

Find refuge from the heat, real and metaphorical, in an artist's garden

Ming Fay's playful papier-mâché sculptures at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, of fruit and other things that grow, are balm for the wilted spirit

By **Murray Whyte** Globe Staff, Updated July 17, 2025, 1:37 p.m.



Ming Fay (American, 1943 – 2025), Ming Fay at NYC Subway Station with Pepper, 1984. Photograph. MING FAY STUDIO

Just in time for the swelter of midsummer, “Ming Fay: Edge of the Garden” arrived at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in full bloom. It’s not just the fine-tuned AC of the museum’s perfectly climate-controlled environment that offers salve from the ballooning

humidex outside; in this moment of overheated social and political tumult, “Edge of the Garden” is whimsical refuge, an escape; it’s an opportunity to take the temperature down, and contemplate slowness.

Fay, who died in February at 82 just as the show completed its planning, was all about those distinctions, and the long, long view. His playful papier-mâché sculptures — giant pear, hot pepper, plum, walnut, maple spinner, all blown up to armload-size proportions — were an expression, he once said, of the disconnect of the urban world from nature. A wonderful photograph, included in the exhibition, helps make it plain: Fay emerging from the 8th Street subway in Manhattan in the 1980s, a bright red hot pepper the size of a golden retriever slung over his shoulder. (Hilariously, a woman visible through the adjacent diner window looks on with only mild interest, as though this happened all the time.)

“Edge of the Garden” is an unplanned posthumous tribute. Born in Shanghai, Fay was a fixture of the New York art scene for more than 50 years; permanent monuments to his ethos, a delicate balance between playful and profound, dot the New York cityscape as large-scale public artworks.



The exhibition "Ming Fay: Edge of the Garden" is on view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's Hostetter Gallery through Sept. 21. ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

Here in Boston is his portable cornucopia: A long stem cherry, a coconut, a bell pepper, a dourian, a sweet gum. An anise, deep brown and star-shaped, perches on an earthy ground like a human toddler-size living thing. A ginseng root roughly the size of my leg and suspended above ground disarms; its network of visceral wisps and tendrils are so true to life you can almost feel it grasping for moisture in the arid cool of the gallery's climate control.

Verisimilitude was one of Fay's most obvious gifts. But likeness for its own sake — however utter — was hardly his goal. The reactions of blasé New Yorkers aside, Fay's pieces transcend likeness to the uncanny; basketball-size cherries might prompt an initial chuckle, but wonder soon takes its place.



Ming Fay, "Peach," 1990s. Mixed Media. Private Collection. MING FAY STUDIO

In his close-looking at the overlooked — everyday things mostly confined now to supermarket shelves or your refrigerator at home — Fay brings us back to solid ground. The industrial-scale food industry makes all of this appear as if by magic, a behind-the-veil mass industry so seamless as to appear invisible. Fay refocuses on the wonder of it all, and not just the eye: Among the experiences on offer here is scent; you're invited to open the slim doors of a pair of small cabinets, where you'll find dried ginseng in one and anise in the other. Through the perforated plexiglass that holds them in, aroma comes wafting — the ginseng, acrid and sour, the anise, licoricey sweet.

There's a disconnect here, between the obvious, fantastical facsimile of Fay's main oeuvre and the sudden organic rush of odor — decaying plant matter, exhaling its rot. The rift, made sudden and plain, is profound; it transforms Fay's project from whimsical to visceral, and freights it with deeper intent. Walk back, then to a deliberate cluster of his blow-ups of a different nature: a hip-height turkey wishbone, its cool yellow-gray the

shade of death, or a dizzyingly intricate sculpture of a bird's skull, more air than matter, the size of a dining room chair, bleached dry by time and sun.



"Ming Fay: Edge of the Garden," in the Hostetter Gallery. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

It's all fantasy, of course — the conflation of Fay's imagination and remarkable skill. But the friction between these things — dead and living, bountiful and spent — helps give fantasy force. I'm disinclined to think of Fay along the same lines as the wry pop conceptualists that come easily to mind — [Claes Oldenburg](#), with his giant soft hamburger sculpture, or towering garden trowels, saws, and spoons; or Andy Warhol, with his soup cans. For them, the formal conflation was about art more than life — culture as consumer confection, like fast food, hardware store miscellania, packaged goods, or anything else mass produced. Fay's work is more soulful and humane, a

I don't know whether he intended it or not, but I felt an urge to read this paean to the processes of nature, at least partly, as epitaph. All over the world, [storms grow angrier and more intense](#); [oceans warm, heat rises](#). Along the nonstop trammel of bad environmental news that keeps coming right here, coastal Massachusetts is on track for the most humid summer of all time (as if I need to tell you, if you've been outside at all lately), which is [all kinds of bad news, according to the Globe's meteorologist](#).



"Ming Fay: Edge of the Garden," Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

It all leaves me leaning into “Edge of the Garden” as a memorial exhibition in more ways than one: For Fay, and the world we know. The perfect sheen of plum skin he crafted years ago always flirted with hyper-reality, as all his works do; nothing in nature is so

perfect and unscathed. An imagined ideal now reads, to me, like a study model for future generations living a very different life on a scorched earth: We had this, once, and let it go.

Fay was never so fatalistic as far as I can tell. He loved the form of things, their colors, their surfaces, dark or light, smooth or knotty and sharp (a suite of drawings, hung in a small darkened space with some of Fay's fanciful hand-scratched zines, reveal his mind as hectic and playful). But nor was he blithely unaware. The exhibition, bathed in natural light against a wall of windows, narrows as it closes; through an archway, a tight cluster of looser, later works, their skin bubbling, seem to chart a new course. Made in the 2010s, it doesn't hurt that many are called "Flame," rough perversions of Fay's perfect facsimiles in grotesque transitional states. The future, it seems, is now.

MING FAY: EDGE OF THE GARDEN

Through Sept. 21. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 25 Evans Way. 617-566-1401, www.gardnermuseum.org

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