

THE FERAL GARDEN OF THE MORE-THAN-PANORAMA MUSEUM

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Abstract

This essay relates the story of a panorama museum's care and response to Los Angeles' multi-layered urban development and surplus materials from its most understudied space: the back garden. Connected to the rear of LA's Union Theatre, which houses the nineteenth-century Euro-American style Velaslavasay Panorama (VP), is a garden of thick, entangled plants, with stone paths snaking beneath string lights. As the visitor traverses the 'jungle', she glimpses architecture like the Pavilion of the Verdant Dream with a wooden door and ornamental lattices, and the green hexagonal Arulent Gazebo with a copper-tiled roof. The garden instantiates the 'feral' DIY LA art that the VP curators practice, transporting the visitor from a site of virtual travel to a site of 'rootedness' in the moment. Centering on the concept of 'feral', this essay presents the Velaslavasay garden as an organic experimental part of the more-than-panorama museum.

Keywords: Feral art, painted panorama, heterotopia, neighbourhood, Los Angeles

And now we are approaching the garden from the theatre's exit. When you pass through the dark hallway, you can see a diorama of the old panorama building, the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda, as it was in 2001 on Hollywood Boulevard. In the diorama is a sparkly sign, tiny palm trees, and bougainvillea vines surrounding this miniature round structure. While looking at the diorama, you experience the sounds of the real garden, just to your left. You can hear many birds. Then you pass through a mosquito net and enter a very green abundant space – vines over bountiful aloe plants almost as tall as Sara and Ruby. The garden is a heterotopia of other Los Angeleses interlinking neighbourhood lives, memories, and cycles of creation and re-creation.

In 2000, Sara Velas founded the Velaslavasay Panorama (VP), a non-profit art space and museum, at the erstwhile Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda in Hollywood. The rotunda was originally built to be a Chinese takeout restaurant that took architectural inspiration from traditional Chinese temples. Velas's own 360-degree painting, Panorama of the Valley of the Smokes, which depicts the LA Basin 200 years ago, was on display for almost four years. Outside was a garden featuring lava rocks, which inspired architectural historian Chris Nichols' description of the site's style as 'Tiki-Chinese-Roadside-Funk' (Howser,

2001), an 'exotic' space to catch the eye of the potential driving customer to pick up Chinese takeout, such as chu-chu egg rolls, listed in a Ralphs newspaper advertisement circa 1960s. In the otherworldly garden, feral parrots roosted in the two huge canary island date palms and could be heard in the late afternoon, like in so much of the city. Inspired by the parrots' visits, Velas and her sister made the Avian Alcove, an installation in the garden with a painted backdrop and an ambient bird soundscape as a virtual presence in case the 'real' parrots were not around. When the Rotunda was scheduled to be torn down to build a mixed retail development project, Velas moved the panorama to its current location in 2004, LA's century-old Union Theatre. In 2009, Ruby Carlson, writer and cinematographer, joined the organisation and continues to play a key role as co- curator.



Fig.1 Snapshot of the Union Theatre back parking lot (2004). Future site of the Velaslavasay Panorama's garden. Photograph by Sara Velas.

In this essay, we walk you through the garden of the current Velaslavasay Panorama that was once an empty parking lot behind the Union Theatre. [Fig 1] As you listen to the birds chirp, admire the tall wild plants, smell the flowers and fruits, and sometimes the neighbours' burgers and barbeque, and pick the winding stone paths through this small but infinite jungle in the city centre, we point you to where all these lives, sounds, smells, and architectural features came from, and read them as an archive of the 'native' LA lives south of Hollywood. In 'native', culture and nature coexist, and the human and the more- than-human build each other. Not excluding but juxtaposed with the 'foreign' as (if) on a theatre stage, 'native' emphasises the ecological vitality, productivity, and inclusivity of

land as the vernacular milieu of life and art (Foucault, 1986: 25). 'Native' means nothing is waste. The dirt, rocks, plants, shells, art surplus, refuse, composts, and human companionships that make the VP establish a remembrance of the city's layered pasts and presents of industry, immigration, and urban development.

