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Emilie Clark at the Lynden Sculpture GardenBy **Mary Louise Schumacher** of the Journal Sentinel

July 3, 2013

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Like a Victorian naturalist, Emilie Clark has made a careful study of her subject, complete with field notes, writing, drawings and paintings. Her subject? Her own life, as a woman, an organism and a thinker.

Inspired by the life and works of Ellen Henrietta Richards, who introduced the term "ecology" into the English language and who was the first female student and instructor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Clark has embodied Richards' century-old research methods and practices during the last year or so.

For her "Sweet Corruptions" project at the Lynden Sculpture Garden, she preserved her own food waste — one month for each season — for instance.

Spread out with all of the fanfare of a gorgeous banquet on the dining table, in the only room that is still as it was when the Bradley family lived in the Lynden house, are the egg shells, chicken bones, avocado skins, bits of dried bread, shriveled lemon rinds, squash stalks and jars of pickled fish heads, among other — and often unidentifiable — things.

Down the center of the table are groupings of mason jars, some of them tightly taped shut, with layers of food decomposing into one another, creating beautiful striations of textures and wine-colored liquid inside. It is a feast for the eyes, a literal abstraction of meals past.

It is a portrait of abundance, evidence of the things that nourished one family for a year, suspended in time by the artist. But, like a 17th-century still life, the installation is also ripe with the idea of decay and mortality, too. The traces of human hands — those that shaped the loaves or peeled the eggs — recede in the process of decomposition. You can almost smell the stench of death or imagine the foul air that would send us running from the room should one of the jar lids pop off.

These carefully arranged heaps of things and especially the whole worlds that seem to exist inside those glass pots seem to contain and describe the very nature of things, matter at its most elemental and in its various states. These experiments, which transform the artist's Brooklyn studio into a laboratory of sorts, are, in part, what inspired a series of drawings and paintings, which are installed a few rooms away, in the Lynden's main indoor exhibition space.



Rich in the color and mystery of her altering garbage heap,

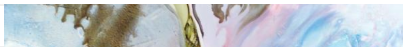
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they bear the exactitude of scientific documentation, of the painstaking illustrations of species of birds or plants, and

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garden. Replicating Richard's practice of corresponding with young women interested in science, Clark worked with Alice's Garden, SeedFolks Youth Ministry and Urban

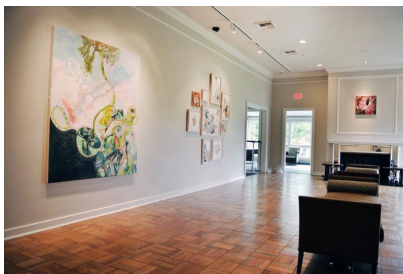
Underground to plan and plant the garden.

In addition to the aquaponic system, stocked with fathead minnows from Lynden's Big Lake, the station has a rolling seat, filled with slop and worms. And it is outfitted with specimens of bones, birds, bugs and books. Slip on a pair of headphones and you will hear Clark's auto-ethnographic essay interspersed with her readings of Richard's texts on the human being and our relationship to air, water and food.

The audio piece was, for me, essential in tying together the poetics of this project. In it, Richards words surge forward in the sound of Clark's voice. And the ideas, a century old, hold the ring of truth for our own moment. Richards wrote, for instance, about how we've assimilated so deeply into the idea of mastering the natural world that we often forget we are a part of it. She wrote pragmatically about the need for clean water, exercise and good rest. She warned against the toxic nature of worry and hurry.

The cloistered sound that buffers the readings are broken by the journal-like entries recorded in the artist's studio, where we sense the echo of her work space and cars on the street outside. One sounds like the contemplative space of the mind, the other the space where life is lived.

This is where Clark shares the thoughts, discoveries and little indignities of her experiment, tales of pets breaking in and eating horrible things, exploding containers, squirrels in her freezer and the putrid smells that threatened to bleed through her walls and offend neighbors. She tells us about the black flies and black mold and her worries about maggots. She meditates on the "leavings of so many deaths," and an understanding of pain, a recognition of mortality and the fear of loss.



"Could life then be seen as an enactment of compost?" she asks.

Clark's "Sweet Corruptions" project, with a title that borrows from Walt Whitman's poem "The Compost," is part of a decade-long investigation into the lives and work of Victorian women scientists that also includes Mary Ward, Mary Treat and Martha Maxwell. The installations will travel to the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno after the Lynden show, which is on view through Aug. 25. Her field station will go to the San Jose Museum of Art and Clark will also be featured in an inaugural show for New York's Children's Museum of Art.

During the summer, the Lynden Sculpture Garden, 2145 West Brown Deer Rd., is open Monday, Tuesday and Friday from 10 to 5 p.m.; Wednesday from 10 a.m. until at least 6:30 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. You can find more information [on the web site](#) or by calling (414) 446-8794.

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art critic. Follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). Email her at mschumacher@journalsentinel.com.

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