



Sculpture, May Vol. 32 No.4, 2013 “Public Sculpture in an age of diminishing resources. A Conversation with Cliff Garten,” by Lisa Paul Streitfeld, 44-47.



# Public Sculpture in an Age of Diminishing Resources

A Conversation with

## CLIFF GARTEN

BY LISA PAUL STREITFELD

WILLIAM SHORT, COURTESY THE ARTIST

To enter Cliff Garten's Venice studio is to encounter a visual dialectic of public and private that speaks to our times. On one wall is *Being and Home*, an impressive suite of 10 independent sculptures depicting living creatures, all meticulously rendered in different materials; on the other wall are images of the artist's large-scale, collaborative public projects, designed with his three-person team.

*Being and Home* is the first figurative work that Garten has completed in 15 years of public art. The title identifies a quest to manifest a philosophy of sculpture in an age of diminishing resources. However personal the process, the installation draws the observer into more universal concerns, speaking to the destruction of nature, even as it recalls the ancient practice of sacred geometry as a means of instilling manmade forms with the harmonic vibrations of nature.

Though Garten's public and private works appear widely divergent, they are corollaries, exploring similar ideas and concerns. His approach to public sculpture seeks to fuse functional requirement with aesthetic desire. By connecting people to places through design, social history, and ecology, his public sculptures locate the latent potential within the public realm.

**Lisa Paul Streitfeld:** *Rudolf Steiner's book Bees is sitting on your studio table. What does your sculpture draw most from his writing?*

**Cliff Garten:** The thing I love about Steiner is that you may not get a real scientific explanation, but you get an energetic explanation for the science. And even though it isn't exactly right, it is truth.

**LS:** *The structure of the beehive is based on the hexagon, which symbolizes harmony in nature, yet this form is collapsing in Being and Home. Did you study beehives as part of your process?*

**CG:** I started breeding bees.

**LS:** *All of these creatures—the bee, the snail, the ant—are threatened by environmental destruction. Here, you transform them into icons through the imaginative use of vastly different materials.*

**CG:** Materiality is the point of sculpture—that is really crucial. What I am trying to do is to create transposition from one material to another. So, the wood is iron and the termite is wood. The snail shell is soft instead of hard. The ant is made of thousands of ball bearings that actually refer to its activity.

**LS:** *What is the history behind this process?*

**CG:** When I was studying with Dale Chihuly, I worked in ceramics, and he said: "If you are an artist, you are able to work with any material." I thought, "Oh I get it. We're not just making craft here, we're making art." What I always used to tell my students is that through the mastery of one material, all others become available



Opposite: *Being and Home*, 2012–13. Mixed media, installation view. Above: *Black Spiral Dream*, 2011. Cast bronze, earth, stones, and fescue, 19.17 x 3 x 5.92 ft. Work installed at Moffett Towers, Sunnyvale, CA. Below: *Tower II*, 2012. Stainless steel and programmable LED lights, 39 x 5 ft. Work installed in Dallas.

because if you master a process, then you understand process. I had to learn about polyester resin to do these, which was a new material for me, and beeswax is relatively new.

**LS:** *There is a strange in-between quality in this work that sets the viewer on edge.*

**CG:** Everything is a little off. A lot of this is like a children's story because of my daughter reading fairy tales. There is the "busy bee," "industrious ant," and "slow snail." But there is a subtext—that the stories we tell ourselves about nature and the archetypes of these creatures are not at all what is happening now. The big shifts happening in nature are really sinister. And so, when you start to really look at the ant, and you realize that it's made of 20,000 ball bearings, it gets you to think about that. But it still retains that storybook quality, that child-like image that we all know. It fascinates me to watch people looking at it because I think the work has a lot of levels of entry.





Top left: *The Great Ellipse*, 2009. Granite, earth, and plantings, 165 x 242 ft. Work installed at Moffet Towers, Sunnyvale, CA. Left: *Baldwin Hills Gateway*, 2012. Anodized aluminum, 10 x 35 x 150 ft. Work installed at Baldwin Hills Conservancy, L.A. Above: *Bullet*, 2012. Aluminum and programmable LED lighting, 20 x 6 x 9 ft. 1 of 2 works at the Denver Crime Lab, CO.

**LS:** *As the film American Empire pointed out, even scientists can't tell the difference between Monsanto seeds and natural seeds. Your works comment on that border between the manufactured and the natural, reinforcing that we no longer know where one ends and the other begins. We don't really know anymore what is real and what is being manipulated.*

**CG:** Well, I'm sure it is all being manipulated. I like to backpack and pride myself on going out alone. And then, I started thinking about what a national forest is and what goes on there. All the animals are tagged. They know how many bears are there.

**LS:** *So, this work originates from your relationship to nature and personal observation.*

**CG:** In some ways, it has a lot to do with living in Los Angeles. There is nothing here that isn't manipulated, so you become aware in a kind of hyper-real way. There is also the constant threat of multiple disasters. The most uncomfortable is the fact that there is no water here.