The Velaslavasay garden presents a Foucauldian heterotopia. It grows with, and is responsive/response-able to, LA's multispecies, multigenerational, multiethnic, and multilingual ecosystem in interlinked cycles of creation and re-creation. For this reason, we call it a 'feral' space. 'Feral' denotes three main parameters of local museum-making alternative to LA's Hollywood spectacle: the repurposing of institutional art training for artist-built folk art environment, the immersion in modestly controlled botanical milieu as a method of displacing and decentering the logic of contemporary art with a capital C, and the propagation of grassroots commons and commoning from which grows a rhizomatic 'panorama public' – a loose but robust network of panorama enthusiasts outside the art and scholarly academy. This 'field trip' to the Panorama garden will showcase how it is derived from, and embodies, the sympoiesis of LA's 'minor neighbourhoods' (Clark, n.d.). This text plays with multiple voices and memories of the organisation's history, values, and aesthetic practices. The narrator is polyvocal but sometimes breaks into the singular voice of Sara Velas or Ruby Carlson to showcase a specific thread, or graft, of the nonlinear iterations of the VP as an alternative art – or even 'anti-art' – space (Manta, 2016) more than a museum of painted panoramas.

The Pix Plaza: Feral Web of Organisations

We push open the mosquito net and walk into the garden in early April. To our right, a scraggly apple tree is starting to produce leaves at the cusp of spring. There is a heart-shaped Dutchman's pipe vine (*Aristolochia gigantea*) cascading from the garden wall on the right. You can tell there has been rain recently. The concrete floor is moist with evidence of moss. There is a citrus tree bearing gigantic fruit (*Pomelo/Citrus maxima*) to our left, a result of grafting-gone-awry, as the tree was intended to be a Buddha's hand, also known as fingered citron. Walking forward, we are in the centre of the Pix Plaza. A giant illuminated 'P' hangs on the theatre's backwall, with an 'ix' below. 'P' stands for Panorama and for Pix Theatre in Hollywood, where the sign originated from the mid-80s when Carlson's mother, Mary Rodriguez, salvaged it as the theatre changed its name to The Fonda. Over 30 years later, Rodriguez donated the 'P' to the Panorama, upon which the VP's technical collaborator and designer Oswaldo Gonzalez restored it and hung it in the garden. Rodriguez donated the remaining 'ix' for the Panorama's *An Evening of Neon*

event, celebrating neon history and restoration work in LA. In 2023, David Starkman and Susan Pinsky of LA 3-D Club, a 70-year-old organisation of Southern California-based 3D stereoscopic photographers and enthusiasts, donated light bulbs to fully illuminate the 'Pix' sign.

The illuminated letters reveal a pattern that repeats itself in this essay and in the structure of the VP's feral garden, where remnants of the past are composted and repurposed to create a root structure linking together organisations, landscape, history, and people. In front of the 'Pix' sign, a giant cactus grows as tall as the pomelo tree. They are intertwined and growing with each other, striving for the sun, as though the pomelo tree grew cactus branches. Next to them is a volunteer pomegranate tree (*Punica granatum*) that is beginning to blossom. The smell of grilled meat flies in from Pete's Burgers, the neighbourhood diner since 1972. Looking up, we spot an airplane through the thick leaves overhead. It is descending to the LAX airport.



Fig.2 Attendees gather in the Pix Plaza after a film screening at the VP (2018).
Photograph by Forest Casey.

This central meeting point below the 'Pix' is a nexus for the panorama public to gather after viewing interior exhibits or attending an event, offering a dual experience of invented landscapes from the proto-virtual of the panorama to the constructed reality of the garden. [Fig 2] A crowd will form and huddle together in this spot, weaving a web of places and histories the garden brings together from Pix to Pete's, and as the next few

sections show, the constellation of feral 'peculiarities' (Sepúlveda, 2005: 3). Through the garden, the Panorama makes entangled, 'continuous enrootings' (Diedrich, 2024: 134) of companionship in the soil, water, air, and light of LA.



Fig.3 Performers of Pursuing the Verdant Dream in the VP Garden (2011). Photograph by Larry Underhill.

