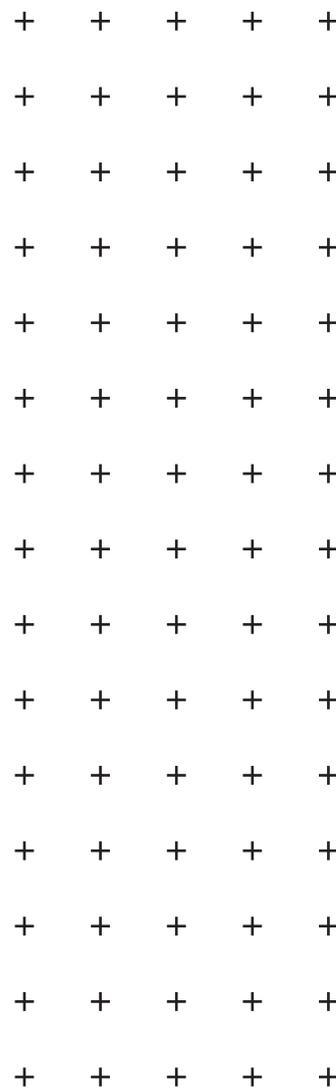


Testing Grounds

Temporary
infrastructure
for creative
practice

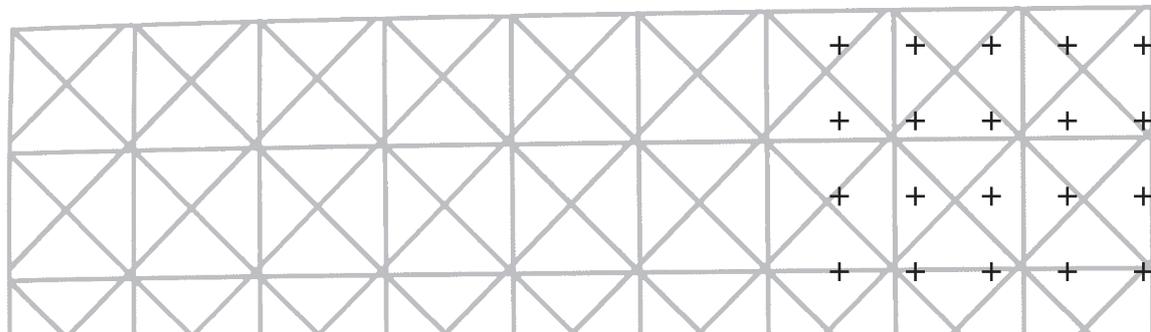


Living installation and the Community

Reading Room

Natasha Peiris, Luscious Jungle

Community Reading Room | 0026



Testing Grounds

Temporary infrastructures for creative practices

Bringing the wild inside

I first discovered the healing effects of plants after choosing to leave behind a failing relationship and an unsatisfying corporate career. The pull was strong as I allowed myself to be led down the path, and the emotional outburst I was experiencing had to unravel its tempest. It was as if until then a part of me was sleeping, and a then storm came and the ground I was standing on rearranged. Totally uprooted and with branches broken and leaves stripped bare, I was urged to look towards nature for comfort.

As I let the wild inside... I dug my hands into the dirt, breathing deeply and reconnecting with the source. Relishing the ritual and reciprocal nature in the practise of plant care - the process and intention - I found catharsis.

Moving into a small inner city apartment, I feathered my nest, showering myself with simple earthly delights; beautifying my space with plants and uplifting my senses with scent and music. With only a small balcony I was challenged for space but still managed to fill every room with greenery. I had created a sanctuary that gave me so much pleasure. It was a luscious jungle.

Looking back, my attraction to nature and greenery was in fact satisfying my growing desire to rejuvenate and revitalise. Wanting to share my experience, I began making potted creations and living plant art installations for those around me.

Biophilia: 'love of life and the living world'

While the humble houseplant is enjoying a revival driven by the trend in high-density urban living, indoor plants do a lot more than just soften the look of a room. Within any built environment plants can actually negate negative mood, dissatisfaction, loss of focus and poor health. Whether at home, in the workplace, or community spaces; accessibility and views to nature, varying temperature and daylight forge positive connections humans require to function at their optimum.

The concept of 'biophilic design' integrates natural elements into interior spaces while strengthening the connection between humans and the natural world. Stemming from Greek roots, the word biophilia means the passionate love of life and all that is alive, referring to an innate attraction to nature and our desire to connect with natural systems. The term was first used by Erich Fromm in his book *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) to describe a psychological orientation to all that is alive and vital. The concept was later expanded by biologist Edward O. Wilson (1984), who argued that humans have a biological need to connect with nature on physical, mental, spiritual and social levels. Recent Harvard studies have applied this concept of biophilia and proven that regular contact with nature reduces stress, improves productivity and mental wellbeing, and can even expedite healing.

