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, (Cambridge) 1977.

Lubell, Ellen. "Michelle Stuart: Icons from the Archives of Time," *Arts Magazine* vol. 53 no. 10 (June '79), p. 122+.

Beal, Graham W. J. "Had We But World Enough and Time," *Michelle Stuart: Place and Time* (Interview), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) 1983.

Michelle Stuart: Voyages, essays by Lawrence Alloway, Frederick Ted Castle, Tom Sandqvist, Judy Collischan Van Wagner, Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University (Greenvale) 1985.

Kotik, Charlotta. *Michelle Stuart, Paradisi: A Garden Mural*, poster with text, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY '86.

Brenson, Michael. "Michelle Stuart," *The New York Times*, April 18, '86, p. C28.

Phillips, Patricia C. "Blossoming of Cells," *Artforum* vol. 25 no. 2 (October '86), p. 116+.

Clothier, Peter. "Reading The Earth," *Artweek* vol. 17 no. 37 (November 8, '86), p. 5.

Norwood, Vera and Janice Monk, editors. *The Desert Is No Lady*, Yale University Press, (New Haven) 1987, p. 216+.

Westfall, Stephen. "Melancholy Mapping," *Art in America* vol. 75 no. 2 (February '87), p. 104+.

Selz, Peter. "Alternative Aesthetics: Quests For Spiritual Quintessence," *Arts Magazine* vol. 62 no. 2 (October '87), p. 46+.

Henry, Gerrit. "Michelle Stuart: Navigating Coincidence," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* vol. 18 no. 6 (January-February '88), p. 193+.

Stoops, Susan. *Michelle Stuart, Silent Gardens: The American Landscape*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, (Waltham) 1988.

Lovelace, Carey. "Michelle Stuart's Silent Garden," *Arts Magazine* vol. 63 no. 1 (September '88), p. 77+.

Selected Bibliography by Michelle Stuart:

Statement by the artist. *Art: A Woman's Sensibility*, Feminist Art Program California Institute of the Arts, (Valencia) 1975, p. 72.

Statement by the artist. *Anonymous Was A Woman*, Feminist Art Program California Institute of the Arts, (Valencia) 1975, p. 127.

The Fall. Printed Matter, Inc., (New York) 1976.

A Complete Folk History of the United States at the Edge of the Century. Wright State University, (Dayton) and Droll-Kolbert Gallery, (New York) 1978.

From the Silent Garden. Williams College Artist-in-Residence Program, (Williamstown) 1979.

Introduction by Lucy Lippard.

Statements by the artist. *I-80 Series: Michelle Stuart*. Joslyn Art Museum, (Omaha) 1981.

Sacred Precincts: From Dreamtime to the South China Sea...With the Addition of the Nantucket Excavation of the Mariners Temple and Burial Cache of the White Whale. Seven Seas, (New York) 1984.