

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Art That Rose Through the Cracks

Three exemplary exhibitions draw attention to public space, from community gardens to rooftop sculptures.

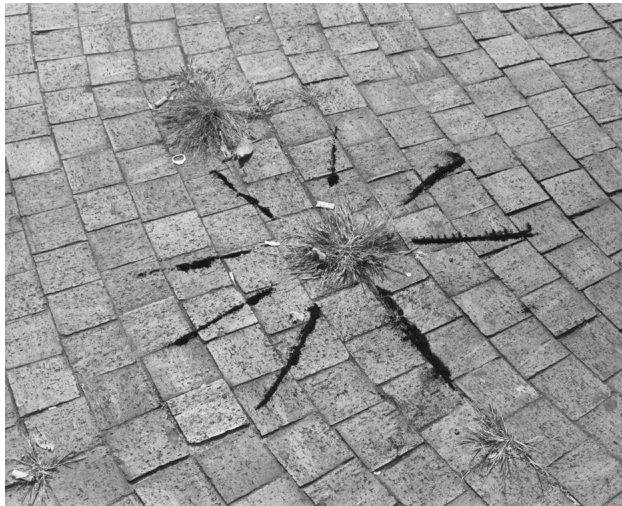
By John Vincler

Oct. 9, 2022

In the 1980s, newly arrived in Manhattan, in exile from her native Chile, the artist Cecilia Vicuña found beauty in the crumbling buildings and waterfront, the broken sidewalks and vacant lots of TriBeCa, before it traded its grit for boutique galleries.

She'd paused to photograph the weeds and plant-life growing up between the cracks, sometimes embellishing them with thread or highlighting their geometries with chalk. These "Sidewalk Forests" (1981), as she called them, monumentalize the transitory, transforming what could be seen as brokenness or neglect into a vision of nature's insistent reaching toward the sun.

"Life Between Buildings," organized by Jody Graf, assistant curator at MoMA PS1, connects the development of community gardens in New York in the 1970s to the work of artists, including Vicuña and Gordon Matta-Clark, who began using overlooked outdoor sites — especially abandoned or seemingly unusable space in the city — in their art.



Detail from Cecilia Vicuña's "Sidewalk Forests" (1981) in the exhibition "Life Between Buildings" at MoMA PS1. Miles Huston; via Lehmann Maupin



Detail from Cecilia Vicuña's "Sidewalk Forests" (1981). The artist photographed plant-life growing up between the cracks, sometimes embellishing them with thread or highlighting their geometries with chalk. via the artist and Lehmann Maupin New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.

The exhibition traces a history of art taking place in the neglected corners of the city, where nature sometimes seems to have been built over and largely pushed out. Two other exemplary current shows — Miles Huston's "Cinderella Had a Farm," at Gordon Robichaux, and Kate Newby's "We Are Such Stuff," at Laurel Gitlen — also ask viewers to consider their immediate surroundings, drawing their attention to communal public space.

Huston and Newby each differently bring the outside into the gallery through their work. For Huston, the humble watering can provides a means for reflecting on the reciprocal care between humans and plants. Newby captures the attention of viewers within the gallery to bring their gaze beyond to the streets, buildings and spaces outside.



Installation view of work by Cecilia Vicuña in the exhibition “Life Between Buildings” at MoMA PS1. via MoMA PS1; Photo by Steven Paneccasio

Huston’s exhibition at Gordon Robichaux centers on the artist’s collection of watering jugs shown in three distinct series: as sculptural forms on shelves presented as designed objects as in a museum, in uniform green monochromes hung neatly in a row from a rack with coin-deposit locks as at a cemetery, and another grouping in a heterogeneous, cluttered multicolored mass as they would be stored within a community garden.

The watering cans are surrounded by wall-mounted works in house-shaped frames within which Huston nests or juxtaposes combinations of images and found objects, ranging from a meme featuring Greta Thunberg to photos documenting striking farmers overtaking a highway in their tractors.

While the wall works use the tactics of collage to portray the globalized economy’s impact on food security and climate change, it’s the marvelously gnomonic and more effective presentation of Huston’s watering cans that allow the viewer to focus on how this simple object serves to honor and care for the dead or is employed within the democratic space of a shared garden.

On the Lower East Side, Laurel Gitlen gallery features two tile works that Newby, the sculptor and ceramist, calls “murals.” Hung like paintings, they incorporate found objects, specifically glass, gathered from specific locales: the neighboring streets of New York, in “I Hate and Love” (2022) and Auckland, in the artist’s native New Zealand, for “It’s Close” (2022).

A print is almost hidden in the closet-like office space, and a large work of cord — made of blown glass, handmade rope, bronze and wire — stretches across the narrow gallery for the exhibition’s title-work, “We Are Such Stuff” (2022). But these works account for less than half of the show.

Seeing the rest of the exhibition feels like being let in on a secret. It continues in the building's underused semipublic spaces upstairs. A cavelike industrial space behind the building's elevator-mechanical room houses two works of towering wall-mounted columns of overlapping, gently arching tiles like terra-cotta shingles. Around the corner, through a door onto the building's roof is another mural work incorporating glass from the artist's current home in Floresville, Texas.



Kate Newby's "Come Back Tomorrow Night and I'll Tell You" (2022), ceramic, found glass (Floresville, Texas), and minerals. via the artist and Laurel Gitlen, New York; Photo by Charles Benton



"Want to Start at the Beginning?" (2022), white brass, silver, stoneware, Limoges porcelain and glaze (9 pieces). Kate Newby; via Laurel Gitlen; Photo by Charles Benton

Back downstairs, the gallerist reached in her pocket to show one of three "pocket works" by Newby in the exhibition.

This one, called "Want to Start at the Beginning?" (2022), included a cast white brass replica of a soda can pull-tab and other rocklike objects made of stoneware, silver and Limoges porcelain. The work felt at once precious and subversive to touch and intentionally requires that the person working in the gallery begin a conversation with gallery visitors.

Gitlen also called my attention to the rooftops of neighboring buildings where colorful ceramic "rocks" were mounted by Newby, in "Go Often" (2022) and "I Can't Wait" (2022), both visible only distantly atop the architecture's ridgeline. Because of how the gallery sits near the top of its white building, oddly situated on a triangular lot, the view of the city is freed from the rigidity of the grid.



Kate Newby's "I Can't Wait" (2022), four pieces of ceramic "rocks" mounted on the rooftop of the gallery's neighboring building. via the artist and Laurel Gitlen, New York; Photo by Charles Benton

Cooperative Village spreads out panoramically, just south of the 24 community gardens on the Lower East Side, which have been mapped and documented by the Japan-based artist and composer Aki Onda in a room at PS1.

While you have to squint to see Newby's work in the distance from within the gallery, these flashes of color must also be a mysterious addition to the daily views of people looking out their windows in the neighborhood.

The works here aren't just ceramics; they are landscapes. As Vicuña found forests in the sidewalk cracks, the intervention of Newby's sculptures demand that we look out around us, and consider how we all must share and find space together.

#### **Life Between Buildings**

Through Jan. 16, 2023 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens. 718-784-2084, momaps1.org.

#### **Cinderella Had a Farm**

Through Oct 30 at Gordon Robichaux, 41 Union Square West, Manhattan; 646-678-5532, gordonrobichaux.com.

#### **We Are Such Stuff**

Through Oct. 22 at Laurel Gitlen Gallery, 465 Grand Street, Manhattan; 212-837-2854, laurelgitlen.com.

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