

In the Garden of Earthly Delights: Maria Fernanda Cardoso



Sullivan+Strumpf Contemporary Art Gallery Sydney, Australia and
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Ahead of her upcoming Sullivan+Strumpf solo debut in
May 2021, Colombian-born artist Maria Fernanda



Maria Fernanda Cardoso in her garden. Photo credit: Ned Mulhivil

Maria Fernanda Cardoso is a Colombian-born artist who lives and works in Sydney. Her practice reveals the wonder, beauty and astonishing complexity of other life forms. Using research as the basis of her work, she collaborates with scientists, cinematographers, microscopists, videographers, sound-artists, industrial designers and landscape architects to express inspirations from the natural world in unconventional ways. And she is a keen gardener.

“Time is a wonderful thing, where age and maturity are not to be feared but to be admired.””

CAN YOU PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOUR GARDEN?

Maria Fernanda Cardoso (MFC)/ Gardening has been the most dynamic and rewarding project I have ever done. When we first arrived at this house, the existing garden was a desert (a suburban lawn). There was no real beauty and nowhere to shelter from the glaring summer sun. It was basically dead. Nowadays, my son Jupiter says “We don’t have a garden, we have an ecosystem”. There is so much life in it that I don’t feel alone in the garden anymore. My studio is at garden level. I knocked the walls of the studio down so I can feel the breeze, see the plants, the birds and the insects. On our ground floor there is vegetation all around, life where there was none before. The garden is the secret to our family’s wellbeing.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN A GARDENER?

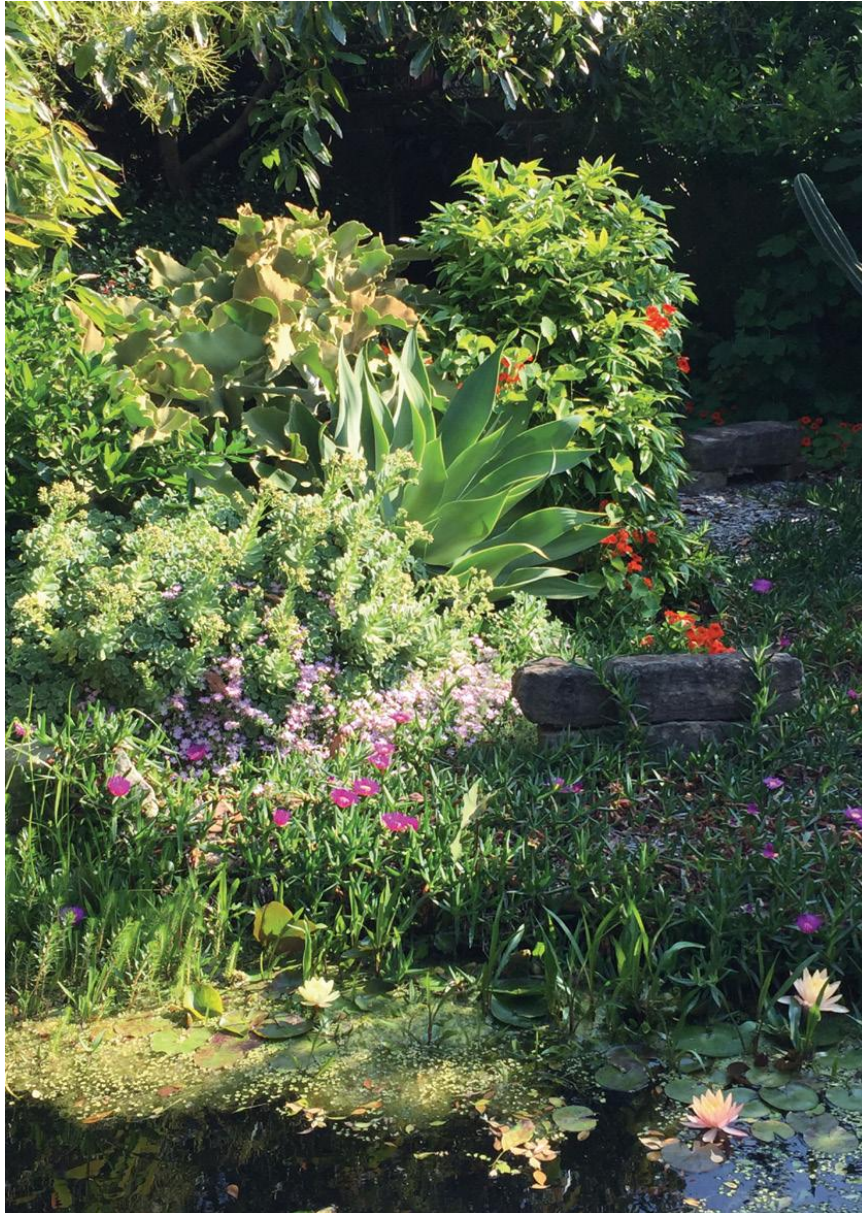
MFC/ When I was a kid, my father used to stop on the side of the road to pick up seedlings from the cloud forests in Colombia. We would plant them at home, slowly transforming a suburban garden into a mini cloud forest. But all we did was plant the seedlings and wait. Nothing else. As an adult I didn’t have a garden for decades as I lived in apartments. My first years as a gardener in Sydney were a comedy of errors. All the native species I planted died. I over-pruned all the bushes and killed them. So I started collecting plants from around my neighbourhood and I brought home a lot of weeds! For example, Mother of Millions, Prickly Pear cacti, Yucca plants. I had to remove them all later. But I also started to collect and propagate cacti and succulent cuttings which gave me more confidence as they are so easy to care for.

