

Natural Selection

*With a botanist's eye,
Michelle Stuart picks
seeds and boulders
to portray the cycles
of life*

BY GAIL GREGG

This Work Is Delicate. Please Do Not Touch," warned a Xeroxed sign taped to the gray metal doors of the John Weber Gallery in Chelsea—but visitors seemed to have had a hard time heeding that admonishment. Moving slowly from one installation to another, they peered closely at Michelle Stuart's delicate seed drawings and sensuous carved containers perched silently on their beds of unrefined beeswax. They lingered over *Collection Table*, a glass-and-metal case of curiosities reminiscent of a display of botanical specimens, though one assembled by a botanist with an eye for beauty as much as for scientific interest. Wax-frosted horse chestnuts; crinkled bronzed leaves; fragile scraps of antique damask and handmade paper; pots of richly hued earth, russet and ocher and dun—all conspired to invite a viewer's touch, since simply looking would only satisfy one of the senses affected by these subtle and complicated works.

So it is especially gratifying to visit the SoHo loft where Stuart lives with her Jack Russell terrier, Lily, and be able to touch the occasional bronze container or sniff the heady scent of beeswax or gingerly press a finger to a prickly seed pod. Stuart's exuberant love of and wonder at nature is everywhere evident; "treasures" she has amassed during an afternoon of gardening or a trip abroad spill off the tabletops or sit in piles of specimen bags. The living quarters of her loft provide a visitor with an armchair trip around the world and into the corners of Stuart's passions. Bodhisattvas, a ceramic rabbit, slivers of bark, pre-Columbian statuary, Western photos, a coyote skull, African and Asian artifacts, and delicate china all hint at her joy in travel.

LAURIE LAMBERT

Stuart has been called everything from an earth artist to a landscape painter—categories she wishes critics would avoid. "I'm an artist," she says simply. "I like to make things." But the simplicity of that credo belies a profound knowledge of art history, wide-ranging intellectual interests, an inborn sense of adventure and risk-taking, and a highly refined sensitivity to translating elements of the natural world into art. Essentially self-taught, Stuart, a spirited 50-something woman, has involved herself in everything from earth pieces to monumental paper works to installations to the more recent wax "paintings." In the mid-1970s she rubbed huge "scrolls" of paper with earth from various sites, creating luminous minimal "landscapes." She arranged 3,200 boulders to construct the earthwork *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* in 1979, and in the 1980s she assembled her "Silent Garden" encaustic grids, embedding them with natural artifacts to read as both monumental references to place and lush, intimate archeological sites. A recent body of work, the "Extinction" pieces, grew out of the



Michelle Stuart in her SoHo studio, surrounded by art-making materials that include seeds, twigs, leaves, and pots for melting wax.

discovery of a Victorian album of leaves that had been carefully pressed for posterity. In spite of her affinity for the past, Stuart has made abundant use of the freedom artists have won in the 20th century: "We can use anything we want to use, do anything we want to do."

As an only child raised in Los Angeles, Stuart remembers spending much of her youth sitting in the garden, "watching the whole stream of life." Her Swiss mother and Australian father often drove her into the desert for outings, and she loved their adventurous stories of life halfway around the world. At 17 she set out on her own adventure, to Mexico, where she



LAURIE LAMBRECHT

Seed containers made of beeswax, a metaphor for the potential of life, will be part of an installation; on the wall, "paintings" with embedded seeds in pigmented beeswax, 1997-98.

landed an apprenticeship painting murals alongside Diego Rivera. Since then, she has lived in Paris, Oregon, and Morocco. Her "completely obsessive thing with the garden" also survives to this day; she starts each summer morning in her country house in Amagansett, on Long Island, with a kind of inspection tour, to investigate what has bloomed, which insects are out. "I was born very observant," she says with her distinctive belly laugh.

Stuart's working methods simulate those of archeologists or botanists, who seem to have an invisible hand in her work. "It's a little bit like being a scientist," she says. "I do a lot of playing and experimenting. A recent work came about when she wondered idly one day: What would happen if you took a natural form, put it between two pieces of paper, and put a weight on it? Eureka! The juices ooze into the paper, leaving a ghostly shadow of the form itself. From that experiment grew such works as *Aquilegia*, a 58-inch-square gridded assemblage of pressed seeds, each surrounded by a halo of pale brown rings and remarkably different from the next. In spite of its quiet, monochromatic palette and constrained format, *Aquilegia* powerfully conveys the infinite variety of life, the miracle of individuality that is evident in the tiniest of seeds.

Since her first solo show in 1974 at Gallery Schmela in Düsseldorf, Stuart has earned a wide following, exhibiting in Japan, Korea, Germany, France, Holland, Great Britain, and Canada. The Anders Tornberg Gallery in Lund, Sweden, represents her in Europe; this fall she will mount a second one-person show at John Weber. Collectors and museums pay up to \$100,000 for her large paintings; smaller drawings and paintings sell for between \$4,000 and \$20,000. And invitations to exhibit in group shows arrive almost daily.

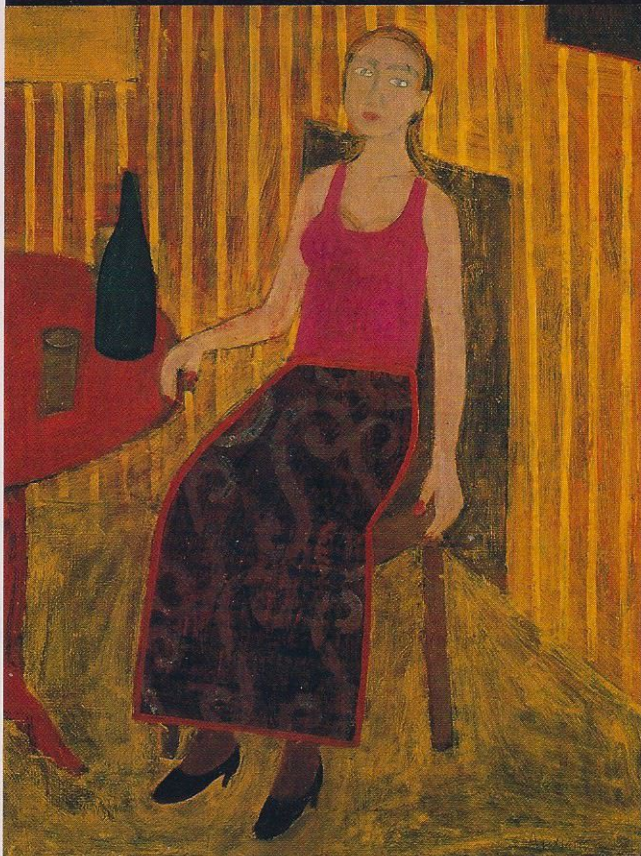
Despite the wide range of forms that Stuart has explored, she believes that each new direction has been a "search to capture some kind of essence of transmutation or transformation." Seeds are but one way of portraying the cycles of new life, of growth—and finally, of death. As Stuart has observed, "Seeds travel and have been known to remain dormant with life for thousands of years and represent—in usually a tiny speck—the past, present, and future of our being." ■

Gail Gregg is an artist and journalist in New York City.

Vladimir Arkhipov

R E C E N T P A I N T I N G S

March 11 - April 4, 1999



"Irena" oil on canvas - 53.5 x 39cm - 1996/7

GRANT GALLERY

484 BROOME STREET, N.Y.C.
212 / 343 - 2919 FAX 212 / 343 - 2973