

CONVERSATIONS

Vaughn Sills: Capturing the Spirit of African American Gardens by Jane Roy Brown for COGdesign

Vaughn Sills is a fine art and documentary photographer based in the Boston area, where she teaches photography at Simmons College. She is the author of the forthcoming book of documentary photographs, Places for the Spirit: Traditional African American Gardens of the South. (Trinity University Press, May 2010)



Vaughn Sills.
Photo by Lowry Pei.

Had you ever photographed gardens or landscapes before?

Early in my career it seemed impossible to capture what I felt about the beauty and the spiritual significance of nature. So I never attempted to do it again until starting this project.

The gardens in these photographs incorporate old tires, sometimes painted white, empty bottles and flowerpots, and other discarded things. What do these objects mean?

One of the most familiar examples is the bottle tree, where bottles are placed onto the ends of branches to capture evil spirits. Flowerpots or other vessels can also be used for this purpose. Sometimes you see [plumbing] pipes, stuck in the ground on end, for our ancestors to communicate with us.

White, which you see on white-painted rocks, tires, and tree trunks, symbolizes good character and marks sacred space. It acts as reminder to anyone who enters the garden to behave respectfully and with proper decorum.



Bea Robinson's Garden, Athens, Ga., 1987.
Photo by Vaughn Sills.

You also will find figures of people or animals. These are watchers, reminding you that you're being observed and should behave responsibly.

Circles, as in tires or circular arrangements of objects, are about the cycle of nature and also about forward momentum. This reminder of progress offers reassurance and strength in difficult times.

Some symbols are related to the divine — reflective pieces of glass, mirrors, and metal, and objects that remind us of water like toilets, sinks, and seashells, are seen in gardens and sometimes at gravesites.

So these gardens are sacred spaces?

Yes. There's an understanding in African-American culture that both good and evil exist, and the garden is where we see this played out. Healthy, robust plant life and the use of particular objects remind us to make good choices, to live life properly, respectfully, and well. Evil can be kept at bay, ancestors can continue to guide us, goodness can be achieved. I felt this sense of magic in Bea Robinson's yard when I first stepped into it. It's the human and the natural, completely integrated in meaning and idea.

What about the reuse of everyday objects in the garden?

Something that's been used before has more significance and value *because* it's been used.

What are these gardens teaching you and your viewers about reading the landscape?

These gardens are disappearing. I photographed with the goal of conveying the beauty and the sense of spirit I felt as I entered each yard.



Bea Robinson, gardener, Athens, Ga., 1987. Photo by Vaughn Sills.

Are there any defining spatial characteristics of the gardens?

There are several traditions of African-American gardens -- the type that includes many plants and objects, but also there's a more spare, flat, open style that I frequently saw.

Traditionally, it's more desirable to have a swept dirt yard than a lawn. The gardener swept it every day, so it was smooth and clean, with markings of the twig broom in the dirt.

There is usually enclosure. Fences imply that yards have protective powers within. And just at the entrance to the yard, a mat may be placed, marking the threshold [into secure space].

How do plants figure in the gardens?

There are lots of plants, sometimes in pots, grouped together, and other times scattered throughout the yard. Plants seem to be located where they will grow best, not merely where they might look pretty. Visual impact is important, it's just not the most important consideration.

We see these gardens as framed by your camera. How much of what we experience is a result of the photographer's eye?

When I started out, I wanted to make beautiful pictures of the gardens. But this became a documentary project about a distinct way of using the land that can be traced back to Africa. If I'd thought of it as documentary from the beginning, I might have stood farther back. In

the yard with the toilets, for example, there were five of them, so I might have shown them all, but I saw the beauty in the visual relationship between the light, the plants, and two of the toilets, and so that is what I chose to photograph. There was always subjective choice.

How do the garden-makers use their gardens?

There are several purposes of the garden: spiritual, social, and practical. Sometimes there were chicken coops and vegetable plots. There were inviting places for people to sit together, in front of the house and visible from the street, not hidden behind the house as in white, middle-class gardens.

How did the gardeners react when you asked to photograph their gardens?

People were basically pleased to have me photograph their yards, as I would be. Only a few people turned me down.

Have your experiences of these gardens influenced your own garden's design or enriched its meaning for you?

A few years ago, a friend saw this series of photographs and afterward she told me, 'Now I understand why your garden is the way it is.' I think she meant that I have a lot of plants in it, with no formal arrangement. I began this project more than twenty years ago, and in that time, I've completely given up a lawn and added more objects here and there that have special meaning to me.

See more Vaughn Sills photos on www.vaughnsills.com .



About Jane Roy Brown



Photo by Bill Regan.

Jane is a writer, editor, and landscape historian. Her writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Garden Design*, *Landscape Architecture*, and other publications. She works part-time as the director of educational outreach for the Library of American Landscape History. Jane received a 2008 Gold Award from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. Jane lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, photographer Bill Regan.