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AT HOME WITH PAULA HAYES

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WONDERLAND Paula Hayes, above right, imagined her garden as a series of dioramas. Clockwise from top: a cast acrylic bird bath; Tyvek "air hammocks" designed with her assistant, John Gray; Turtle, a turtle, lives inside, as does a terrarium; a "living room necklace" lives in the garden.

Love Alters the Landscape

Transforming two lives and a Brooklyn garden

By PENELOPE GREEN

PAULA HAYES likes collisions, particularly those involving meteors, because they give birth to crystals, structures she's enthusiastic about right now. "Meteors! Dynamism! What's not to love?" she'll tell you excitedly, pointing to the heat of their impact as the "miraculous transmutation of life."

One bright morning recently, Ms. Hayes patted the glittering quartz landscape of a section of her tiny Brooklyn garden into which were tucked soft, blobby silicone planters no bigger than a child's hand and filled with begonias. "Living room necklaces" — little webs of crocheted fishing line designed by Ms. Hayes — curled down from a Japanese maple; some of their pockets were filled with bromeliads, spiky water-hoarding epiphytes

that looked like alien pets. You wanted to lie down and peer through the underbrush, in case a critter was lurking there.

"I wanted to make the garden magical and hopeful," said Ms. Hayes, 50, whose fantastical herbaceous art pieces like hand-blown terrariums have made her an art-world darling. "A healing place that's part of our story. The other thing I was after is this idea of visitation. You know, aliens."

Except for the bromeliads, aliens were not wildly apparent that morning. But there was a sense that the garden, a postage-stamp space behind a brick row house in Boerum Hill, was nonetheless a place of tremendous abundance (even slugs are welcome; Ms. Hayes plants sweet potato vines for them to munch).

Yet it was not too long ago that this garden

was a desolate space of lawn and fallow vegetable patch that had been abandoned by its owner Teo Camporeale, 43, a soulful 3-D animator and composer who is now married to Ms. Hayes, and Ms. Hayes was living like a monk in a small walk-up on East Fifth Street in Manhattan. She had a few amenities — a futon, a rice cooker, a stack of clear plastic boxes with the childhood artwork of her son and daughter, now in their late 20s — and a companion, a surly Chihuahua named Diego.

"I was pretty much married to my work," said Ms. Hayes, the daughter of farmers from Rondón, N.Y. (population 810), who took her master's degree in sculpture at Parsons in the late '80s and supported herself by working as a gardener. By the late '90s, sculpture and gardens had merged in her brain, she said. She created her signature

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planters — soft and biomorphic silicone pouches that gentle a plant's root ball — and Plantpacs, designed to be worn on the chest like BabyBjorn for asparagus ferns. "Like motherhood," she said. "Love on the go!"

Since then, her down-the-rabbit-hole environments — and Ms. Hayes's "haunting spirit," in the words of William T. Geoggin, an architect with whom she has collaborated on a few rarefied Hampton properties — have kept her an unlikely art star for over a decade, unlikely because her deeply personal, ephemeral and handmade worlds have told a markedly different story from the identity politics, nihilism and cultural commentary of many of her art world peers.

"It's like a continuous art project, her biospheres," said Aby Rosen, the developer, who has eight. "They are a hybrid between a living organism and a piece of art." Also, as he pointed out, "You just want to crawl inside them."

This year is typically robust: Ms. Hayes was nominated for a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award, a huge honor, though another firm took the prize. Next Thursday, she has a show opening at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea. It includes six giant terrariums, a beguilingly beautiful animated film about an extraterrestrial gardener that is a collaboration between Ms. Hayes and Mr. Camporeale, and a rooftop garden.

On July 1, the W South Beach, a 400-room luxury hotel five years in the making, will be open for business in Miami Beach. Designed by Costas Kcondylis, with interiors by Yabu Pushelberg and Azuma Busta, it is surrounded by the dreamscape-landscapes Ms. Hayes has created, whimsical outdoor rooms of sea grape, saw palmetto and pitch apple trees hung with birdcages and fragments of poetry.

But back in the spring of 2006, Ms. Hayes's

A postage-stamp-size space where the bromeliads and a love story can flourish.

daughter, Ryan Morrison, was compelled to give her mother a lecture. "She told me I was never going to meet the love of my life having dinner with Diego in front of the Jim Lehrer news hour," said Ms. Hayes, who had been divorced from Ryan's father for two decades. So instead of ordering in that April, Ms. Hayes began dutifully picking up her meals at Caravan of Dreams, a vegetarian restaurant on East Sixth Street. She soon met Mr. Camporeale, another regular there, who liked to visit Caravan of Dreams after he looked in on his widowed mother on 10th Street.

Sitting on the bench out front, Ms. Hayes and Mr. Camporeale slipped bright green juices and uncovered common interests, like animals, quantum physics and outer space. "Of course I noticed he was hot," said Ms. Hayes, who boldly invited Mr. Camporeale to visit her 13th Street studio, where the terrariums and other projects are hatched. A year later, Ms. Hayes moved into Mr. Camporeale's century-old Boerum Hill house.

"Welcome to our lightly humble hippie habitat," Ms. Hayes said. "I am very domestic, as it turned out." There was a crystal terrarium on the dining room table — crystals are the latest iterations of Ms. Hayes's magical biospheres (besides being a new passion of hers, they are harder for clients to kill, though they do like full moon baths, she said, and come with a calendar detailing five years worth of full moons). Nearby was a giant biomorphic terrarium big enough to tango with, one of six that will be on view at Ms. Hayes's show next week. There were eucalyptus, laurel and grapevines woven through the stair balusters to keep Diego from slipping through them. (Diego, having been released from an upstairs bedroom, cluttered over to a reporter and looked up at her with eager, rheumy eyes. "It's a trick. Do not pat the dog," warned Ms. Hayes. "He will bite.")

