



PRETENDING, BEHAVING, BECOMING

EXPLORING THE NOTION OF 'PERFORMANCE PAINTING' IN GABRIELLE
KRUGER'S SCENOGRAPHY FOR A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

BY ELLEN AGNEW

When creating the scenography for Laine Butler's interpretation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Gabrielle Kruger's upstairs-studio-mate commented that there was a remarkable amount of "edible noises" emerging from below. Kruger's painted, sculptural landscapes, constructed from the 'un-grounding' of plastic-enhanced acrylic paint from its canvas, were – like some sort of contemporary, whimsical Frankenstein – bubbling, brewing, spurting and growing in her workspace at the NIROX Sculpture Park in the Cradle of Humankind, South Africa.

Tumelo Magashoa (Oberon) wearing Gabrielle Kruger's creation out of acrylic paint. Photograph: Anthea Pokroy

“SO WE GREW TOGETHER, / LIKE TO A DOUBLE CHERRY,
SEEMING PARTED, / BUT YET AN UNION IN PARTITION, / TWO
LOVELY BERRIES MOULDED ON ONE STEM.”

- Helena, from William Shakespear’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Following an extended spell at the NIROX Foundation’s Artist-in-Residency programme, Kruger was tasked with creating the scenography for the play – fashioning it out of acrylic paintings typical to her work and with the intention of setting the stage for, what the artist has termed, a *performance painting*. Bearing in mind the life-like nature of Kruger’s creations (her garden grows through both process and action) – it seems almost comical that this performance should be carried out at, what we know to be, the birthplace of humankind. This, considering Kruger’s work encourages a new way of living and seeing in the world.

A gentle sort of ‘theatre-of-the-absurd-in-the-park’, NIROX and the National School of the Arts collaborated to bring *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to life: set in the tranquil gardens of the Sculpture Park at the Cradle of Humankind – interpreted as renaissance drama meets Generation Z in a South African urban and plastic jungle – and presented in garden-form as the blurring of boundaries between nature and man, imagination and reality, painting and canvas, static and living. This burgeoning jungle – in all its plastic and painterly portrayal of the opportunistic nature of flora – was created to challenge our habitual way of reading images, and to reclaim the process of painting as a pure form of expression and performative intervention.

As with Kruger’s body of work created for her Master’s degree in 2017, her performance paintings for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* explore the idea of a socially and materially

constructed landscapes and at once adopt the various positions of artwork, costume, landscape and scene – both in utterance and in action. “*Is it a painting, a plant, or a landscape?*”, Kruger asks of the work in her Master’s thesis – echoing questions posed by the performers and audiences for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and drawing in on the idea of camouflage. Arguably predicated on concepts of simulation and resemblance, camouflage comes as a sort of desire to produce and discern likeness – something Walter Benjamin believed to be inherent in the human experience – and exists as its own form of performance; transforming from pretending, to behaving, and finally – to becoming.

When regarding the notion of the performative, one cannot ignore a primary understanding of performativity (defined by British philosopher John Langshaw Austin) as a ‘speech act’ – a form of speech in which the issuing of an utterance is also the performance of an action. “Tongue, lose thy light; Moon, take thy flight; Now die, die, die, die, die” utters Bottom in his performance as Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It is a speech act, one that performs its function once spoken or communicated (Pyramus takes his last breath as he speaks it) – and it is here, in this understanding of both camouflage and the performative, that Kruger’s work challenges meaning associated with landscapes, the ‘natural’ environment, painting and performance.

Utilising acrylic paint to embody plastic (much like the very real, very contemporary

landscape of the Anthropocene), the artist liberates her paintings from their supporting canvases and frames, putting to use the malleable nature of solidified acrylic paint, and in turn, deconstructing notions of traditional Western landscape painting. Her works are both paintings of flowers *and* flowers – much like how her work deliberates between *what is* and *what is not*. Taking direction from the nature of her paint (made from a unique formula of acrylic and pigment, and created solely for her use), the idea of growing comes as a movement to inform composition, and once worn (a wearable painting!), the paintings become the composition; “*So we grew together, / Like to a double cherry, seeming parted, / But yet an union in partition, / Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.*”

Here, Kruger has ‘planted’ ideas for both performer and audience to consider – relating both to the act of gardening and to the function of gardening; mimicking elements of plant material and plant growth (camouflage, or like a reptilian-plant-paint skin) to become a landscape, a performance, on their own.

Her plasticised garden – existing both on performers and surrounding them – transmutes the sobering reality of our current state of nature into powerful, poetic, painterly allegories; calling Shakespeare’s play into a contemporary perspective and presenting the ecology of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s ‘dreamscape’ as idea, place and action; the paint as concept, surface, image and medium.



The Amphitheatre at NIROX Sculpture Park. The performers wearing Gabrielle Krugers creations out of acrylic paint. Photographer: Julia Jane Perrson

In a play about shape-shifting, shifting affections, and the blurring of distinctions between imagination and reality; and in a world that has become plastic and fake, Kruger’s work, in collaboration with Butler’s interpretation of the play, sought to provide both the audience and the performers a moment to find their imagination and to dream. Kruger’s work, specifically here, becomes like a skin – growing both over and around its subjects, and – ethereally, whimsically, botanically – performing as painting: disguising the material of paint

through representation, manipulating paint as plant, and launching the way we perceive landscape, nature, performance and painting into the realm of performative intervention.

The cast of A Midsummer Night’s Dream was selected from the National School of Arts: Thamsanqa Ngwaxaxa (Lysander), Thuto Montsbo (Helenus), Kgotsa Gregory Mokegatthe (Demetrius), Sabeebab Bhamjee (Hermia), Zoë-Lee Thando Speelman (Hippolyta and Fairy Dendrop), Tamsyn James (Thesius and Fairy Mustardseed), Jazeeek Mondell (Egeus and Flute),

Tumelo Magashoa (Oberon), Joziah Selwyn Wheeler (Puck), Daliya Jodi Russell (Nick Bottom), Tshepiso Marole (Snug), Jesse Hattingh (Starveling), Matthew Rusznyak (Wall and Snout), Teresa Willoughby (Fairy Peaseblossom), Claudia Mandlate (Fairy Moth), Nqobile Mablangu (Fairy Cobweb), Hannah Flynn (Peter Quince), Amber Frans (Titania), Tristan Jacobs (Flute).

Kruger’s body of work created for A Midsummer Night’s Dream will be up on exhibition as part of arteBOTANICAextra at the NIROX Foundation later in 2019.