

## Dirty Art

by Daniel Larkin on May 10, 2012

Dirt is getting its moment in the sun. A cluster of recent shows in Chelsea and downtown make the most of soil, making it a good time to think about earth art again.



*Rob Carter, "Faith in a Seed" 2012 (view through the peep hole)*

At Art in General, Rob Carter has created *Faith in A Seed*, a big, wooden hydroponic box of with seeds sprouting into young plants inside. Quaint house structures are also placed in this field, which encourages the perception of a live farm diorama. Of course, it's more than that.

An elevated platform in the room provides a good aerial view of the installation. Alternatively, peepholes burrowed into the sides of the wooden box provide some really funky "ant's eye" views. Memory gems shined from "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids," "Antz," "A Bugs Life" or any other film that gives you a view of someone crawling through the topsoil. The installation also has looping videos of sprouting plants. As a whole, the experience rekindles a fascination with the miracle of a seed — that with a bit of sunlight, water and time, tall green stalks come from a speck of dust.

The big reveal in the press release is that the artist the three little houses are replicas of the homes of Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau and Sir John Bennet Lawes. As the plants grow more in the coming weeks, the houses will eventually be overtaken by the green. The title of the show, *Faith in a Seed*, is derived from a quotation by that notoriously verbose but nevertheless charming Thoreau, which can be summed up simply as "Seeds. Good."



*Rob Carter, "Faith in a Seed" (2012)*

Just a few blocks away from Art in General is the legendary *New York Earth Room* by Walter De Maria, operated by the Dia Foundation. At first glance it's a room of soil, but the contrast with Carter's show made me wonder why nothing is ever seen growing in it. There are spores everywhere, and virgin soil doesn't usually stay blank and empty for long.

As it turns out, there has been a systematic effort to purge mushrooms from the earth room over the past few years. The work also requires an elaborate raking maintenance regiment. So what looks like just a room full of soil is actually a carefully manicured and highly artificial construction. That's the glory of a work like this. Your first impression gets proved entirely wrong. It's a good thought exercise, reinforcing the Buddhist tenet that not everything is what it first seems.



*Walter De Maria, "New York Earth Room" (1977) (image courtesy of the Dia Foundation)*

Soil is the result of decomposed matter. An old rug fraying and devolving into dirt with plants growing around and upon it is one of Valerie Hegarty's most dynamic sculptures in her recent show at Marlborough's Chelsea gallery. The piece, "Rug with Grass" (2012), plays on the idea of how nature can reclaim an object; Hegarty casts the processes of entropy and decomposition with visual wit.

The majority of art renders dirt as a blank, boring, dull thing in the background. Soil deserves

more. These shows are refreshing because they give soil a personality. Carter conjures a childlike excitement with the potential and growth of sowed seeds. De Maria shows how even something as innocuous looking as piled earth can be invisibly policed. Hegarty finds an aesthetic sensibility in that slow process by which all matter eventually becomes dirt again.



*Valerie Hegarty, "Rug with Grass" (2012) (all images by the author unless otherwise noted)*