

DAVID LIGARE

Landscape with Deer II, 1999-2020
Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

LIZZETTA LEFALLE-COLLINS

Gardening and Longing

An avid gardener pays homage to her farming ancestors

In the mid-1940s, my mother and most of her eleven siblings immigrated to Los Angeles from Shreveport, Louisiana, during the Great Migration of Blacks out of the South. Their experiences and life lessons learned on Lakeside Dairy farm, which their father, Angus Bates, had opened in 1907, were remembered and internalized, although they were miles away in South-Central Los Angeles. Essential elements of their world view of place affected the way they ruralized the small areas of land that surrounded their Los Angeles homes. As emigrants that crisscrossed a nation during the Great Migration, they are historically a part of American entrepreneurial self-sufficiency stories.

Born in Los Angeles, I did not visit the former Lakeside Dairy site until I was an adult, well into my career as an art curator. But, my mother and relatives had filled my head with stories of how they connected to the land and environment. They signaled a longing felt by many Blacks to maintain the relationship to the land and natural environment that they had sacrificed when they emigrated from the southern United States to urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. The elders in families told emigration tales to younger generations. These were the stories that helped to root Black Americans to a sense of place, a place of a new, albeit traumatized life in the Americas. For my family members, land and foodways sustained their lives at the dairy in Louisiana and in Los Angeles.

The combination of land and food reminded me of the many small entrepreneurial enterprises that had once dotted Los Angeles's urban Black communities, in part because of racial segregation, which had created food deserts. At Lakeside Dairy, aside from milk products, the dairy provided business services that included distributing, selling/ bartering, and preparing fruits, vegetables, and nuts grown on their farm and in their gardens. They rented pasture land to other farmers for their cattle and sold fish from their pond. In Los Angeles, Black truck vendors sold vegetables and fruits and sometimes the sugary reddish peanut patties, a favorite treat from the South, from the back of their trucks. The sight of these trucks in Black neighborhoods continued to be prevalent in some communities like mine into the 1970s. Rarely seen now, Hispanic vendors have replaced them.

I am interested in people like my grandparents—

Field pea seeds, a staple planted by my husband's father in Louisiana, were planted in an open, sunlit space in front of the cottage, as were a stand of collard greens.

U.S. Blacks and their relationship to working the land. In a book I am writing titled “Seasons at Lakeside Dairy,” I tell stories about the foods that Black communities produced and ingested, through a network of growers and makers. As an avid gardener, I pay homage to those traditions by mixing edible and ornamental plants that add to my family’s quality of life and closeness with the natural world.

After planting gardens of varying sizes in different cities, in the winter of 2013, my husband, Willie, who grew up on a farm in Northern Louisiana, and I purchased a run-down property on over a third of an acre in Sonoma County, California, known for its dairies, wineries, and artisan foods. With my thoughts of Lakeside Dairy, and his desire to return to the country, we were, in a sense, coming home.

The driving force for acquiring this property was that it was a farm-like home where we could live “off the grid,” as my friend said, in the city of Santa Rosa. This large and complicated renovation project tested our renovating skills. The house was a renovated barn. It was not one of the architecturally redesigned and built iterations that were so popular in the magazines. The former owner had renovated it, but we were most excited about the land surrounding the

house. Google Maps showed the property almost entirely covered by trees. You could not even see the house from the street because of the overgrowth. Driving down the gravel driveway, upon entering the grounds, there stood a guest cottage, then storage shed, and finally the main house. Woods, with a small creek, lined the property on the other side.

The first year we shored up foundations of the main house, cottage, and shed.

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We trimmed overgrown native trees, bays, big-leaf maples, live oaks, walnuts, and buckeyes. We began to see the shape of the property, learn where the light rested and for how long so we could plan all of the new plantings that we envisioned for the place. We resurfaced the gravel lane. We spread Sonoma Gold crushed native stone, the color of sunlight, on the patios of the cottage, the enclosed kitchen yard of the main house, and the backyard that extended on a slope going down to the property edge to meet Spring Creek. The creek ran from the hills and emptied into the Russian River, which spilled into the Pacific Ocean at the coastal town of Jenner. In the fall, wood ducks returned and remained at the creek into early summer when the creek waters decreased.

