

ZEST

MEET THE ARTIST

Beneath the surface with Monet



New York artist Mark Fox has created a five-channel video installation made under water at Claude Monet's famous lily ponds in France. Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle

By Molly Glentzer

When a curator offered Mark Fox a residency at Giverny, the estate in France where impressionist Claude Monet created his famous water-lily paintings, Fox thought the idea was crazy.

After all, the artist, who lives in Brooklyn, is best known as a maker of complex laser-cut sculptures and drawings in steel or paper. His art deals with impermanence.

But Giverny, Fox learned, had deteriorated after Monet's death in 1926. And in the 1970s, philanthropic Americans restored it exactly with the stipulation that U.S. artists would be invited to spend time there each year.

"Three months in France — how had I can it be?" Fox decided.

Not bad at all, as it turned out. Fox's five-channel video installation "Giverny: Journal of an Unseen Garden" premiered this month at Hiram Butler Gallery. Fox went to France determined to use Giverny for a project with his own contemporary aesthetic. He wasn't required to work in Monet's style, he said, "although they say things like, 'We hope you're inspired by the environment.'"

He had 24/7 access to the grounds — important because Giverny is one of France's top tourist attractions. Most days, busloads of people walk through, taking pictures of the iconic bridge and buying souvenirs plastered with prints of signature Monet paintings.

Fox realized Monet's paintings have become so ubiquitous no one — himself included — really sees them anymore. There had to be another way to see what nobody sees, he thought.

Then it hit him: Even Monet didn't see under the water's surface. His paintings reflect the changing colors of the sky. Giverny had rules, and the one about not going



A video still from Fox's "Giverny: Journal of an Unseen Garden." Hiram Butler Gallery

into the pond was explicit. But on the sly one afternoon, Fox put his camera on "video" mode, attached a string and sent it out into the water.

He was amazed by the "beautiful, crazy life" under the lily pads. After a few more experiments, he fessed up and got permission to shoot more. For two months, as the water lilies went from bloom to bust, he shot at 1 and 6 p.m. daily to catch the light, "pretty much like Monet painted."

Fox traversed the pond in a boat, with a guard, using a glass box he created to hang over the edge of the canoe so he could guide it slowly through the water. He didn't wade in because he didn't want to kick up dirt.

By late October, he had a ton of footage with date and time stamps but no clear idea of how to show it. He considered making projections to mimic the oval rooms Monet created between 1915 and 1926 for Paris' Musée de l'Orangerie. But that was too complex, nothing like

"Giverny: Journal of an Unseen Garden"

When: 12 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Nov. 28
Where: Hiram Butler Gallery, 4520 Bissonnet
Tickets: Free, 713-863-7097, hirambutler.com

his intimate experience in the garden. "I didn't want to make it into an extravaganza," he said.

The water-lily work sat idle for about four years. Josh Puzda, Hiram Butler's gallery director, snapped it up when he happened upon a small, one-screen preview of the video at a botanical garden last year. "Giverny: Journal of an Unseen Garden" plays across five adjoining screens like one long image. Each screen has a different length of footage, so when they're looped they never match up the same way.

It may not be his primary medium, but Fox worked with video pretty spectacularly about 14 years ago — on one of his favorite projects ever, he said.

Like a lot of artists in the era of 9/11, Fox was horrified by the destruction of the World Trade Center and Afghanistan's monumental Buddhas, and his art reflected that. "I was addressing what do objects mean? What does culture mean?" he said.

When the Cincinnati Art Museum commissioned him to create an installation for the opening of a new building wing, he suggested cavalierly, "Let's just go ahead and destroy it now."

Much to his surprise, the director loved his

concept for a series of videos that would depict the museum being destroyed by fire, a tornado, a Godzilla character played by Mr. Peanut and — his favorite — a biblical flood.

Fox, who has a history in puppetry, created a lifelike model of the museum and its contents. He achieved the flood with a small rain machine.

"As the museum is being destroyed, you see all the artwork floating through. It's very slow and meditative," he said. His "Giverny" project is slow and meditative, too, but not nearly so unsettling.

Time in France changed his perspective on a lot of things, including Monet.

"He knew all about flowers and how they grow and what to put next to each other, and how the sun would hit the garden at a certain time, and what plants would need more light, and what plants would create shade for other plants," Fox said.

He's been reminded that Monet was a rebel. "Impressionism was a derogatory term initially," he said.

Fox takes Monet personally now. He feels like he got to know the pond in a way no one had before.

"There's a little piece of me with it now," he said.

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SPOKEN

"My last record was a break-up record, and if I had to label this one, I would call it a make-up record. I'm making up with myself. Making up for lost time. Making up for everything I ever did and never did."

Singer Adele, on "25," her new album that will be released Nov. 20.

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