The Pavilion of the Verdant Dream: Compost as Method

Then we come to the Pavilion of the Verdant Dream, a curved seating courtyard with an intricate penny-and-stone laden floor and lantern-lit steps leading up into a slate-colored rockery grotto, adorned with octagonal windows, a fountain spring and ferns. Looking up, a giant fig tree is overhead. Next to it is a loquat tree that will soon produce fruit. Visitors are invited to enter the Pavilion, if they brave the cobbly concrete fragment steps, and sit opposite a waterfall feature. The stone and tile floor is inspired by the Classic Chinese Suzhou Garden style. Velas, Gonzales, designer Evelyn Kiing, and the Chinese visual artist and the VP's long-term painter Guan Rong, collaboratively designed the floor pattern. Parts of the stone floor were salvaged, including slices of the 'composted' tiles, from the original Hollywood Boulevard site. Before the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda was gone, Velas rescued

the concrete tiles without an immediate idea of how to reuse them, until a set of Chinese Opera demonstrations were planned in August 2011 for a two-day event, Pursuing the Verdant Dream: Two Afternoons of Kwun and Yueju Opera. The long tradition of connecting gardens with theatrics in the history of Chinese operas was naturally evoked as the Chinese artists toured the Velaslavasay garden. [Fig 3] As a result, The Peony Pavilion (1598), one of Chinese operas' most exemplary tributes to the theatrics of gardens, was selected for performance. As if a feedback loop, the performance then inspired the creation of the Pavilion. In the years to come, it would attract to the garden dreams of city lives on the silver screen that would have otherwise been lost in their journey in time.

At the Pavilion, our intention is not to recollect how 'Chinese' performative and visual cultures became part of the Panorama or the garden, which would risk being Orientalist without unpacking the complexities of 'Chinese' and questioning its presence in this organisation. Instead, you will hear about compost as a method of creating alternative cultural spaces: how different building materials are recycled and repurposed as new relationships with LA are inspired by a native garden, and how those relationships obscure the line between artists and audience and leave behind a mark, a memory, and musing that will grow into new art programs at the VP and beyond. Defying the impulse to position 'Chinese' as foreign and 'other' in space-time against the perceived 'native' and 'local', the Pavilion represents the continuous process in which their incompatibility is not hastily resolved. Instead, it symbolises a heterotopic and peculiar LA of many 'other spaces' and 'other times', a metonymy of what Foucault calls 'the epoch of simultaneity [and] juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (Foucault, 1986: 22). Juxtaposed in the Pavilion are also the virtual and lived environments as the VP focuses on this architecture the light and shadow of a variety of 'show industry', from panorama and garden to theatrical play and film. It converges many cities, including Beijing, Shenyang, and LA, in ephemeral film productions through the generations of filmmakers and panorama painters who devote their lives shuffling, and who themselves shuffle, between faux and real landscapes. The artist becomes the spectacle and the spectator the artist in cumulative cycles of engendering 'Chinese' cinematic temporalities.

Like a prism on the outskirts of Hollywood, the Velaslavasay Panorama refracts its blinding corporate fame and propagates heterogeneous waves of connection with the Chinese film industry. A three-part screening series in 2021, a belated celebration of the VP's twentieth anniversary, drew the attending crowd to 1930s Hollywood-influenced Shanghai glory, an idyllic southern Chinese melancholy produced in Hong Kong on the cusp of the Communist Revolution, and Beijing streets – and Peking Opera house and public bathhouse – after the Mao era captured by filmmakers known as the 'Sixth Generation' (Electric Shadows, 2021).

The three films celebrated the reopening of the Shengjing Panorama, a 360-degree landscape painting of the semi-colonised Shenyang (circa 1910-1930) in northeastern China, debuted in 2019, but closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through juxtaposition and superimposition, Chinese cinema across sixty years casted its ghostly 'electric shadows' on the VP garden, then turned into an open-air theatre, creating a multi-world effect for the audience in which 'China' and 'California' blurred, multiplied, and became confused (VP and Livonian Cinema, 2021). [Fig 4]



Fig.4 Electric Shadows on Penglai Mountain outdoor film screening at the VP (2021). The Isle of Penglai is visible in the foreground. Photograph by Forest Casey.

