

FEATURES ▶ STUDIO VISITS

Saturday, May 26th, 2018

A Tunnel of Roses on the Lower East Side: Justen Ladda and His Scholars' Rocks

[print](#)

by David Brody



Scholar's Rock garden on the Allen Street Mall, between Broome and Delancey streets. Courtesy of Justen Ladda

Justen Ladda, an artist who has lived and worked on the Lower East Side since the late 1970s, has spent endless hours for ten years maintaining a remarkable public garden he helped create (with several New York City agencies) on the Allen Street Mall just south of Delancey Street. Every day Ladda picks up bags of trash and cigarette butts from around a magnificent collection of scholar's rocks he chose and imported from China, each a world unto itself. He plants bulbs, seedlings and rescued bushes; he waters, weeds and trims; he gently admonishes dog owners and converses with whoever wishes to do so; and he notes with meticulous triumph each new blossom and twig. Ladda designed the park deliberately without fences. Nothing shields the delicate plantings and fresh earth from lanes of heavy traffic and whirring bikes on either side, or from predictable desecrations along the pedestrian path – more of a cul-de-sac – that bisects it. Without Ladda's unpaid, unrecognized efforts, the place would revert to a wasteland. For now, gentrification in these parts coexists with the homeless population it displaces (gentrification complete with ghetto-chic, a cynic might say), so it is often the down and out that frequent the park's benches. But Ladda's labor of love includes his own forms of outreach, pragmatism, and forbearance. Together with his gardening it is enough to nurture a zone of calm and contemplation despite civic neglect, smack in an emblematically dense zone of urban stress.

I spoke with Ladda in early May at the park, as leaves and flowers were emerging, and later in his top-floor loft on Stanton Street — which until recently was without insulation and unheated (Ladda was once featured in a New York Times article about hardy souls who thrive heatless in winter). I asked him about the relationship between the park and his art practice, which includes exquisitely refined sculpture and painting as well as a series of dazzling, tromp-l'œil installations which, viewed at certain angles, create precisely calibrated sculptural hallucinations (notably *Art, Fashion & Religion*, his 1986 tour-de-force in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art).

As with an installation, Ladda reminds me, “a garden is a curated space. It creates a certain impression; it does something to people.” But different sculptural modes require different kinds of mastery. “In the studio I'm a total control freak. With an artwork you have a vision, but a garden is ongoing. It's never done. I am always looking for texture and color, just as with painting. I try to achieve a color balance in different seasons. These nasturtiums, I started them as seedlings and determined where to plant them, but then you just let them go where they want. It will make its own image.”

Ladda's current studio work involves the painstaking application of more than a hundred layers of photosensitive pigment onto prominently grained wood supports, resulting in patterns of mysterious color that can suggest, as Ken Johnson remarked in a review



Justen Ladda. Photo: David Brody

That of gardening, however, is on another scale. “Gardening is an old man’s game,” Ladda says wryly. “Time goes by so much faster now — it feels like it’s Thanksgiving every three months. If you’re young and you plant something you get very impatient. When time goes faster you can literally watch the grass grow.” Being in touch with larger cycles of time explains, in part, Ladda’s obsession with clearing the ground of every scrap. “I like to be in the soil, in the earth. I know I’m going to go there one day.” Visitors to the park, cheek by jowl with rank exhaust fumes, may not think about the improbable luxury of the loamy freshness at their feet, but the sensation is ineffable — equally life-affirming and a gentle reminder of mortality.

In contrast with the evolving, seasonal plantings, the scholar’s rocks stand as unchanging sentinels fixed in geological time. “I look on them as an early form of abstraction,” says Ladda. Scholar’s rocks resonated with the artist on first encounter in 1995, in an exhibition of the collection assembled by the brilliant contrarian Robert Rosenblum at the China Institute. “My art education in Germany was basically Bauhaus and Mid-20th century abstraction. I think ‘50s sculpture is the same way of seeing as the scholar’s rocks, that’s why I’m so fascinated by them. The Chinese started looking at abstraction around the year 1000, long before artists in the West. They called scholar’s rocks the bones of the earth, and they used them as inspiration for landscape paintings as early as the Southern Song Dynasty.”

