

Barbara Bullock

Fearless Vision

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September 23, 2023–January 21, 2024

Woodmere**ArtMuseum**

**Where People Grow,
Like Flowers:
The Jasmine Gardens
of Barbara Bullock**

Tess Wei

Jasmine Gardens (detail), 1980
(Collection of the artist)





WHERE PEOPLE GROW, LIKE FLOWERS: THE JASMINE GARDENS OF BARBARA BULLOCK

TESS WEI

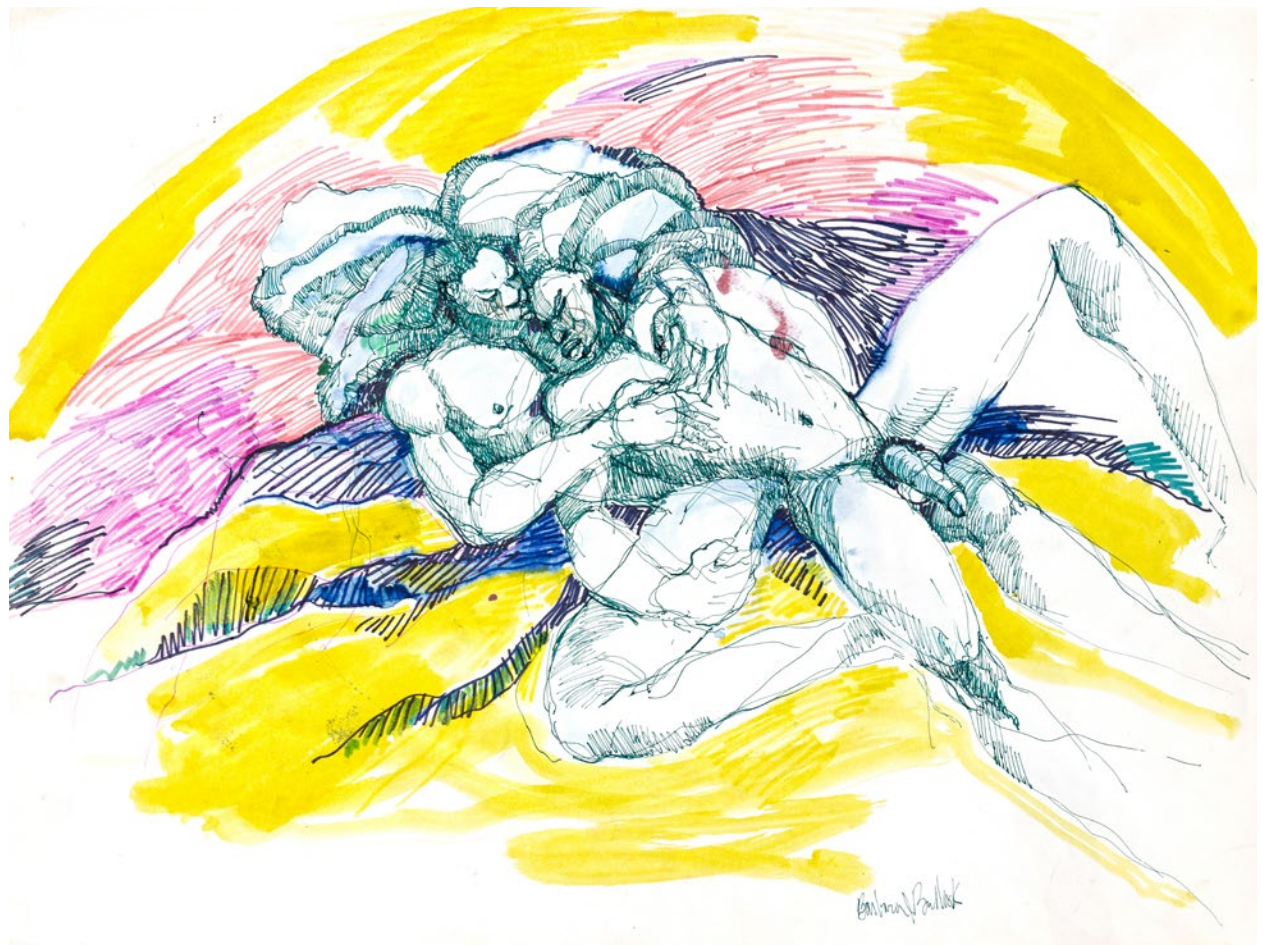
As Barbara Bullock's time leading the art program at the Ile lfe Black Humanitarian Center was coming to a close in 1975, her friend and colleague Martha Jackson Jarvis asked, "What's next?" Bullock answered, "I want to do something about love."