During the screening of *For Fun* (1992), the Pavilion was turned into a Beijing-style 'bathhouse', referencing scenes in the film. [Fig 5] Spectators passing by the Pavilion to feel the 'steam' and overhear the clubhouse men talking in the 'bath' experienced the same scene/screen as the old opera connoisseurs did in early-1990s Beijing. A similar experience of walking into the screen accompanied the film, *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), where the audience realised that during their tour of Shengjing Panorama, they had just set foot on a replica of a war-torn city wall in early twentieth-century Shenyang, resembling the replica wall the heroine of the film walks along in southern China, twenty years apart in the panorama or eighty years apart in the garden. Neither was more real or virtual than the other. The architectural replicas in the Guandong (near Shenyang) and Beijing Film Studios from which *Shengjing* and *For Fun* partially came from, respectively,

are both stuck in the cycle of demolition and reproduction. The former was partially burnt to a crisp in 2019 on the eve of Shengjing's debut, and the latter gave way to Universal Studios Beijing, which opened in 2021. But their spectres have danced in the panorama garden lit by Hollywood's forgotten glow.



Fig.5 Pavilion of the Verdant Dream activated as a "bath house" for an Electric Shadows screening of Ning Ying's *For Fun* (2021). Photograph by Forest Casey.

The Penglai Isle: An Archipelago of Celestial Collaboration

We step out of the Pavilion, follow the adobe brick wall built with the original parking lot's decomposed granite too expensive to dispose of, pass the Penglai Isle (Hōrai in Japanese) – a rockery made of refuse, concrete bits, and broken pottery on a hypertufa base – and reach the other end of the feral garden where the stone path stops at the moon gate. [Fig 6] Wearing a hazy hue under the sun, the Isle is a miniature of the mythological Penglai Island, the home of the Daoist immortals in Chinese and Japanese legends floating in clouds and waters. Representing paradisiacal delight and timeless friendship unburdened by the mortals, the famed island in the distant mountains and seas has not only inspired the literati but also designers, landscapers, and architects of gardens across the greater Sinophone world over a millennium.



Fig.6 An aerial, August view of the Velaslavasay Panorama's Garden (2021). Photograph by Forest Casey.

The Velaslavasay garden once held a reading of *The Monkey King* in an occasional book club led by artist and VP collaborator Paula Peng in 2007. The transient literary gathering germinated the idea to create a rockery in the garden when half of it was waiting for a story to open a portal to other worlds. To this request, 'Penglai' brought the celestial union of eternity and ephemerality, represented in the earthly bodies of rock and water. Designed to evoke an ethereal and nebulous imagination, the Isle was adorned with velvet elephant ear (*Kalanchoe beharensis*), dusty miller (*Jacobaea maritima*), white alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*), and purple sage (*Phlomis purpurea*). Its terrain is composed of tiny seashells, bits of rock and concrete, fragments of porcelain and opalescent oyster shells retrieved from the Studio City House Saloon in the San Fernando Valley. [Fig 7]



Fig.7 An evening, illuminated view of the Isle of Penglai (2013). Photograph courtesy of Velaslavasay Panorama.

VELAS: The island used to have a few lit areas. I have really fond memories wiring up LED modules with Oswaldo Gonzalez and Mimi Soo-Hoo, who was one of our summer Getty interns who continued her involvement. Once having dinner together while we were working on the Isle, I thought to myself ‘This is what this is about, just working on this thing.’ I had a strong revelation that the work itself is the key reward for me, not the ‘final’ product.

Process is so vital to the VP’s longevity, among other factors, that it simply carries a project over its closure point. A fundraising dinner to inaugurate the Penglai Isle launched the ‘Velaslavasay Panorama Enthusiast Supper Club’ series in 2009. The Supper Club then moved focus around the moving panorama, The Grand Moving Mirror of California, an interdisciplinary presentation of Dr. L.E. Emerson’s 1853 script for a moving panorama, a tale of the California Gold Rush led by a crew of a narrator, a pianist, crankers, and craftspeople (Grand Moving Mirror of California, 2010). The supper series steadily built a panorama public that would germinate a variety of lasting partnerships, one of which

formalised in the VP's collaboration with LA's Forest Lawn Museum on the exhibition of *Grand Views: The Immersive World of Panoramas in 2023* (Supper Club, 2010; Forest Lawn Museum, 2023).