Southern Song “academy” painting had reached an apex of poetic realism equal to anything in the European Renaissance — but centuries earlier — after which it was largely superseded by “literati” or scholar-amateur painting, in which the brushstroke itself came to be valued above the artful decipherment of natural phenomena. Scholar’s rocks were consulted by both the realists — i.e., as bones of the earth — and by the literati, as calligraphic abstractions. Interest in rocks reached a peak in the Ming Dynasty, exemplified in the 1610 scroll, *Ten Views of a Lingbi Stone* by the eccentric Wu Bin (currently on exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) that maps a famous specimen from multiple angles with a fanatical, jutting plasticity that is neither realistic nor abstract. There is, evidently, a great deal to unpack in those rocks.

The placement of scholar’s rocks at this site, with their ancient premonition of New York School abstraction, can be seen in dialogue with the upcoming opening of the Pat Passlof and Milton Resnick Foundation in the reclaimed synagogue that Resnick painted in for decades on Eldridge Street. Passlof, who had her own synagogue nearby, practiced tai chi daily alongside Chinese residents in local parks into her eighties — and of course it is the longstanding Chinese community in the area that the scholar’s rocks primarily address. “I think of the rocks as immigrants, because they come from China,” explains Ladda (himself an immigrant, from Germany). “There was a wonderful Chinese antique shop on Allen Street run by Mr. Wong. He had a hundred or so photographs of rocks sent from China from which I chose these. Each stone has its own character — it has a habit and a posture.” One low, twisting rock resembles a dragon. A mountainous standing rock with scalloped fins and eroded perforations transforms into a flickering flame as you walk past, with the somewhat dreary cityscape providing a perfect foil.

Ladda is under no quixotic illusions about the civic effects of his unpaid artistic labors. “You learn a lot about people when you are here every day: how little people see, how few people really appreciate this park for what it is. I would say maybe 5%, 3%. Most people are on their cellphone. It doesn’t matter to me. But the people who appreciate parks will find delight in it. It’s a gift, yes, but also a gift to myself. Because how else can I have a garden in the city?”

He gleefully recounts how he finds rose bushes in the excess piles of other parks to plant along the bike paths, which were added after the park was built and which radically altered its situation. His eyes light up as he explains that—someday—bike riders will be engulfed in twin tunnels of roses. A tunnel of roses on the Lower East Side? If that miracle comes to pass, it will be due entirely to Ladda’s unceasing custody. “It’s a labor of love,” he explains. “But, you see, a labor of love is not really a labor at all.”

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM FEATURES ART WORLD DEPARTMENTS THE REVIEW PANEL

ARCHIVE | SUBSCRIBE | ABOUT US | ADVERTISE/SUPPORT



Courtesy of Justen Ladda

[print](#)

ALSO ON ARTCRITICAL

Angels for Lent: William Corwin at ...

6 years ago · 1 comment

A celebration of his residency is this Tuesday, 5PM to 7.30PM

A Flood That Carries Along Beauty and ...

5 years ago · 1 comment

"Anti-canvas" like cascading, luminous tapestries

"Fuck Richard Prince": The Stolen Memes ...

7 years ago · 1 comment

on view at Mitchell Alguus through October 14

Moments of Heightened ...

7 years ago · 1 comment

Her recent show, Les Biches, was seen on the Lower East Side

Building Up an Breaking Dowl

6 years ago · 1 cor

A derangement c senses is arrived multifarious stim

1 Comment

[Login](#)

G

Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

♡ 1 Share

[Best](#) [Newest](#) [Oldest](#)

S

[Souhad Rafey](#)

7 years ago

This is such an excellent article!

Anyone who knows Justen realizes he gives everything his 100%.

Not only is he an exceptional artist who has always challenged himself with new materials and concepts; on all levels, Justen takes special interest and time in countless pursuits. And his kindness and enthusiasm is refreshing!

0 0 Reply Share >

Subscribe Privacy Do Not Sell My Data

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM

EXHIBITIONS
BOOKS

FEATURES

COMMENTARY
STUDIO VISITS

ARTWORLD

NEWSDESK
OUT AND ABOUT

DEPARTMENTS

WELCOME TO THIS
ISSUE

THE REVIEW
PANEL

THE REVIEW

ETC.

ARCHIVE
LISTINGS

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

[CRITICISM](#) [FEATURES](#) [ART WORLD](#) [DEPARTMENTS](#) [THE REVIEW PANEL](#)

[ARCHIVE](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [ADVERTISE/SUPPORT](#)

RSS

[MAIN FEED](#) [EXHIBITION REVIEWS](#) [PODCAST](#)

For letters to the editor and all other correspondence, please write to editorial@artcritical.com "artcritical," "artcritical.com" and "The Review Panel" (c) artcritical, LLC 2003-2010