The clay soil required load after a load of an amendment to aerate it enough to plant. We added amendment each planting season, but the hard winter rains seemed to pack the clay soil each year. On our flat landscape, we decided to build berms, which resulted in rolling terraces where we planted varieties of succulents, sections of irises, and raised beds to hold rotating summer and winter vegetables. In contrast, other beds alternated between zinnias and edible nasturtium flowers. Filtered light encouraged flowering shrubs and drought-resistant plants, including succulents that cascaded down the sides of a berm.

Field pea seeds, a staple planted by my husband’s father in Louisiana, were planted in an open, sunlit space in front of the cottage, as was a stand of collard greens. Twelve lavender plants lined the brick walkway leading to the cottage door, six on each side. Five citrus trees—Lisbon and Meyer lemons, two kumquats, and a blood orange—two olive trees from McEvoy Ranch in Marin County, two red Mr. Lincoln roses, named after the great emancipator, and

again many succulents completed this sun-soaked planting. Under the shade of a grand live oak tree, we planted shade plants and ferns at the perimeter of its branches, since it is difficult for many plants to survive under a native oak. But it provided a shady resting place for a swinging seat with Sonoma Gold crushed rock and slate pavers underfoot.

Flowers in terra-cotta pots stood at the entry of French doors on each side of the shed. A bed of succulents lined the parking area at its north side. A screen of bamboo plantings along a redwood fence separated our neighbor’s property from ours. The kitchen patio was a combination of exposed bright light and sunlight filtered through two weeping maple trees, a palm, and a large olive tree. This planting scheme mirrored Southern France. I had an artist residency in a small village there about ten years ago, where I began writing “Seasons at Lakeside Dairy.” I returned to France, specifically the American University of Paris, for a conference to present a paper entitled “Dancing with Silence and Light, James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney,” in which, among other things, I profiled Baldwin’s garden writing:

Baldwin’s unplanned landing in St. Paul de Vence opened yet another door for him, a house with more living space than he ever had and a studio on the first floor adjacent to a garden terrace. It was a place where he metaphorically “cultivated his own garden,” a phrase Baldwin liked to quote from Voltaire’s *Candide*. In [Beauford] Delaney’s place in the country, he cultivated or imagined his garden space through the tree growing against his apartment windows. It was a place of respite where seasons changed illuminating the cycle of life—birth, growth, death, and renewal. The same was true for Baldwin’s southern France home.

After the conference, my son and I traveled to Southern France. Reading about descriptions of Baldwin’s garden in St. Paul de Vence partially influenced my garden design. Sometimes when I’m standing my garden, I can feel Baldwin’s presence.

Traveling with me in Southern France, my son began to understand my garden aesthetic.

In my Santa Rosa home, as native trees marched toward the creek, our landscape got wild on the other side of a wire fence with a canopy of laurel and bay trees. One could experience the expanse of the wildness, home to

deer, raccoons, and foxes, from above on a balcony, as an observation deck walkway wrapped around the back of the main house. Flowering verbena, rosemary, lavender, and edibles like varieties of mint, bay, blackberry vines, and pomegranate trees grew in the backyard. It was a restful and contemplative place, especially on days when gentle breezes passed through the leafy trees or during the rainy season when Spring Creek rustled through on its way to the Pacific Ocean.

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But, I left all of that to move back to Los Angeles, where I knew that after so many moves, I was destined to return, drawn there by my three sons. I have two grandbabies. They were born months after my husband and I returned to Los Angeles. Being back reminds me of my childhood. The city of Los Angeles is horizontal rather than vertical. Mother’s family and her siblings resettled here from a similar semi-Mediterranean climate in Louisiana. Los Angeles was a place where my extended family developed a village and practiced ritualizing their homes by planting gardens of edible and ornamental plants. There, they held on to memories of Lakeside Dairy, where sorrow was also filled with joy.

Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins is an art curator and writer. Her creative mixed-genre works have appeared in the *New Guard*, *Rigorous*, *Paper Nautilus*, *AWAY: Experiments in Travel and Telling*, and *Black Renaissance Noire*.