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Review of *Yard Art and Handmade Places: Extraordinary Expressions of Home* By Jill Nokes with Pat Jasper

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Yard Art and Handmade Places: Extraordinary Expressions of Home. By Jill Nokes with Pat Jasper. Foreword by Betty Sue Flowers. Principal photography by Krista Whitson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. xv + 170 pp. Photographs, map, notes, index. \$29.95.

In *Yard Art and Handmade Places*, Jill Nokes collaborates with architect/photographer Krista Whitson and advisor/folklorist Pat Jasper to celebrate unique and resourceful Texans who enhance nature, honor personal and regional histories, and improvise in the midst of constant, sometimes cataclysmic, change. Nokes is a professional conservationist and landscape designer (she authored *How to Grow Native Plants of Texas and the Southwest*

with Kathryn Miller Brown in 2001) and, since most of the book's practitioners are avid gardeners as well as builders, her expertise makes for a rare and palpable synergy between author and subject. Early on, she lets the reader know that she believes "the objects on display are less interesting than the connection we feel to others when we are inside the yard itself." Horticulture and the built environment are treated interactively as "use of space" in precise and lively detail.

Much of the book's originality emerges in subtle ways through its structure. It abandons categories based on ethnicity, race, religion, educational status, and aesthetics to concentrate on the relationship of owners to homeland—"their strong identification with the particular spot where they live, and their determination to use their property to express publicly a very personal vision of what it means to live and belong there." Each site is created by owners and their families, not copied from magazines or maintained by landscaping companies, and each is active—in progress—as opposed to dormant or abandoned. Some makers are economically comfortable and others more fragile; at least one has a master's degree in painting; another is a cactus collector and rock hound. There are religious memorials

and at least one "cathedral of junk," all grouped according to ecoregions of the state. But their stories evoke larger concerns as when international borders become less permeable, touching families on both sides in unexpected ways. Job experience (Mary Saldana is a midwife; Tim Gearn, an engineer and investor; Joe Smith, a doctor), military service, travel, and local legend all find their way into the book's mature and intelligent text. Nokes is a clear-thinking and gifted writer with attention turned outward, towards her subjects, avoiding the characteristic navel-gazing of arts industry texts steeped more in cultural branding than in the lives and goals of makers engaging the world.

The book's visual design is tasteful and sensually rich with film-based color photography by Krista Whitson that equals or exceeds those handsome vernacular art books of the 1990s. *Yard Art and Handmade Places* surpasses most of them and is a must-read for anyone who assumes that America's capacity for indigenous inspiration has run its course. On the contrary, there is something genuinely unique and vivifying here.

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