HOW DID YOUR SWIMMING POOL BECOME A POND?

MFC/ It was never my dream to have a pool, but the house came with one, which my kids and their friends enjoyed tremendously. Because I had to supervise the kids so they wouldn’t drown in the pool, I started to do gardening around the pool so I wouldn’t have to go into the water with them. Once they grew up and stopped swimming in the pool, it just became a chore: scooping out the leaves every week, replacing pumps and adding chemicals. I found out about a “Pool to Pond Conversion” program offered by Kuringai Chase Council. They made a little brochure and explained exactly what to do, which is basically to do nothing. Stop using chemicals, wait until the water is full of insect life, then plant some water plants in a shallow area of the pool. That’s what I did and now it is totally wild, especially as friends brought me more native water plants to grow there. In summer it becomes a theatre for mating blue damselflies. At night, I conduct “Frog Concerts”, and we sit around the pool and listen to 4 or 5 different species of frogs that just turned up on their own. I also added a dozen silver perch fish, who are thriving. And of course there are lizards eating all over the garden, snails, and lots of other small creatures. It is heaven for me. What I have enjoyed more about the garden was not the plants themselves, but all the other life they brought in.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE GARDEN TO YOUR ART?

MFC/ I planted a bottle tree at home as a 30 cm seedling and I was watching it grow really quickly and wishing I had planted more. So I proposed planting many *Brachychyton rupestris* as a piece of public art and I won a commission from the City of Sydney. It's called "While I Live I Will Grow", (just 5 min walk from Sullivan+Strumpf on 118128 Portman St, Zetland NSW 2017). I built a spiral of sandstone blocks that becomes a stage for seven bottle trees to display their growth into magnificent trees over the next 100 years. It is a long duration performative and observational artwork between the trees and the community. My garden taught me that time is a wonderful thing, where age and maturity are not to be feared but to be admired.



Maria Fernanda Cardoso's garden, Sydney.

BEST TIPS?

MFC/ Compost. I have never seen anything more alchemical than a compost heap steaming. I understood that the foundation of my garden were its small inhabitants.

Grow a little bit of food, a little bit of herbs, and a lot of food for the eyes.

Gardening is all about observation. Feel the breeze, the sun's direction, the

sounds, the insects, the textures, the temperature, the seasons. It's a daily

lesson that brings a lot of joy.

Figure out where is north. Based on that observation base all your decisions on where and what to plant.

Test your soil. I learnt why all my natives have died, and why my veggie patch was unproductive: my soil had the wrong Ph for them and it only had 3% organic matter: basically it was a sand dune!



Maria Fernanda Cardoso in her garden. Photo credit: Ned Mulhivil

Fix your soil. After my composting efforts didn't make a dent in my garden I went nuclear and bought 15 tons of pure compost, on the advice of my friend landscaper Sue Barnsley.

Mulch. Nothing gave me more satisfaction than turning over my lawn and covering it with tons of mulch. After heavily mulching, my garden started singing as all the roots interconnected. The soil is now rich and black.

Plant wind screens first' That's the secret to create a microclimate.

Propagate first, then decide where to plant. It will save you thousands of dollars and they will be healthier than plants you buy from a nursery.

Plant seedlings. Don't bother with expensive bigger plants. Start small and watch them grow.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's first solo exhibition with Sullivan+Strumpf will be in May 2021.