

Artweek



■ The Elements: Earth ■ Enrique Chagoya ■ Ed Ruscha ■ Annette Corcoran

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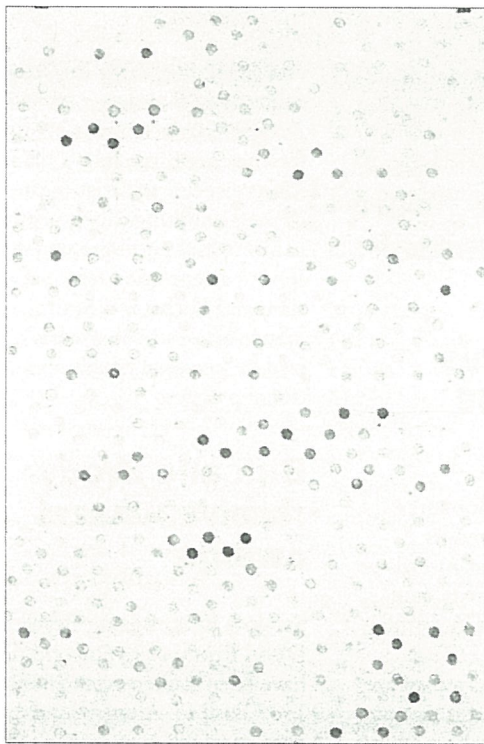
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Due to personal real estate inadequacies, my gardening has been confined to enthusiastic philodendrons, the kind that will grow in a closet. When I discovered within myself a curiosity about growth and how its principles might illuminate artistic process, there was only one work of horticulture on my shelves, a book which hitherto has been little more to me than plant porn: Rayford Clayton Reddell's *The Rose Bible* (Chronicle Books).

The Rose Bible first tempted me with blooming color spreads on floral phenomena such as "Old Blush"—the "prettiest of the stud roses"—and "Gold of Ophir," "like a moon on fire." Reddell dramatizes the qualities of varieties like "Ralph's Creeper," "Popcorn" and "Baby Chateau" with talk of "silky petals," "deep, lemony fragrance" and many other specific charms. Since I mainly had been dreaming over the portraits of mature plants, I had never made it to the practical instructions in the back of the book, which begin with a chapter called "Buying." And indeed, although "Buying" is also copiously illustrated in color, at the sight of the plate on page 176, my reverie dissipated. "A handful of sticks" is how Reddell describes the bare-root bushes that he recommends to the prospective gardener. "A handful of spiky, ugly, dead-looking sticks" is how I would amend his description.

I have seen such things for sale, but never thought to want one. For a neophyte, their potential is unknown, and "no one, except maybe for a rare enlightened being, advances with delight into the unknown," as the artist William Wiley said in a recent interview. The potential of art in its formative stages is emphatically unknown. I think of the many times I've encountered work aware of the artist's disappointment in it, which is often conveyed indirectly by anxious explanations of intent; or the many times I've looked at my own art and winced at its insufficiency. Most of us are not too comfortable with the bare-root stage of our work. Faced with our own handful of sticks, we squander time guessing at the future: Is there any juice in that shoot? Will that cane ever bud? Am I on the "right" track? (Is this perhaps a potato rather than a floribunda?) Unpleasant as this agitated timidity is to experience, it's a little more promising than looking at a "bare root," undeveloped work and, from ignorance, laziness or exuberance, calling it good. Would-be artists who make this mistake are stuck: they never plant their bush in the ground, never find nourishment for their work. An artist who is dissatisfied with her efforts may at least take the next step.

What does Reddell have to say about the act of planting? Quite a lot—much of it about finding the site. You want "five hours of morning sun, protected from wind, close to water, not too close to other plants that compete for root space and nutrients, and perfect drainage." "Five hours of morning sun." Perhaps that would be getting to the studio first thing, before my head has filled with distractions. For those who work at night, the timing is different, but still there's a rhythm of daily attention, the "sunshine." "Protected from wind, close to water"—disabling the studio phone? Bringing lunch? "Not too close

to competing plants"—studio neighbors had better be the kind who will keep their mouths shut unless their opinion is asked for. "Perfect drainage"—relaxing outside of the studio; not dwelling on doubts or circumstances that are beyond my control.

That's the way I'd play out the metaphor; other artists require different conditions. (At severe risk of reminding readers of Barbara Walters's famous "What kind of tree would you be?" question, I'll say they might be cacti or Venus's-flytraps instead of roses. A writer who's philosophizing with the help of a coffee table book with a foreword by Martha Stewart can't be too proud ...) Social circumstances being what they are, the struggle to root in favorable conditions threatens to be continuous for many artists. Unfortunately, it is usually the way with growing things that if they are planted in poor conditions or continually uprooted, they fail to thrive.

"Fairness" or "unfairness" are concepts without much usefulness in the world of growth. Either things grow or they don't. I used to think that artists who gave up because they couldn't make a living were quitters, but now I don't think of such a choice as a particularly personal deficiency. Perfectly viable seeds may fall in dreadful soil.

Reddell describes the soil conditions that roses like in a section subtitled "The Almighty Hole." He begins by saying, "Of all the fine horticulturalists I wish I'd met, I most long for the person who said, 'I'd rather plant a two-bit rose in a four-bit hole' than vice versa." He explains that roses don't have tap roots; rather, they depend on feeder

roots—masses of hairlike mats—for the bulk of their nourishment. These delicate roots need friable soil and the right organic food; overdosed on fresh manure, they'll burn up. It doesn't take too much imagination to extend these ideas to art: a so-so idea which has flowered when rooted in good conditions and work habits seems common, as does work which has spurted up—fertilized by theory—but then spindled and died because it's not rooted in the artist's own soil.

Reddell has much more to say about roses, and as I played with my comparison I could keep it going through blind growth and tools and even fungal diseases ... but the metaphor itself was growing spindly and I began to wonder if it was rooted in something real. Why did I care about it? Why pursue a question about what it means to grow? I found my personal answer in the section about pruning. "Rosebushes must be pruned for two reasons," says Reddell, "to encourage new growth, and to shape plants." But growth has its pains—we never know if newly planted flowers will be roses or stink weeds.

Wiley's words about the un-delight of the unknown circle back to me. His comments came in the course of a discussion about an exhibition he and his partner, Mary Hull Webster, are creating for the Oakland Museum, a loose-jointed, semi-improvised sprawl of an exhibition with one hundred artists, structured to be full of surprises. As we talked, Webster picked up his thought and added, "There's an aesthetic there, an aesthetic of entering the unknown." Wiley continued, "It's full of potential. It might fail, it might go. But the situation is rich with potential, and that's good enough for me."

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