The Penglai Isle is another example of a multi-phase, multi-year project that involves many of the VP's ongoing 'cast of characters'. Paula Peng joined the painting work of the Arulent Gazebo (discussed more in the next section) and organised a VP concert of the Bulgarian Polyphonic Choir. The sculptor of the Isle's bridge and mountain returned four years after the Isle's initial completion to add a waterfall and pond. An artist and friend of the VP donated mosquito-eating fish to the new pond. Now in 2024, the Isle is in a revival phase with new plants sowed like bridal veil (*Nigella papillosa*). An interesting analogy for this network of collaborations could be the 'Studio System' in earlier Hollywood where actors would have an ongoing relationship with a particular studio. While the Hollywood model became exploitative at points and was disbanded, the VP is rooted in localised peripheral histories and labour, the contingencies of everyday life, and collective and response-able practices that establish 'sympoietic [and] more-than-human' (Haraway, 2016:52) storytelling of the minor neighbourhoods south of Hollywood.

The Arulent Gazebo: The Cycles of Feral (Re-)Creation

Looking back at the garden from the moon gate, we get a full view of the Arulent Gazebo nested in thick vegetation. Wearing a copper roof with a spike on top and hanging copper flare on the bottom, the green hexagonal wooden architecture resembles none other than the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda. The stone path branches off from the Penglai Isle and leads us to the Gazebo, our last stop. Its fence shares the architectural patterns with the houses in the immediate street surrounding the Union Theatre. We climb into the Gazebo where a large gourd dangles above the entrance. We sit down on the wooden chairs around a picnic table. Now is time to meditate, contemplate, and articulate the feral-ness of the panorama garden. [Fig 8]

Art as social conjuring serves as a type of medium to channel ideas and create immersive experiences in the immediate way of something like Watts Towers, Rubel Castle, or Grandma Prisbey's Bottle Village. These places have their own internal logic, facets, and windows into their own manifestation of reality. A creator, or a set of collaborators, may not be explicitly conscious in an intellectual way of one or many meanings of the work they are doing. Creation comes before explanation.



Fig.8 The Arulent Gazebo with hanging gourds (2021).
Photograph by Forest Casey.

VELAS: My sense in art school, at least in the 1990s, is that there was a feeling that an artist might need to be pre-aware of a 'message' intended for the audience, and then goes about creating 'the thing' to get this idea across. With folk art environments, the 'reason' for doing feels different. It exists because it needs to exist, regardless of embedded meaning. For the creator, the work comes when it 'feels right', and is being channeled through frequencies less talked about or even difficult to acknowledge.

In the garden, there are a few specialty features made 'on purpose' with a design forethought. But even among these on-purpose fabrications, considerable happenstance with materials that appeared easily or circumstantially to a great extent drives the design process. Rather than a top-down design process, the tenet is 'make first, discuss later'. This inverted order of making art and museum rebels against, yet is still informed by, the 'White Cube Path' indoctrinated by art institutions – the void of individuality insulated from the messiness of community-based creation. In contrast, the VP's ongoing cycles of DIY artist-built folk art environment appears not unlike the growth of the feral garden:

Creation/manifestation → growth → discussion/reflection → stagnation/'death' → compost/recycling/re-seeding → nutrient absorption → back to creation/manifestation and circle again

Institutional art training perhaps arises in conversations between the co-curators, reflections with or from other people close to the VP, observations on how the public is interacting with the VP's works, and ruminations on projects not by the VP but which feel adjacent (or even not). A pragmatic, and somewhat political, manifestation of this rebellious repurposing that informs this cycle of (re-)creation has been to question the underlying structure that supports and homogenises the 'art world' economy. And yet, a non-profit organisation like the VP also cannot afford the naiveté that fantasises a 'free paradise' outside this world either. Standing strategically in the margins, the VP embodies art-grafting gone awry, a collective practice of 'making-with' neighbourhood environmental assemblages and being responsive to 'the heterogeneous webbed patterns and processes of situated and dynamic dilemmas' (Haraway, 2016:58).

CARLSON: The institutions – schools, grant makers, foundations, galleries – are constantly trying to mold a certain type of artist or art institution, asking and answering the same questions, with a set basis of knowledge and approach, but the graft did not take as intended. Instead, with the work of the VP, this other thing grew, like a circus tree from Axel Erlandson.

