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Bulb Log Diary

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You may well be wondering what the cover image has to do with bulbs or the garden but in my mind there is a perfect link. Wherever I go I am compelled to make things using whatever materials come to hand – so often it is finding an interesting object that triggers the desire to create something and that is how the cover image came about. We are all attracted to collecting driftwood, shells, pebbles etc. from the seashore and I have been enjoying this random collection for some weeks before I decided to arrange it, then record and share the result. As the still life assemblage was temporary the photograph becomes the record that it existed, this highlights the importance of recording fleeting moments with the camera, something I am constantly also doing in the garden.



The very same process happens all the time in the garden where we assemble a range of materials - rocks, soils, plants etc., then arrange them into a pleasing composition and this happens across all scales so I create a small trough which can be viewed as an entity in itself or combined in a group of troughs or as elements within the bigger composition of the garden.





The materials that I found and used to form the cover image are a mixture of natural and manmade which is also reflected in the garden where we use a combination of the natural and manmade. The conglomerate on the left looks as if it could be manmade from pebbles embedded in cement while the manmade lump of concrete and wood has been beautifully worn by the elements to look almost natural – this confusion of materials gave me the confidence to use manmade materials freely around the garden.



I have learned from nature I can use manufactured materials sympathetically and after they are weathered by nature they start to look natural.

These materials are often recycled like the broken concrete used to create the landscape in this trough. I made the trough using a polystyrene fish box and cement which start to look like they are natural as they are worked on by the weathering process of nature.



We can learn a lot about rock gardening from the seaside where just as in the mountains we find a rocky exposed environment where we can observe magnificent rock structures alongside the random nature of rock piles.



I made this rock work many years ago inspired by the natural rock structures I had seen and following the examples of how the Japanese had for centuries seen rocks and gardening as an art form. It started as a ceramic tray with two bits of rock cemented into position and surrounded by gravel but over the years nature has joined in as my creative partner to complete the work with moss growing on the rocks and plants seeding into the gravel.



Working with nature is one of the best lessons that a gardener can learn and the Japanese have been masters of that for centuries.

Bonsai is one of the disciplines where, when done well, we see gardening and art blending together perfectly.

I have worked at bonsaiing trees for over forty years and while none of them are masterpieces there are some that I am pleased with.

Once more the bonsai can be viewed as an individual specimen, as a group, below, or as part of the overall garden.





I have always been interested in trees and have recorded them for my own reference both as photographs and drawings - here is a quick sketch I made on a train journey of a lovely stand of scots pine on the rise of a hill –as the train was travelling at something like 70mph it had to be fast art. The influence of Japanese art comes out again in many of my landscape and tree drawings just as it does in the bonsai.



This 40 plus year old tree would be a giant cone shape if I had not shaped it in the cloud style like a large bonsai – slow art. I would normally trim it once a year but last year I did not get around to trimming it so the shape was being lost as the growth was closing up.



The art of topiary has many styles and I could have shaped the tree into a large chicken but my aesthetic is much more towards the stylised natural shape so well demonstrated in traditional Japanese gardens and taken up in bonsai.

After a few hours of trimming the cloud style is established again - the gardener and nature working together to turn a tree into an artwork.



The back gutter of the glasshouse is next to the hedge and is not easy to get at to clean it out. I have been observing this seedling pine growing there since last year – now I think I need to get it out of there before it becomes an issue.



For various reasons I control the shape of many of the trees in the garden although not all are as stylised as the cloud pruned one.

This pine is candle pruned every year to keep the growth compact and a few years ago I also removed all the lower branches to expose the trunk and to open up the planting area below.



Now the shape mimics the shrub in the foreground which I was also thinking of trimming as it is spreading out using up valuable planting space until I noticed that after a number of years it was flowering for the first time.



Trochocarpa thymifolia



I see the garden as an ever changing art installation; the control of which is a partnership between me and nature. I would say that I get the choice of what is planted except that is not entirely true as many plants come in by seed using a third party carrier such as birds, wind, etc. however I do get to choose what is allowed to stay and for how long. I know people who are much tidier than I am who would have removed these leaves as soon as they started to

turn yellow but I enjoy the changing colour and form as they slowly collapse and decay.



I also like recording this with the camera or trying to capture the atmosphere by drawing them in some of my many sketchbooks using a number of mixed media techniques.



The yellowing forms of the Roscoeia foliage also saw me trying to capture the vision in mixed media drawings in sketchbooks.



I love seeing old herbarium sheets where the pressed preserved remains, as well providing a scientific record of a collected plant, can also create a powerful image especially with all the historical texts and aging of the papers and that, along with the chaotic atmosphere found in groups of plants in the garden or the wild was the inspiration for another series of drawings.