Acknowledging these innate human needs, we began to think about creating a space where people could cultivate their inner garden, disconnecting from digital devices and reconnecting with the wild world and its natural rhythms.

Testing Grounds

Temporary infrastructures for creative practices

Community Reading Room: the installation process

With our recent plant installation for the Community Reading Room at Testing Grounds we set out to create an immersive experience. Working with artist collaborator Jesse Rhys Sciberras, we began the creative process by viewing the site and gathering inspiration for the design. We paid particular attention to the journey of the senses; imagining how visitors may feel in the space and how our plant display will impact their time spent. What will the space look like? Is there natural light? Where is the airflow? What colours and textures will we employ? What will it smell like? How will the plants we use continue to live and flourish within the environment? Who will take care and maintain them?

It was a blank canvas - we would be transforming a white cube into a community library for 3 weeks. Encouraged to challenge traditional boundaries and take calculated risks, we were excited to install a thought provoking, safe, and inviting environment for all visitors, artists, performers; a haven entwining literature, nature, and community.

On meeting the curator Torika Bolatagici, we learned that the library was her own personal collection and this was by no means to be a traditional library. Comprising of books and literature from the Pacific Islands, Africa and the Americas, Torika's unique collection included topics around race, cultural identity, gender and post colonisation. The context for Community Reading Room instantly provoked meaning to our design; the material centred around indigenous history and culture provided many themes to explore in our plant scape. With such a powerful collection of literature, texts and zines, it was important that the installation we were planning would not only provide a visual compliment, but also create an empowering experience. We wanted our work to reflect the idea of libraries providing a kind of freedom - freedom of ideas and freedom to share and communicate. We felt a deep sense of honour and indigenous wisdom reminding us that the natural world is enchanting and sacred, and that we are part of it, creating and co-creating.

The design: we rise by lifting others

Following ideas within the Process Art movement, our approach takes into account that the physical end product is not the only focus of an installation. Logistically, working with living plants requires careful planning; a series of measures to ensure the plants remain alive and sustain themselves within a man made ecosystem. The process of creating living installations is a dance between form and function. Managing the natural cycles of decay and rejuvenation through placement, light and water management ensures functionality of the installation, and symbiotically the aesthetic is informed by the natural systems.

Deriving inspiration from the literature and activities planned for the Community Reading Room, we built a sub-tropical oasis inspired by the Pacific Islands. A canopy of lush vegetation appeared amongst the tangled reeds and roots, trailing ferns, and fresh forest moss. We arranged the plants in a kind of rhythm around the room, following a pattern of shapes and colours. We spent time to preparing before their debut: wiping leaves, pruning, trimming repotting and watering. The blushing

Testing Grounds

Temporary infrastructures for creative practices

Bromeliad *Neoregelia* - which cleverly collects water in its spectacular magenta coloured 'cup' - was a particularly attractive feature while also proving to be self sustaining indoors. Dried rosemary sticks were woven through the the display, giving a gentle, uplifting aroma which encouraged mental clarity.

The scene was completed with a collection of red gum logs which symbolically represented the monumental and sculptural nature of totem poles. The hollowed logs, originally discarded, was reclaimed and repurposed as 'pots' for plants to unfurl from. A few of the logs were subtly carved and hand painted with bird and animal faces. Elevated by steel plinths, the reclaimed timber pots were distributed into a informal grid to create a towering vertical wall. To add detail we finessed the settings with river stones and pebbles, playing extra care at eye level to draw the viewer further into the display. Finally, we dressed the base of each plant with dried coconut fibre, which gave temperature protection moisture retention, while also showing a natural contrast between life and decay.

Maintenance and art

In the Manifesto of Maintenance Art (1967), Mierle Ukles proposed undoing the boundaries that separate the maintenance of everyday life from the role of the artist in society. Ukeles was interested in how art could be used to empower people to act as agents of change; to stimulate positive community involvement toward ecological sustainability. The maintenance and watering schedule for the living sculpture in the Community Reading Room was a key part of creating a harmonious, regenerative setting which actually grew more luscious over the 3 week installation. This caretaker role was often taken on by reader-in-residence and plant enthusiast Stéphanie Kaybanyana; the routine of care became part of her daily practice and put into action the idea of maintenance becoming part of artistic creation.

Our intention was for the plants and people to flourish together in a space for learning, reflecting, and regenerating.

Natasha Peiris is the creative director and founder of Luscious Jungle, a plant based project specialising in living installations for community spaces, interiors, visual merchandising and events. Based in Melbourne (and often escaping to to the jungles of her motherland Sri Lanka) Luscious Jungle is inspired to bring nature inside; creating immersive experiences, beautiful environments and meaningful stories through creative consultation and collaboration.

Web: lusciousjungle.com.au

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lusciousjungle/>