Mr. Camporeale, whose two cats and a turtle, all rescue animals, have by now gradually accepted Diego, urged breakfast. ("He's a super mensch," Ms. Hayes said) and told of buying this house in 1997, for about \$225,000. His father, an artist and thwarted gardener, had just received a diagnosis of cancer. Mr. Camporeale's parents' apartment on East 14th, where they had been living since 1952, was stuffed with his father's efforts: herbs and tomatoes on the fire escape, and a living room layered with seedlings and cement. Fruit flies were an issue. "It was driving my mother crazy," said Mr. Camporeale, who offered his new yard to his father.

Mr. Camporeale did the heavy lifting — hefting in thousands of dollars of topsoil and compost, carving out beds to his father's instructions for tomatoes, green beans, herbs, roses, geraniums and lots of marigolds to keep the bugs away.

"Of course, your taste is more expensive," Mr. Camporeale said to his wife.



ARTISTIC VISION FOR THE W South Beach, a hotel opening July 1. Ms. Hayes created outdoor rooms — "elegant jungles," she said — of sea grape, saw palmetto and pitch apple tree.



'HIPPIE HABITAT' Paula Hayes and Teo Camporeale were married in the garden, above right, of their row house, top left; her giant terrarium will be at the Marianne Boesky Gallery; on the dining table, a crystal terrarium; a Dumpling planter; chunks of recycled glass in the garden.

Mr. Camporeale's father would come out each afternoon after chemotherapy to work on the garden. "It was his therapy," Mr. Camporeale said. "The garden got him through. But when the cancer came back seven years later, he was no longer able to work on it."

Mr. Camporeale, who married soon after he bought the house, was divorced in 2003. His father died the next year. The garden suffered.

"I couldn't keep up with it," he said. "It got pretty forlorn looking." When he met Ms. Hayes, he said, "we had both been through hard stuff. The house retained a kind of griminess. It was pretty sad here."

Said Ms. Hayes: "I made him throw everything away. We were exercising."

Then she tackled the garden, moving slowly at first. She wove birch twigs into a chain-link fence. "Chain-link is harsh unless you can connect to that fishnet stocking look," Ms. Hayes said. She moved a rosebush from the front to the back of the house and planted a fig tree. The soil, she said, was wonderful, retaining the richness that Mr. Camporeale's father had put there.

"It made me cry," she said, bursting into tears.

On the terrace, she showed off her Dumping planters, soft rubber pouches with drawing ties. "In the summer, you can undress them, and work the root ball, and in the winter you can cinch them really tight," Ms. Hayes said. "This one is ruffled and so glamorous, don't you think?" — she nodded fondly at a Dumpling filled with Japanese forest grass — "it's like a Chanel bag." Her terrariums and crystal gardens range from \$4,000 to \$60,000, and living necklaces (bromeliads in delicate crocheted sacks) from \$200 to \$1,200; she is looking to mass-produce the Dumpings at a more affordable price point.

Last week, she wore a stretchy bright blue tunic by Maria Cordero, a designer she wears exclusively. ("She gets women," Ms. Hayes said, pulling out the fabric at her midsection, "she gets it if you have a belly day.") Although, she said, "Since the recession I've been trying not to weed in them. I'm like, 'Honey, I'm going to slip into something less expensive.'"

Ms. Hayes was on her way to a presentation at the Core Club of her latest project, the gardens surrounding the new W South Beach, which were finished last month. David Edelstein, who with Aby Rosen is the developer, talked about how he had been moved by Ms. Hayes's Alice in Wonderland qualities, and how he'd wanted that kind of soul for his new hotel, which is rather surprising, given that "soul" is not a word one hears too often in conjunction with pricey Miami Beach real estate.

"That's what I always hope people want," Ms. Hayes said, "but so often there is a kind of creature."

Two summers ago, Mr. Camporeale invited Ms. Hayes for a walk on the piers along the West

ONLINE: AUDIO SLIDE SHOW

The artist and landscape designer Paula Hayes tells the story of how she came to create the garden at her home in Brooklyn, with views of the house, the garden, and the objects she designed. [nlytimes.com/home](#)

Side Highway. She balked at first. "We don't have time," she remembered saying. "He's like, 'I have something for you.' We sat down and he handed me an old Cat in the Hat jack-in-the-box. I'm like, 'Oh, vintage, that's cool.' He said, 'Why don't you see if it works?'"

It did, and what popped out was the cat holding a sign Mr. Camporeale had inked with the words "Will you marry me?"

Last August, the two were married in the garden. Ms. Hayes had made, and danced a five-step tango along its tiny path with a rose that migrated from Mr. Camporeale's breast pocket to Ms. Hayes's teeth.

"We really practiced," Ms. Hayes said, "and I'd been doing lots of yoga so I didn't break anything."

They string hundreds of marigolds and hang them inside and outside the house. "The spirit of the marigolds!" Mr. Camporeale said of the gardens, put there in honor of his father, whose ashes are in the garden.

What still thrills Mr. Camporeale, he said, is that a good night for us is sitting on the couch watching a DVD about quantum physics.

"We are both nerds," said Ms. Hayes, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "We both wear glasses."

"Paula used to be the most ethereal person," said Andrea Fossen, the galleryist, the other dog. "Now she's evolved into a grounded fairy."

Ms. Hayes is not entirely convinced.

"The thing about being an overachiever is you are stoic and you believe you can do anything so you do," Ms. Hayes said. "It's not until you find love that you realize you are fragile."

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