



Patrice Moor © Elena Alhimovich

## The seeds of inspiration: painting the Medicinal Garden of the Royal College of Physicians

For the past year **Patrice Moor** has been the garden artist in residence at the RCP. Ahead of an exhibition of the paintings produced during her residency, she reflects on the profound effects that her time at the RCP has had on her work.

**Many doctors would say that they did not choose their profession – rather, it chose them. In the end, the decision to become an artist came about in a similar fashion for Patrice Moor.**

'I was in my final year of a law degree when I found out I was expecting twins,' Moor begins. She had planned to do an MA in Law at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) but deferred the course by a year. During that time, she began to paint her children, first in watercolour but then in oil, which was a far better fit for her. She enjoyed painting 'tremendously', and began to realise that it was developing into more than a hobby. When it was

time to take her place at LSE, 'turning it down, however difficult in one way, seemed the only real option. I decided at that point to commit to painting. I was commissioned by a friend to do some paintings of his children and it was the turning point.'

### From cradle to grave

Since those initial paintings of children, Moor's art has evolved dramatically. Her work now consists primarily of still lifes and explores death and the cycle of life. (Not everything has changed, however – she retains her predilection for oils and continues to paint portraits.)

Why the focus on life and death? 'Simply because these are my subjects. They are my areas of interests and inform my work in every way and therefore are a never-ending source of inspiration.' Previously, her fascination with these

themes has taken on quite literal manifestations. She spent four years painting one human skull, a year and a half of which was spent on 'an installation of 252 small paintings (12 x 15 cm) of that skull ... This proclivity drew me to approach the RCP and apply for a job as artist in residence.'

### Planting the idea

For a stint in 2012, Moor was the artist in residence at the British Optical Association Museum. While there, she produced *The Beholder's Eye*, a painting of the eye socket and plastic eyeball of a skull in the museum's collection.

But rather than maintaining this cranial fixation, Moor's subject matter took a turn for the botanical upon joining the RCP. She attributes the credit for this change to Dr Henry Oakeley, the RCP's garden fellow, who interviewed her for

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the artist in residence post, and suggested that the medicinal garden might serve as inspiration.

When she visited the garden alone, Moor was unconvinced. 'I didn't really have any idea of what I was going to paint,' she recalls. However, she soon changed her mind. 'After giving me a tour of the garden, Henry asked me if something in particular had drawn my attention. I pointed to a rotting pomegranate lying under a bush.'

It was the pomegranate's resemblance to a skull that initially drew Moor's attention, but it was its decomposition that led her to realise how the garden might complement her aesthetic after all. 'Life, death and the cycle of life were all playing themselves out in this garden in the most amazing way, and it was a huge source of inspiration,' she explains.

Moor tried to spend around a day a week at the RCP, and went on all the garden tours. 'I tend to immerse myself in the garden and try not to think about anything,' she says of her creative process. 'At the end of a few hours there what stays with me is this leaf that's dying, or this plant, but there's no thought process and no planning involved; it's a very organic, instinctive process.'

Throughout, she was 'unknowingly drawn to plants and flowers that were either decayed or in the decaying process or about to decay. Generally that seems to be what's always drawing my attention as opposed to the beauty of the flowers, which is what a lot of other people who visit the garden find attractive and draws them.'

Moor took photographs to record her inspirations, choosing to complete paintings in her studio. She works meticulously, often taking months to complete a single painting. 'My paintings take a great deal of time because they are made up of lots of thin layers of paint,' she explains. 'I usually work on two paintings at a time but not always, and never more.'

### Paintbrush or scalpel

In this meticulousness, Moor sees a common thread between the work of the artist and that of the physician: 'Both require a great deal of attention to detail, single mindedness and determination. They both need to work hard to achieve what they want and are required to look beyond the obvious.' Furthermore, she posits that artists and medics 'can both aid and promote healing, albeit of a different kind,' but concedes that the former have one great advantage: 'They cannot kill anyone through their work!'

Patrice Moor: *life and death in the garden* is an exhibition of the works produced during her residency that runs from 11 November to 24 December at the RCP. It includes her painting of the decaying pomegranate unearthed on that first garden tour with Oakeley, strikingly rendered on a black background. Another similarly stark work reproduces in minute detail the flower of a wilting echinacea plant which she 'couldn't bring ... back to the studio because the petals were literally about to drop off.'

The collection encapsulates the bold new direction of Moor's work in the past year, which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, as she has accepted the position of artist in residence at the Botanic Garden of the University of Oxford. She acknowledges that this new role would never have come about without her time at the RCP, which she credits with having had 'a huge impact' on both her and her work.

'Being given the opportunity to be artist in residence at the RCP, and being given free rein to inspire myself from the garden, has been a powerful experience,' Moor concludes. 'It is admirable that an institution such as the RCP leads the way in valuing artistic dialogue. It is enriching for everyone concerned.' ■



### Garden variety: the range of inspiration in the medicinal garden

'Given that the garden was planted to be a record of the history of medicine, each part of the garden is, without doubt, interesting. Of course, being a garden it has a beauty but that is not its main purpose. I do love sitting near the plane tree on the lawn and looking at the garden and the RCP building, which I find quite stunning. The combination of the garden and the building together is probably what I like the most.'

'As far as I am concerned every season in the garden is of great interest. As an artist all things can be interesting and a source of inspiration. The garden at RCP is visually stimulating all year round. One of the bonuses of having a year-long residency is the possibility of seeing all the plants going through the seasons at all their different stages. I have a particular interest in the rotting and decaying process and was able to observe this at close quarters.' ■