What followed, from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, was the development of *Jasmine Gardens*, a series of hundreds of figurative drawings and paintings dedicated to exploring and celebrating what Bullock felt to be the vital depths of eroticism.

The drawings, by virtue of their often gestural and varying nature, express the attributes of sensual and sexual identity that Bullock saw as natural in the world: exploratory, intense, tender, free, and often seemingly unfinished. The context of *Jasmine Gardens* is a period of transformation in the expression of sexuality that evolved in the United States prior to the horrors of AIDS, as well as the ongoing fearlessness of an artist whose faith in the beauty of human sexuality has remained certain to this day.

Jasmine Gardens,
1980 (Collection
of the artist)





Jasmine Gardens, 1980 (Collection of the artist)

Bullock's erotic drawings are works on paper of diverse sizes rendered with rippling lines, hatchings, sweeps, and blotches from pen, ink, and watercolor. Much like the figures they depict, the lines themselves lack self-consciousness—they flow, scribble, pierce, and double back on themselves in colors of black, brown, blue, purple, and gold. The bodies in these drawings are all expressly muscular and elongated, and they enact a great range of positions in lovemaking and foreplay. They are entirely nude except for occasional adornment from an amulet or bracelet.

At the time, Bullock was given a book of erotic art, *Japanese Erotism* (1981) by Bernard Soulié,¹ and she became immediately absorbed in the sensual world-building found in the Shunga tradition. She

was captivated not only by the bodies portrayed in these centuries-old woodblock prints and paintings, but also by the provocative fabrics, foods, plants, and animals that participate in the inventive sensual play. Here the artist found sexuality that was blissful, not sinful, and recognized the type of liberated space she was creating in *Jasmine Gardens*.

Bullock's erotic drawings, however, reflected her own social milieu and political concerns at the time. She populated her works with Black warriors whose Herculean bodies symbolize the fortitude of mind, body, and spirit of the people who led the civil rights era and the continuing movements for Black liberation. In one particular drawing with a yellow palette, two figures are suspended in an embrace with one figure laying back, penis erect and cradled



Jasmine Gardens,
1980 (Collection
of the artist)

between the limbs of the other. The two figures are similar in size and stature, and have long, thick dreadlocks whose shapes reverberate into the shadows and surrounding atmospheric landscape. This drawing recalls a monumental painting from the same series, *Dark Gods* (1982), whose androgynous figures—one of whom is inspired by Bullock’s friend and fellow artist, Deryl Mackie—float while caressing in a moment gripped by pleasure. “...Man is one with animal / animal is one with man / woman—peers from the side of a God / woman

emerges from / the dark side / on both sides / who is god / who is man / both unite...” reads a portion of the poem *Dark Gods in the Gardens* by Naomi Nelson, which Bullock transcribed in a notebook at the time.²

Research by way of observational study has always been an essential part of Bullock’s creative practice. For this series, she made frequent visits to the erotic sections of bookstores and went to bathhouses and gay bars in New York and Atlantic City. From one such establishment she was



Jasmine Gardens, 1980 (Collection of the artist)

eventually asked to leave. Bullock was committed to “trying to see and understand everything that was out there” in order to record and communicate the natural expanse of human sexual experience. Her sustained study of her subjects is apparent in works with figures that repeat in various poses across the page—overlapping and blending into each other with multiple views of the same face or with arms stretched, legs in motion. These figures not only overlap, but also begin to blend into each other, exploring one another just as much as they

become one. She wrote accompanying, nonlinear texts to further “flesh out” this world of unrestricted lovemakers: “Jasmine gardens are love gardens, where people grow, like flowers. Where men are like flowers and like herbs and the trees. Where their hair grows wild like branches matted, strong like roots of a tree. Their perfume under their arms and in their crotch are like the exotic smells of flowers. Their cum is that delicious taste of the passion fruit. Many of my loves live in this garden...”



Jasmine Gardens, 1980 (Collection of the artist)

At the time, Bullock's peers, primarily her straight, cis-male colleagues, criticized the *Jasmine Gardens* series. They found obscenity in the sexually explicit content and, more acutely, they deemed it inappropriate for a woman to venture into this territory. Despite shared values in celebrating liberated identities when it came to Blackness, many of Bullock's peers believed that female artists should not generate erotic images. In addition, works from the *Jasmine Gardens* series were censored from several exhibitions of Bullock's work. But the artist's creative voice has always been her freedom, and the prudishness of colleagues and institutions only affirmed the need to continue nurturing the specific line of inquiry and purpose. The drawings are not erotic to be shocking. Instead, they represent Bullock's drive to explore a phenomenon that naturally exists in humanity—a sensuality absent of boundaries that dissolves the socially constructed dichotomies of human/