**LS:** *Do you think that art is doing enough to focus on this impending disaster?*

**CG:** Everyone is thinking about it. Sculpture has been thinking about it since the early '80s. In many ways, this is part of Smithsonian's unfinished project, and many artists have touched on it. It's what is up in the human consciousness. What people don't understand about all of these issues surrounding global warming is that they are not scientific issues—they are human rights issues: we have a right, a responsibility to care for our environment.

The tragedy is that we set everything up to work so that as soon as we try to step out of business as usual, the economy collapses. We are afraid to stop it. Our altering and polluting of the earth is how we set it up, what the economy depends on to keep going. I work in the public sphere, so I can tell you that, in terms of legislating "green" economic activity in the building professions, right now we are at the equivalent of 1965 with civil rights: we know that we have to do it, but it continues to be a painful process, and you can see how slowly things change.

**LS:** *At least it is changing.*

**CG:** We need that kind of political will to make people change their behavior. There is a lot of lip service paid to making things green or sustainable in public art and architecture. There are two sides to function or sustainability in the environment. One is how things work and the kind of resources we use to build them. And the other is the way they look. I don't think things are really sustainable unless they are built with a certain amount of integrity and made to last. Since the '50s our culture has been building with the understanding that we just have to get it done and then we can throw it away. That attitude has escalated to the point where we don't even try to fix anything anymore. It's scary.

My public work is about conditioning public space and activity in a particular way that holds and contains you to create interest in the public realm—and, I daresay, beauty in the public realm—and conditions it in a way that creates a place with an identity that you can understand, that is legible, where the sculpture becomes

RIGHT: FRANK OONIS / BOTTOM LEFT: WILLIAM SHORT

part of the functioning public realm. This is why I am so interested in infrastructure. In a time of diminishing resources, what could be better than building our infrastructure in a way that informs people about resources? What I am arguing is that we build beautifully, with an intentionality toward scarcity. The public realm was built by engineers after World War II, when we had a booming economy and a myth about progress. The last time people really paid attention to the public realm in this country at a national level was with the WPA, which was really a result of the Great Depression. I don't know if that type of public will is possible in this day and age though, because everything is so fragmented. At that historical moment, people believed in their political leaders and they believed in progress. We no longer believe in progress because of where it has gotten us.

**LS:** *You talk about how sculpture can guide people into a new paradigm in your private work, and now you are extending that idea into the public realm.*

**CG:** How do we get people to think differently? I think the public is a large part of the problem. In the last decade, we have privatized more and more things and spent less and less time and attention on the public realm. The public has to embrace the fact that we need to instill imagination into the forms that run things. If we don't imbue them with some kind of imagination, then we are bound to the same kind of technocratic process and numbing forms we have seen since the engineering profession took over.

**LS:** *Maybe that is the intention—to be a slave to function and bring the artists in as a form of exaltation.*

**CG:** It is interesting that this is how public art is set up—you come in and do window dressing. I am grateful that the money is there. The reason we are able to do it is that the money is protected. But the system, in protecting the money, has created a situation in which art is separate. It is half to two percent (targeted for art) depending on what city you are working in.

**LS:** *You are referring to a real paradigm shift—bringing artists into the planning level to create positive change in the environment.*

**CG:** It is already being done, and people are doing it intelligently. For a project in Arlington, we had to put together a coalition, and we had to become urban designers. For a project in Fort Worth, we redid a whole median, so the street will glow at night. This project was really smart because it didn't use public art money. The funding came from the tax finance district. It gets complicated, but I am finding that these are the types of things I need to put together in order to work the way I want to work. No one is really talking about infrastructure. When your art exists at the scale of infrastructure, when you work with and become infrastructure, then you are really operating as part of the



Above: *Avenue of Light*, 2008. Stainless steel, concrete, and programmable LED lights, 36 x 4 x 8 ft. Work installed in Fort Worth, TX. Below: *Luminous Crossings*, 2013. Rendering of project for 7th Avenue Light Rail, Calgary.



city. For the two gateway stations in Calgary, I installed chandeliers. When the train pulls in, they turn one color; when the train is waiting, they turn another color; and when the train leaves, they are regular white.

**LS:** *So it's performance?*

**CG:** It is performance. I am interested in sculpture built at the scale of the city, performing with the city.

**LS:** *Do you have any role models?*

**CG:** I am thinking about sculpture in terms of its history, people in the '80s who were part of the dialogue of how to make sculpture functional. That moment was really important to me because it was the point when Minimalist dialogue was being taken forward. I feel like I am trying to complete an unfinished part of the Minimalist project—I'm working with industrial materials, I'm working in a series, I'm working on the street with nominal perception, but I am trying to make all of those things part of a working infrastructure. Because why not? If we are going to build it, why not build it with that kind of wonder and intention?

*Lisa Paul Streitfeld is a writer living in Berlin.*