

“By working with our hands, by drawing, we enter the house of a stranger”

- Le Corbusier

There came a point when botanical illustrator Margaret Mee began to inhabit her subject matter. Her work, according to a close friend, was recognizable precisely because “it was as if she had entered the plant itself.”¹ Perhaps this is why her own garden, and the creatures in it, were notoriously left to their own devices. One mustn’t destroy the spider’s web. That is its home.

Fifteen Amazonian expeditions. Thousands of hours on paper. Mee was one of the most revered botanical artists of the twentieth century. After moving to Rio de Janeiro in 1947, she worked closely with the modernist landscape architect Robert Burle Marx. Both avid collectors of rare Amazonian species, they were pioneering conservationists. Mee entered the landscape. Marx contained it.

When Le Corbusier traveled to Rio for the first time he described it as a city where “ideas attack you.”² Like many Europeans, he was overwhelmed and disturbed by the vast jungle which continually encroached on the city; “The rainforest, the exuberant vegetation of the meanders, are the molds of our earth.”³ His subsequent work with Burle Marx has been described as an exercise in contrast. Marx’s snaking gardens and indigenous flora thwarting the Swiss architect’s strict linearity.⁴ Similarly, the ‘chaos’ of Rio provided the perfect opportunity to invoke a characteristically Corbusian sketch: an urban plan consisting of a 100 metre tall highway, above 10 storey high buildings, themselves raised on 30 metre piers. This of course, all remained on paper.

As Beatriz Colomina has pointed out, drawing was how Le Corbusier appropriated his exterior world.⁵ Throughout his career, he would laud it as a rational medium, akin to architecture itself. Drawing was simply a way to accurately process one’s surroundings. He consistently contrasted the medium with photography, while paradoxically basing his own sketches on photos and postcards. By drawing, we inch closer to true embodiment. By working with our hands we “enter the house of a stranger”⁶ he quipped. The camera on the other hand, is merely “a tool for idlers, who use a machine to do their seeing for them.”⁷

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¹ Malena Barretto in *Margaret Mee and the Moonflower*. DVD. Directed by Malu de Martino (Brazil: E.H.Filmes, 2012).

² Le Corbusier quoted in Valerie Fraser “Cannibalizing Le Corbusier: The MES Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* vol. 59, no. 2 (2000): 180.

³ Le Corbusier quoted in Fraser: 189.

⁴ Fraser, 189.

⁵ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture As Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press: 2001), 88.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.