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HOME

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Zone 5

Artists' Gardens



How a photographer and a sculptor **visually interpret** their landscapes

Lush Gardens Serve as Inspiration for a Photographer and a Sculptor

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rosette of gray-blue and rose-colored leaves, is admired by succulent collectors for its delicate color.

Meanwhile, in Petaluma and in San Francisco, sculptor Suzanne Biaggi musters plants, earth, steel, water and massive stone to create gardens of poetic beauty.

An artist and landscape designer, Biaggi shapes and sculpts plantscapes as background for her dramatic columnar stone sculptures.

"Sculptures and rocks and stones are as important to landscapes as flowers and shrubs," said Biaggi.

"I work with the site carefully and respectfully," she said. "Just as I chisel and sculpt stone, I select areas of a plot that I will reconfigure and alter. I want to create harmony between the original site or stone, and add new history and meaning to the land. The garden and the sculpture become one."

Camera Works

Don Worth, a professor emeritus of art at San Francisco State University and a former Guggenheim Fellow, assisted Ansel Adams for five years.

A native Nebraskan, Worth started his Mill Valley garden in 1964.

"When I first acquired this property," he recalled, "I dreamed of creating a subtropical garden in the shade of 50-year-old Monterey pines."

He planted agaves, New Zealand flax and pampas grass, all of which grew rapidly in his sunny and sheltered half-acre garden.

"I removed old sickly trees tangled with poison oak, chopped down rampant brambles, and then enthusiastically planted Australian tree ferns, Tasmanian tree ferns and black-stemmed tree ferns," Worth said.

"Over the years, I realized that I



SUZANNE BIAGGI / Special to The Chronicle

STANDING TALL: Sculptor/landscape designer Suzanne Biaggi created a trio of tall granite sculptures for this San Francisco garden.

was really growing plants that were perfect subjects for photography. I was not at all interested in flowers."

The sculptural forms of succulents were more important than blossoms. Worth is fond of the fierce spikiness of agaves, aloes and cactus plants. And he enjoys them more if they are bursting with vitality.

Over the last 20 years, Worth has become a palm fanatic. He has added hundreds of palms, including

Mediterranean tree palms, Canary Islands palms, windmill palms, Mexican fan palms and kentia palms, as well as more clusters of succulents.

But Worth's dreams of paradise have not been without trauma. He learned about microclimates the hard way, he admits, when many of his tree ferns died in the great 10-day freeze of December 1990.

Deer, frisky gophers and armies of ants and mealy bugs have also provided horticultural challenges.

Throughout the years, Worth has not only cultivated his garden, he has also photographed it in detail.

Early in the morning, before the winds blow in from Richardson Bay, he begins recording his still, green paradise. In the brighter light of later day, he continues focusing on the whorled centers of his succulents and the ruffled edges of his fern fronds.

"In my garden, and in my photographs, I am trying to bring into



CHUCK STEWART / The Chronicle

GREEN ROOM: In her Petaluma garden, Suzanne Biaggi made a stone "carpet" for the "floor" of grass.

existence an image I saw in a geography book when I was a boy in Iowa," Worth mused.

"It was a grove of tree ferns in Australia. For a child in the bitterly cold and gray Midwest winters, the picture was the ultimate symbol of Eden. That verdant paradise is what I am also trying to portray and immortalize on film."

Sculptural Stone

Suzanne Biaggi's sculptures are in private collections throughout the country. Her clients range from violinist Sir Isaac Stern to Metallica lead guitar player Kirk Hammett.

She studied sculpture and landscaping in Northern Italy and Japan, and started her own landscape design firm in 1984.

"Gardening has always been my favorite hobby," said Biaggi, who also teaches courses in landscape design and the aesthetics of gardens.

"As a child growing up in Hollywood, I worked alongside my father," she said. "He was an avid gardener, a floral designer and wholesale florist. I later studied horticulture so that I could turn my passion into a profession."

Biaggi's chosen medium for her

art is massive monoliths of granite and natural basaltic stone, which she shapes with great sensitivity.

Her elegant plinths, rugged rocks and stately columns stand in contrast to clouds of ornamental grasses or textured green carpets of moss and lichen.

"As a sculptor, my medium is monumental stone," said Biaggi. "But I approach the creation of a garden or a sculpture in exactly the same way. In a sculpture, I work closely and in harmony with the stones. In designing a garden, I collaborate with the site, the elements, my clients."

In a contemplative garden in San Francisco, Biaggi designed the sculpture courtyard. Her trio of granite sculptures was selected from a quarry that had been abandoned 80 years ago.

The works — the tallest is 8 feet — stand like the remains of an ancient temple, surrounded by a quietly splashing pool with fish and aquatic plants.

A granite bench was placed for garden viewing, meditation and contemplation of a collection of rare plants.

At her own Petaluma property,

Biaggi is at work on a new landscape, which she has named, "The Garden of the Blue-Tipped Tree."

A sea of green grass surrounds a "carpet" of cut stone. The 4-by-6-foot carpet is flanked by a pair of topiaried junipers; they, in turn, frame a sculpture.

The view from Biaggi's new garden, framed and accented by bamboo, is of open pasture land bordered by a row of coast live oaks. Rural farm buildings in the distance draw the eye and paint a rustic contrast to Biaggi's dreamy and somewhat abstract garden scheme.

Rearing up behind the new garden are living branches and tree trunks, painted bold, bravura blue by Biaggi.

"I started this new garden in an area I consider a power spot of the landscape," she noted. "Every garden has such a place that people are mysteriously drawn to. It's often an area where they want to spend quiet time and recharge their batteries."

Diane Dorrans Saeks is a San Francisco-based writer who specializes in design. Her newest books are "Bedrooms" and "Bathrooms" in the California Design Library series (Chronicle Books).

RESOURCES

■ **Suzanne Biaggi**, Suzanne Biaggi Sculptural Landscapes, Petaluma, (707) 762-0753 and (415) 382-1085.

■ **Don Worth's** photographs are available at Photographer's Gallery, 536 Ramona St., Palo Alto (between University and Hamilton avenues), (650) 328-0662; Ursula Gropper

Associates, Sausalito, by appointment only, (415) 331-2414; Scott Nichols Gallery, 49 Geary St., fourth floor (between Kearny Street and Grant Avenue), (415) 788-4641; Alinder Gallery, 39165 S. Highway 1, Gualala, (707) 884-4884; Photography West Gallery, Dolores Street at Ocean Avenue, Carmel, (831) 625-1587.