

Jane Rendell

Paradise Lost (and Regained)¹

Between two grand but slightly rusty iron gates, across a lush grass courtyard and around its majestic cedar tree, one enters the pale stone loggia fronting the building and leading to the central stairwell, lit from a window high above. Elegant steps wind up to the first floor, presenting a view back down to the original source.

The scene below is of a checkerboard inlaid with circles: bright green tufts in dark brown soil ringed with blue enamel are laid on marble squares of black and white. This enhanced pattern is made of lids from antique nineteenth-century jars. The usual function of a lid is to hold tight the contents of a container, to prevent their escape or the ingress of other unwanted conditions or particles. Yet these lids have been over-turned and used as the basis for growing. In their interiors a series of gardens have been planted. The new grass seed springs lithely up towards the light defying the earthbound logic of the lid to hold things down in the dark – goose fat, ashes, even seeds.

Beyond the stairwell three rooms with identical windows overlook the entrance. In one a landscape of plates float off the floor. Glazed white with petalled edges, each one contains a small garden. The gardens refer to one another; they are variations on a theme combining earth and gravel, two materials from the site, variously planted with a range of seeds – grass, radish, and lettuce.

The plates have been made in traditional moulds from the ground on which the building stands. The live earth is burnt, transforming nature into culture; the firing kills one life but engenders another. Here the plates, which usually contain food – vegetables and animals – cut from the soil and culled from the land, are returned to nature, and become life givers, coming alive as a

seedbed for plants. The floating position of the plates between ground and table reflects the location of these miniature gardens between nature and culture, life and death, freedom and containment.

The three rooms along the building's front are flanked by two larger exhibition spaces. The one to the right displays its wares on the floor, an arrangement of various plates, bowls, jugs, and fragments of vessels, sorted according to colour, bringing to mind Tony Cragg's *Spectrum* (1983), which ordered found items by their colour on the gallery floor, and Richard Wentworth's *Spread* (1997), a collection of ceramic plates laid out in a circle. Delicately balanced on the ceramicware are tiny vessels, glazed in the region's traditional blue, each one nurturing a new sprouting seedling, re-awakening this still-life.

[...]

Here at Barthete, Nguyen's hybridized artefacts, ceramic containers brought to life by sprouting seeds, fed by spring water, respond to the attitude and methods of display that govern the curation of the collection. This museological code works against convention preferring to organise according to a desire to combine whole forms and fragments, and consider the sensual appeal offered by visual taxonomies of colour and pattern rather than the more usual regime of geographical origin, date or style.

The *nature morte* of the display ceramic is reactivated by its new use, while the motifs of artificial nature in the decorative patterns of the tiles and plates are reanimated with the fronds of living matter. In such a force field, *Petites Terres* makes adjustments to our understanding of the delicate balance between nature and culture, life and death. Chemicals were used in the early ceramic industry, something we only know now to have been damaging. The paradise we believe we have lost is based on a state of not knowing. Once knowledge is gained, paradise as the bliss of ignorance really is lost.

Petites Terres could be understood in a number of ways, but I argue that these miniature perfect worlds are not simply vegetal scenes presented for our delectation, in which we can contemplate paradise lost. Rather, by drawing attention to the divergence between what they contain – seemingly perfect balanced worlds fed by spring water, and what contains them – the surrounding land, *Petites Terres* urges us to consider the responsibility knowledge brings as the difficult task of regaining paradise.

ⁱ John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem in blank verse. It was originally published in 1667 in ten books and concerns the Judeo-Christian story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Later in life, in 1671, Milton wrote the much shorter *Paradise Regained*, charting the temptation of Christ by Satan, and the return of the possibility of paradise.