Liberating creation from a narrowly determined purpose sanitised from the 'dirt' of community enables the growth of 'feral dynamics' between the VP and the many individuals and organisations of and by whom the garden is made. 'Feral dynamics' suggests not only an ecological phenomenon, where 'anthropogenic landscapes [are] set in motion not just by the intentions of human engineers but also by the cascading effects of more-than-human negotiations' (Bubandt and Tsing, 2018: 1), but also a critical and

deliberate embrace of sympoiesis, which keeps invigorating the more-than-panorama museum's nonlinear cycles of production.

The More-than-Panorama Museum: A 'California Native' and Grassroots Commons



Fig.9 Adobe wall and log sitting stools in the VP Garden (2022). Photograph by Forest Casey.

Into the panorama garden the city flows, often invisibly, by nature or by human, prompting the unending phases of the garden's development (Kučan, 2024). A bird drops a few seeds that grew into an apple tree. A raccoon repeatedly unplugs the pendant lights in the grotto. A dwarf specialty citrus tree unexpectedly starts fruiting gigantic pomelos. A pomegranate tree appears, seemingly out of nowhere. A panorama fan sends an unsolicited shipment of plants. Occasionally, people drop off potted plants under the marquee at the front door. Stumps of a huge tree cut down in the neighborhood became 'stools' near the Arulent Gazebo. [Fig 9] A chance encounter driving through mid-city, Velas came upon a pile of 'pencil cactus' (*Euphorbia tirucalli*) and packed it into her yellow Volvo for the garden, leaving bits of sticky sap permanently in her car.

In these silent conversations with the neighbourly lives in the city, the VP speaks the vernacular language of 'California natives' spoken by the 'soil, watershed, climate, native plants and animals' – and humans – that mark the biospheric coherence of the bioregion (Berg, in Glotfelty and Quesnel, 2014: 62). These conversations also mark a 'terrain of consciousness', the cognitive, intellectual, and creative engagement of being with/in a place (Berg and Dasmann, 1977: 399). These artistic, ecological, epistemological, and social underpinnings of the VP have nourished a grassroots commons that repurposes the centuries-long tradition of the European and American panorama-and-garden relationship that has facilitated the colonial impulse of collecting one of everything exotic.

The panorama and the botanical garden – two distinct immersive landscape fabrications – both convey human beings' desire to domesticate and claim the knowledge of the world since the late eighteenth century. They both draw a multiplicity of places, lives, and experiences to one enclosed space not only to 'showcase culture and science', but to also classify, capture and own the claim and knowledge of 'foreign' land, in contrast to a normative 'home' the all-seeing traveler can always return to. Botanical gardens attached to panoramas, museums, and world fairs assist these theatrical institutions to construct a metropolitan cultural imagination that produced a public around the imagery of the European Man who was superior to, and confident in studying and taming, the lands, species, and peoples in the empire's distant peripheries, even decades after colonies became independent states.

Because of the feral nature of the garden and how it represents the VP's ground-up, place-based art-making, we call the Velaslavasay Panorama a more-than-panorama museum that is immersed in, and also immerses others (its staff included) in, the vibrant native environments of California. 'Native', defined not in essentialist terms but by the ecological, conscious, and collective practice of 'living-in-place', juxtaposes and mediates – though not without the burden of experiencing its own Othering – colonisation and (im)migration. Bounded but porous, it lives the totality of the local in which the global and the planetary reside. It decolonises the institutional production of the knowledge of land and landscape that sanitises the messiness and chaos of place for the interest of a scalable space of capital growth (Tsing, 2015).

The 'native garden' and panorama connection sprouts from the English horticulturalist, botanist, and landscape designer Theodore Payne (1872-1963), who played a crucial part in shaping the notion of Southern California terrain as though the region were a singular, cohesive ecological exhibition (Theodore Payne Foundation, n.d.). Payne assisted with horticultural installs at the Crystal Palace Exhibition and en route to Los Angeles docked in Chicago to attend The California Pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. It

was a pivotal event in panorama history that informs projects at Velaslavasay, including the Nova Tuskhut installation, a 'living exhibit' of an Arctic trader's hut designed to invert the colonial gaze of the 'Esquimaux Village' of the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Chicago Expo (University of Chicago Library, 2023:5).

