

## DAVID HARTT

### Digging up modernist myths at the Glass House

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View of “David Hartt: A Colored Garden,” 2021–22, the Glass House, New Canaan, CT. Photo: David Heald.

*Last spring, David Hartt unveiled “A Colored Garden,” a dense circle of blooms in the lower meadow of Philip Johnson’s Glass House planted with flowers found in still lifes by a Black nineteenth-century artist named Charles Ethan Porter. This year, the blooms are back, accompanied by a neo-mythological film in Johnson’s self-glorifying gatehouse-cum-visitor’s-center and, down the hill, an installation of Porters in Johnson’s personal trefoil painting gallery. It’s still the house modernism built—the architect’s taste for Arcadia sits next to his Nazi sympathies—but, says Hartt, Johnson’s aren’t the only myths that live there.*

PHILIP JOHNSON’S PARTNER, David Whitney, was an avid gardener. He would make these exuberant gardens throughout the Glass House grounds, until Johnson and Whitney recalibrated the landscape to fit a more austere, controlled

aesthetic. That erasure of Whitney and his authorship on the land held the clues to what I could add to the site without departing too much from its history.

The landscape suggests an Arcadian ideal. There's the fact that it's New Canaan. There's the Poussin landscape painting Johnson owned, *Burial of Phocion*, 1648, displayed in the house. But I didn't want to just deal with what was present. Researching for an earlier work, I had come across Charles Ethan Porter, a Connecticut-based African American still life painter active in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also did landscapes. I was interested in understanding the Johnson grounds through his eyes.

I looked at as many Porters as I could find and did an inventory of all the flowers. Then I mapped those flowers out so that *A Colored Garden* would be in constant bloom from early spring until late fall, starting with peonies and then going through daisies and chrysanthemums, and ending with zinnias. The size and shape of the garden in the lower meadow were informed by the round swimming pool and the circular cast concrete Donald Judd sculpture on the site. The arrangement of flowers overlaps so that you have a full field at any given moment, although it grows and changes, like any good garden.

Poussin's *Burial of Phocion* became key to understanding Johnson's reference to unspoiled, slightly wild landscapes where one could perhaps imagine the wanderings of a shepherd. In many ways, Johnson projected himself onto this character of Phocion, this stoic, noble general and politician. Johnson used the painting, perhaps, to burnish his legacy and reputation. The preservation of a historic house museum like this is also a kind of writing in the landscape, turning a personal mythology into a public one.



**David Hartt, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 2022**, digital video, color, sound, 15 minutes 13 seconds. Olympia (Tomeka Reid).

The most potent mythologies help us navigate the present. For the video *Et in Arcadia Ego*, I wanted to recast characters from classical and contemporary mythology. Another painting by Poussin depicts Orion being led to the sun by Cedalion—this beautiful, beautiful painting of the blind giant with these Greek gods hovering. I reimagined Orion as a Black woman. I also wanted to imagine other bodies inhabiting the house and occupying the site. Thinking about other mythologies that Johnson was tied to led me to Oskar Schlemmer. Johnson donated his 1932 *Bauhaus Staircase* painting to MoMA, which was important in terms of bringing the legacy of the Bauhaus and German modernism to America. This coincided with Schlemmer's cultural exile in Germany under the Nazis. There's this incredible ambiguity about his relationship to Johnson. What did it mean for Schlemmer to have his legacy embraced by a fascist sympathizer while also being persecuted?

In his costume design for *Triadic Ballet*, Schlemmer references E. T. A. Hoffman's short story "The Sandman," merging man and machine. I imagined Hoffman's character Olympia, again as a Black woman, in Johnson's glass house, clad in a kind of Greek goddess's armor but also in the exoskeleton of an automaton. Her mask is based on one of Schlemmer's designs. It's a device that Olympia can don and remove depending on the role that she wants to play. The mask also sits on the dining room table, where it's occasionally used as a vase for cuttings from the garden. One could just as easily imagine it as Philip Johnson's mask.



Paintings by Charles Ethan Porter in "David Hartt: A Colored Garden." Photo: David Heald.

The film follows Olimpia, played by cellist Tomeka Reid, as she rises in the morning, writes music, makes tea, and goes back to writing music. Then she goes into the lounge area and records the music, and then she promenades in the garden. She goes to the pavilion on the pond and hooks the recording up to this enormous Jamaican sound system and serenades the giant, who haunts the grounds. The sun in the Greek myth is replaced by a highway flare. It's a distress signal, but it's also tied to protest. It's a symbol of activism, of occupying the street, reclaiming it.

In the painting gallery, each of the walls pivots around one of three columns like leaves in a book. There are a half-dozen more walls behind each of the three pairs of walls that the viewer can see, and they contain work by Frank Stella, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Robert Rauschenberg, and other artists whom Johnson and Whitney collected. All those works are still in the room. But I've made Porter's work visible instead. Its scale is dramatically different. You think of a huge Stella—the painting gallery is really made to accommodate that kind of work. To hang something there as delicate and compact as Porter's still lifes is, I think, both a beautiful and subversive act.

I'm not interested in erasing Johnson. I'm interested in surfacing these other narrative possibilities within the same space. Using the metaphor of the garden—in tilling the soil, you're trying to increase its health and productivity, but you're also surfacing what's buried.

— *As told to Travis Diehl*