I have thought to create my own 'herbarium' type sheets where I could enjoy the dried and pressed remains of some plants. There is a beauty in the pressed and dried remains of a plant laid out on a sheet of paper.



This currently unused section of a bulb house plunge has been turned into a temporary studio space providing good light for photographing.



I found these Narcissus flowers that I pressed two years ago on the lower shelf of the bulb house still in between sheets of newspaper in the makeshift plant press now they are somewhat chewed by insects but still I find a beauty in these decaying flowers.



In the garden I can isolate many images carefully composing them in a digital photograph – each of which can tell a story. Here the new *Cyclamen hederifolium* leaves are surrounded by the autumn leaf fall with *Helleborus* leaves pushing out in the foreground.



This group of silver leaved forms of *Cyclamen hederifolium* stand out against the fallen leaves in the shadier areas. They flowered a few weeks ago and I was curious to see if there were any signs that they might be setting seeds.



Yes I find some of the flower stems are coiling, drawing the slowly swelling seed capsule down towards the tuber where they will hold onto the seed for almost a year before shedding it. I also see the tiny leaves of many new



seedlings growing where they spilled from the capsule right on top of the tuber – I will rescue and plant them elsewhere next year when the plant goes into its summer rest. Perhaps I can plant some of them beside seedlings from this dark flowered form where they will form a nice contrast.

Impatiens omeiana

Impatiens omeiana is a good plant whose growth of attractive foliage appears in spring slowly spreads out through the summer then its flowers appear in autumn when many plants are going down for the winter.



There are so many attractive autumnal images waiting to be captured by my camera as I walk around the garden.



Autumn leaves





Where ever I go I have always been attracted to collect objects which I often arrange into a 'still life' which I then record with a photograph. Sometimes this is done in the location like this 'Crab Shrine' created at the seaside.



