



Since 1999 I have explored the possibilities of a modified Diana plastic camera to photograph gardens. Due to its poor manufacture the camera introduces accidental effects of vignetting, fogging and the confounding swirl of an 'image circle'. The camera's idiosyncratic recording of scenes results in ambiguous and evocative images that leave room for the viewer's imagination and multiple readings.

My latest suite of photographs captures Isola Bella, an extravagant Baroque palace garden on an island in Lake Maggiore, in the foothills of the Italian Alps. A *tour-de-force* of garden design completed in 1671, the garden and palace are still owned by descendants of the Borromeo family, Milanese bankers and allies of the Sforzas, who used them to stage parties and theatrical events for European rulers and aristocrats including Napoleon and Josephine.

The garden is a theatrical extravaganza consisting of ten terraces rising from the lake, edged by marble balustrades generously studded with jardinières, sculptured figures and obelisks, featuring lawns and abundant topiary. As Edith Wharton remarked in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, Isola Bella is different from many Italian gardens in that flowers are used in profusion. The terraces lead upwards to an open space of lawns and gravel walks leading to a monumental water-theatre of stonework, statuary, plantings and spurting fountains. Its paths lead up-ward to a vantage point that suggests the deck of a caravelle, buffeted by the lapping waves below.

Isola Bella's setting and its illusion of sailing on the lake are already other-worldly. Its picturesque pavilions, reflective pools, gesturing sculpted figures and its ghostly white peacocks sweeping over manicured lawns provide the setting and characters for a thousand and one imagined stories. My photographs allow access to the fantasy of this Baroque garden, capturing both its exuberant artificiality and the dream-like experience it invokes.

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<sup>1</sup> Wharton, E. (1904) (1976 reprint) *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. New York: Da Capo.