In 1916, Payne's masterpiece, the California Wild Garden at Exposition Park, just over a mile from the VP, opened to the public 'to awaken a greater interest in our native plants and endeavor to persuade people to use them more frequently in planting gardens, parks and public grounds' (Payne, 1919). The essential nature of Payne's business was to promote a semi-mythical entity known as 'California'. The idea of 'native' plants that grew only within its boundaries reinforced the imagination that Southern California was 'an idyllic "land of sunshine" of unlimited possibility' in the progressive era (Guerrini, 2021: 260). Payne's positionality as an English entrepreneur attempting to mold the experience and discourse of 'native' California landscape was inevitably entangled with the state's emergence from settler colonialism, the Gold Rush, and the construction of the transcontinental railroad that relied predominantly on Chinese indentured labor (Chang, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial that gardeners, museum and cultural workers, and artists open up the otherwise mythologised perception of 'California native' described by Payne to accommodate the situated triangulation of settler, Indigenous, and immigrant identities (Day, 2016) in the work of plant-based landscapes.

In 2021, the Velaslavasay Panorama carefully adapted Payne's tradition of distributing seeds on vacant lots over the greater Los Angeles by mail (Sunset, 1918) when it sent gourd seeds harvested from the garden to over 100 addresses of the panorama public, reaching an array of locations from long-term collaborators in Seoul, South Korea, to grotto preservationists in Neshkoro, Wisconsin. The gesture was part of the Union Square Florist Shop, an immersive theatrical performance wherein the gourd played a symbolic role of personal betterment. The project fabricated a later 1960s-era florist shop as a mixed media installation that promoted a 12-step system of 'floral arrangement for new beauty', appending to the mythic role plants have played in California from Payne's 'native' notions, to the commercialised imagery of the orange fruit, to plant usage in new age movements. The VP's gourd crop originated from a seed packet purchased in Seoul during the exhibition of the Grand Moving Mirror of California in 2015 at Songwon Art Center. The seeded offspring then returned to Seoul six years later, perpetuating the cycle of regrowth and rerooting the feral network.

Coda: Afterparties and Afterthoughts

The garden is different at night. As darkness blankets Los Angeles and the Union Theatre, we end our tour with the garden transforming into a space of possibilities and potentials. Although the theatre's events from inside the Panorama, be it a film screening night or a New Year's Eve party, may have a programmatic ending moment [Fig 10], the garden continues to foster a rhizomatic and heterotopic community that extends the experiences inside. Guests take their own roots in the different spaces of the garden to linger, converse, think, and commune together under the soft illumination of the suspended used-car-lot lights over the 'Pix' sign. Thoughts wander and interact with the green environment, finding places in the garden to be heard, and more desirably, to be grown with and into the wider places of the city and across time and space. New relationships stem from this grafting gone-awry.



Fig.10 In the Velaslavasay Panorama garden at night (2020). Photograph by Weiling Deng.

The garden serves as a wild, living record of the organisation's history, values, and aesthetic practices. At the same time, it exists as a semi-public green-space within the contested botanical imaginaries and realities of its neighbourhood, city, and region of Southern California. Both of these aspects speak to how art and museums can be deeply rooted in and intertwined with place. Here the audience becomes more than just spectators, rooted in the broader community that the Panorama cultivates and propagates. This community, which we have deemed both feral and DIY, is part of a larger constellation of ground-up art, museum, and exhibition spaces, where things are happening outside the normative modes of LA art and event. Future events will continue this work, bringing more people into the orbit of the Panorama and the garden.

We push open the mosquito net and leave the garden. The Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda diorama emits a gentle warm glow on our left to bid goodbye. The smell of the old wood floor of the Union Theatre encompasses us. We walk past the staircase that spirals up to the Panorama Rotunda where train horns blow from 1910s Shenyang and 2010s LA at once. We keep walking through the dark hallway, pass the Union Square Florist Shop's plaque and the Nova Tuskhut, and step out of the building. Lights, music, and laughter pour on us from the Panorama Play Street Festival. The happy crowd surrounds the booths of Bob Baker Marionette Theater, 24th Street Theater, 3-D Space, Community Services Unlimited, West Adams Heritage Association, Los Angeles Breakfast Club, and more. Into LA's evening aroma and the festive conviviality we blend.

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