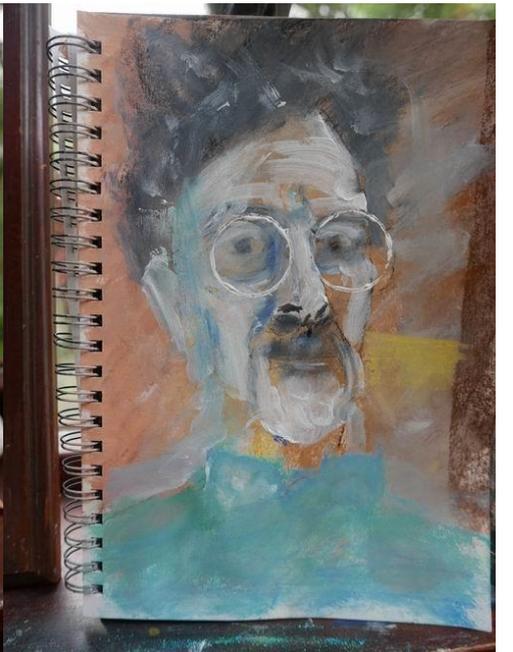
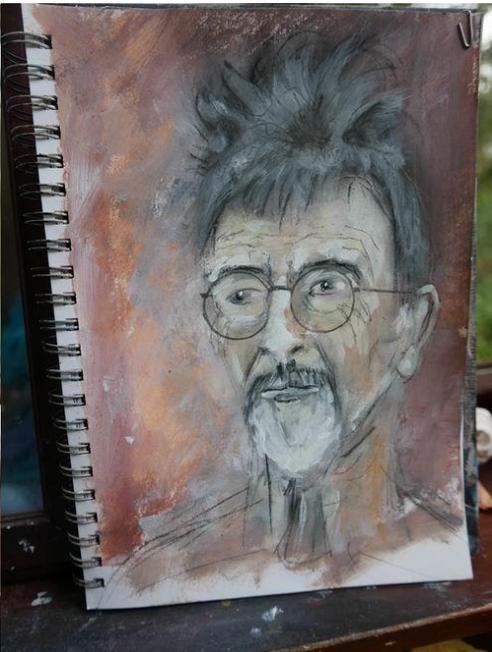
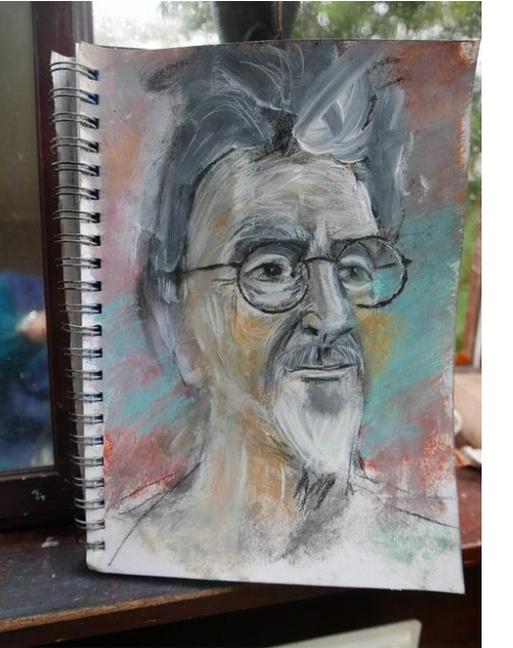
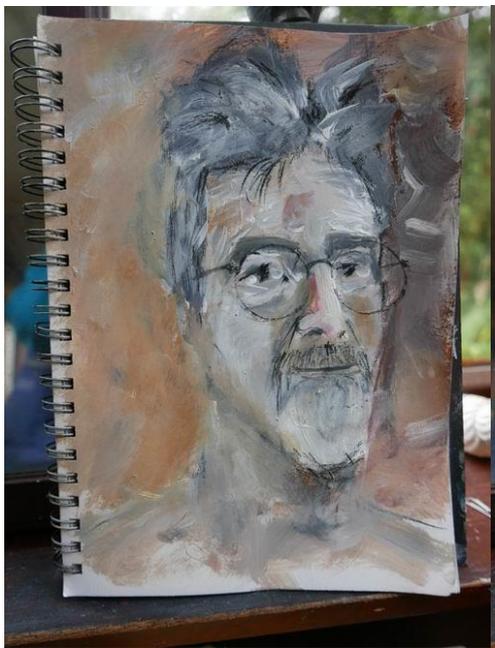
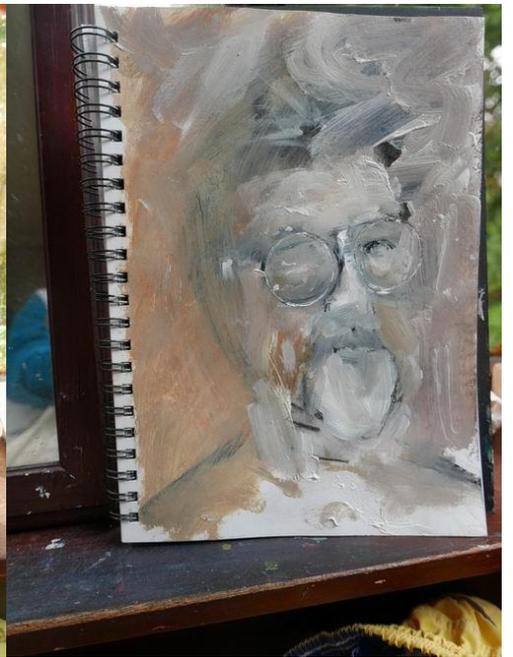
Even as I walk the dogs I will find discarded objects which I collect and may combine into small assemblages – these are not random objects each tiny box will have a theme or a story behind it. Here all the objects are about holes including pictures I took of potholes in the streets before and after they were filled in with tar.



My desire to collect and arrange things makes me ideally suited to collecting and arranging plants in the garden where I have the additional challenge of working in partnership with nature. I am constantly manipulating environments within the garden both for aesthetic reasons as well as trying to create conditions that plants from so many different parts of the world can tolerate.

Artists among you will know the working process where when faced with a blank canvas the first thing you do is to make a mess then try and pull a likeness or image out of the chaos as I constantly do in sketch book selfies. When I made the new bed

by the pond recently ([Bulb Log 3417](#)) I worked to turn a mess of materials into a pleasing bed whether I have been successful will not become apparent until the plants appear in the spring.



Sketchbook Selfies



Gathering together objects, each of which is attractive and interesting on its own, then combining them with other objects into attractive compositions describes the image above but could equally well describe the garden where we gather and arrange plants rocks and other objects into an attractive composition. The difference is the garden is never finished: it is constantly changing, some plants grow too much and need cut back, others die away then there are all the seasonal changes.

I finish with an appeal to you all about the [International Rock Gardener](#) (IRG) the monthly online magazine which is available freely to everyone. The IRG has become a popular publication read by thousands around the world every month but we rely on the generosity of the contributors to provide the material. Every one of you could contribute. We would welcome your contribution of anything from a small portrait of your favourite plant to a longer article about your garden or plant related travels and interests. You do not need to be an expert to be a contributor nor have perfect spelling or English as our editor will assist with that. The IRG is your magazine it need your contribution. To send or discuss your contribution contact the [Editor](#).