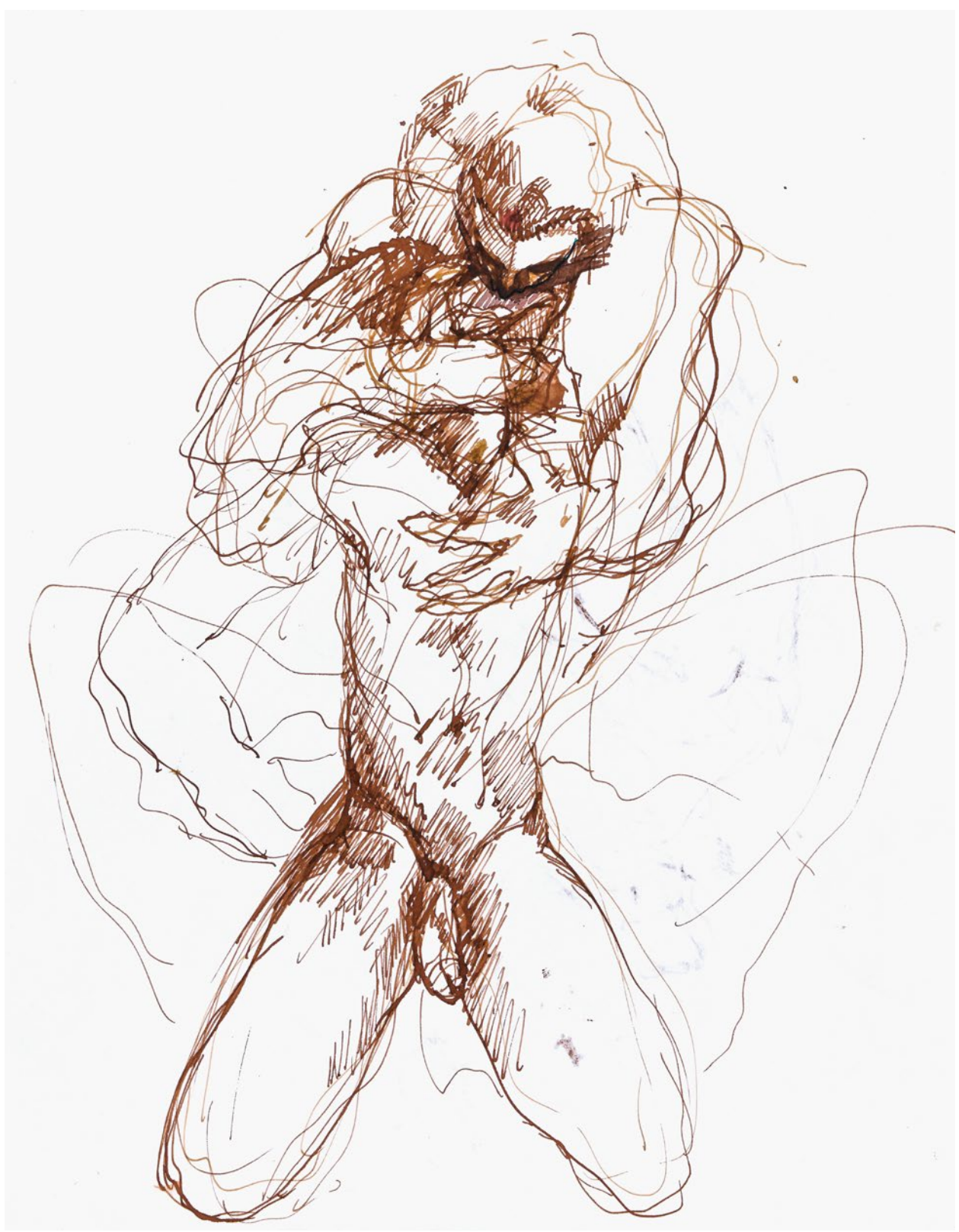
nature, man/woman, gay/straight, black/white, and so forth. For those (like me) who came of age after the 1980s, the *Jasmine Gardens* series speaks across time to the changing understanding of sexuality and identity we grapple with as a society today. Bullock proposes that when our sexual and sensuous bodies exist without categorization, that is perhaps the greatest declaration of love and freedom—a culture where love is the ritual, and the ritual is always open.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Wei is a Philadelphia-based artist, curator, and writer. They are currently the exhibitions manager and assistant curator at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College.

NOTES

- 1 Bernard Soulié, *Japanese Erotism*, trans. Evelyn Rossiter (New York: Crescent Books, 1981).
- 2 Naomi Nelson, "Dark Gods in the Gardens," unpublished poem.



Jasmine Gardens, 1980 (Collection of the artist)



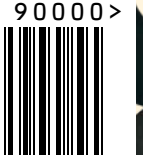
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