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Book Review: Art of the garden: the garden in British art, 1800 to the present day

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and social signification of space and landscape have been taken over by other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

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Art of the garden: the garden in British art, 1800 to the present day. Edited by Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Daniels and Martin Postle. London: Tate. 2004. 256pp. £40.00 cloth; £29.99 paper. ISBN 1 85437 544 X cloth; 1 85437 502 4 paper.

The key to this exhibition (Tate Britain 3 June–30 August 2004, followed by Belfast and Manchester) and its catalogue, is in the title: it's about art, as well as about gardens. This at once presents a tension for both viewer and reader, because art and gardens are practices that require different modes of engagement and interpretation, different 'ways of seeing'.

The editors observe that gardening is currently the most popular leisure activity in the UK, and suggest that England is a 'quintessential' nation of gardeners. This claim for gardening greatness is often made for England, and the editors/curators work hard to substantiate it, while recognizing that gardening cultures extend across the British Isles, particularly to Scotland. Largely, however, they work with a very particular variety of Englishness. Their achievement is to successfully disturb the idea of green pleasantness that the English garden is popularly supposed to convey.

For example, although parts of the exhibition speak to notions of innocence, purity and the pastoral, many of the pictures subtly upset such notions. One such upset is provided by Peter Rabbit. In a tiny watercolour by Beatrix Potter a pair of ears point out of a watering can, invoking memories of childhood, and the right of animals to live in gardens too, along with plants and other non-human forms. This was the cleverness of the show, to demonstrate the ambiguity of garden spaces in witty and sharply observed ways, but I fear that the curators may have been too knowing for their visitors. *Art of the garden* is pleasing – or perhaps 'patriotic and polite', as Humphrey Repton once described the English garden landscape – but notwithstanding such a popular theme, it was an intellectual show.

In their introduction the editors anticipate the tension produced by their title. They suggest that they wanted to present the artworks as 'imaginative constructs in their own right' – a justifiable aim, given the English predilection for gardening, and arguably a function of public display. Yet because these were pictures of gardens, themselves imaginative constructs, there was a paradox at the heart of the exhibition, a problem of representation. In the catalogue this is less troubling, but the show was full of double representations and extraordinary ambiguities, such as Helen Allingham's watercolour of Gertrude Jekyll's garden, or Anya Gallacio's *Red on green*. The strength of the catalogue is that it addresses those ambiguities in ways that exhibition captions alone could not (in spite of some perhaps over-explicit captions). For this reason, readers of the catalogue may be better satisfied.

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