Student-Curated Exhibition Surveys Eighteenth-Century English Gardens and Modern-Day Ideologies Through the Work of British Photographer John Goto

NEW HAVEN, CT (April 3, 2018)—This spring, the Yale Center for British Art presents Art in Focus: John Goto’s “High Summer,” an exhibition of work by the contemporary British photographer John Goto (b. 1949). This student-curated exhibition explores the historical sites that Goto references in his series High Summer, created between 2000 and 2001. Drawing on eighteenth-century views of the gardens at Stowe in Buckinghamshire and Stourhead in Wiltshire, Goto’s photographs are contextualized by ancillary works from the Center’s collection to highlight the ways in which these picturesque landscapes have been created, adapted, and represented over time to serve particular and sometimes competing ideologies. This exhibition will be on view at the Center from April 6 through August 19, 2018.

In High Summer, a portfolio of fifteen digital prints (nine of which were selected for this exhibition), Goto creates composite scenes in which contemporary figures disrupt the landscape gardens of eighteenth-century British country estates. These intrusive arrangements of people complicate the carefully contrived gardens with their seemingly natural plantings and emblematic classical buildings. Goto’s integration of contemporary characters into historic landscape gardens encourages the viewer to think critically about nature and culture both past and present, and the politics of these estates then and now.

“The English landscape garden attempted to tame nature, and a series of eighteenth-century landscape architects—notably, Charles Bridgeman, William Kent, and Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown—pioneered this informal style closely aligned with the development of a parliamentary democracy in Britain,” states Jordan Schmolka, SM ’20. “Inspired by ideals of liberty and limited government espoused by the political philosopher John Locke, architects and landowners cultivated a garden aesthetic emphasizing freedom in the landscape. These gardens included allegorical programs of classicized statuary and temples, which became emblems of the resumption of republican liberty and power.”

The gardens of Stowe and Stourhead were monuments to the political and aesthetic ambitions of great English landowners—the Whig Richard Temple (1675–1749), first Viscount Cobham at Stowe, and the Tory Henry Hoare II (1705–1785) at Stourhead—
who used their properties to critique the perceived corruption of the age. Shaping both productive and fallow land into carefully constructed, picturesque landscape gardens created ideal environments where all members of society—from landowner to laborer—could realize their place in an apparently harmonious, divinely ordered world. Such estate gardens provided Goto with a visual language to explore, and complicate, notions of the landscape, its social structures, and its histories.

“Goto modifies the quintessential British garden to reveal the artificiality of the environment, as well as the class hierarchies that haunt the rural landscape,” states Kelly Fu, DC ’19.

“I think Goto’s composite scenes invite the viewer to contemplate the delicate balance between notions of, what he calls, the “high” and the “low,” not just within the constructed landscape of his photographs, but in the very structure of British society as well,” adds Matthew Klineman, BK ’19.

Comprising a single bay in the second-floor galleries, a selection of photographs from Goto’s series is on view, including Brigands, Dancers, Eco Warriors, Farmer, High Ground, Movie, Pasturelands, Plinth, and Society, as well as several contextual works drawn from the Center’s collection. Art in Focus: John Goto’s “High Summer” is organized according to the following thematic sections:

MOVIE AND FARMER
In Movie, Goto depicts a film production crew set in a picturesque country garden. Actors stand in period costume within a landscape composition that resonates with theatrical scenes like those by the eighteenth-century satirist William Hogarth (1697–1764), whose painting The Beggar’s Opera (ca. 1729) is depicted in a print by William Blake (1757–1827) that is featured in the display. Goto was strongly inspired by Hogarth, and similarities can be found between his subject matter and those of the artist.

Farmer, on the other hand, features a dull, infertile landscape, which serves as a juxtaposition to the brilliant green pastures portrayed in Movie. The barrenness of the terrain complements the farmer’s lifeless body hanging from a tree, implying that a failed harvest may be the cause of his demise.

SOCIETY AND BRIGANDS
Here, Goto examines the delicate balance between notions of “high” and “low” in these images, questioning the seemingly fragile structures of community. The fumbling of folding chairs in the foreground of Society provides a moment of humor that seems to
contradict the serious aura of civic virtue and familial duty emanating from the classical architecture in the background. Isaac Cruikshank (1756–1810) illustrates a similar display of self-indulgence in his etching *A Flight Across the Herring Pool* (1800) – where well-heeled men who clamor for titles and recognition are instead humiliated in the “imperial pouch.” This pairing of Goto’s photographs highlights how society, like nature, when left unchecked, will quickly return to an untamed state, where base human impulses engulf civic ideals.

**HIGH GROUND AND PLINTH**

In these photographs, Goto contradicts the historic use of classical temples, statuary, and other monuments that normally embellish English gardens. *High Ground* depicts a group of British soldiers and displaced civilians taking refuge on a mossy plain before Stowe’s “Temple of Friendship.” Like *A View of the House from the Equestrian Statue in the Park of the Earl Temple at Stow, in Buckinghamshire* (undated), by George Bickham the Younger (ca. 1704–1771), Goto’s *Plinth* captures the reverberations of imperial conquest and the glories of British power embedded in English landscape design. At Stowe, monuments celebrating British heroes can be found dotting the serpentine walkways and ornamenting remote corners of the garden.

**ECO WARRIORS AND PASTURELANDS**

In *Eco Warriors*, Goto challenges the bucolic landscape of Stourhead, by disrupting the countryside with a swarm of environmental protesters. These activists descend on a test site for genetically modified crops, insinuating a modern-day battle for control over nature. *Pasturelands* visualizes a different form of present-day landscape engineering—the proliferation of popular wildlife parks in English country seats, which developed from the menageries created by aristocratic landowners who introduced exotic animals from across the empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The animals appearing in this work are not unlike those in the painting *Peacocks, Doves, Turkeys, Chickens and Ducks by a Classical Ruin* (ca. 1700), by Marmaduke Cradock (1660–1716). Goto creates a scene similar to those found in eighteenth-century estate gardens, which served as reminders of Britain’s imperial power.

**CREDITS**

*Art in Focus* is an annual initiative for members of the Center’s Student Guide Program, providing Yale undergraduates with curatorial experience and an introduction to all aspects of exhibition practice. The student guide curators for this exhibition have been Kelly Fu, DC ’19; Matthew Klineman, BK ’19; Jordan Schmolka, SM ’20; and Jackson Willis, BK ’19. In researching and presenting the exhibition, the students have been led by Linda Friedlaender, Senior Curator of Education; Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, Curator of
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Education and Academic Outreach; and Courtney Skipton Long, Postdoctoral Research Associate in Art Collections.

This exhibition and the accompanying brochure have been generously supported by the Dr. Carolyn M. Kaelin Memorial Fund and the Marlene Burston Fund.

ABOUT THE YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART
The Yale Center for British Art is a public art museum and research institute that houses the largest collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), the collection reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center’s collections include more than 2,000 paintings, 250 sculptures, 20,000 drawings and watercolors, 6,000 photographs, 40,000 prints, and 35,000 rare books and manuscripts. More than 40,000 volumes supporting research in British art and related fields are available in the Center’s Reference Library. In May 2016, the Center reopened to the public following the completion of a multiyear project to conserve its iconic Louis I. Kahn building.

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