



A GALACTIC BOTANIC VOYAGE

March, 2013

Writer's preface: *I have been inspired to write extensively about Peter D. Gerakaris' work in the U.S. Art in Embassies (AIE) permanent collection, currently on exhibit at the Libreville Embassy in Gabon, Africa. This essay is meant as outreach to those who are unable to view Gerakaris' tondos in situ. Furthermore, I seek to bring greater awareness to the U.S. Department of State Art in Embassies programming which engages a full spectrum of American artists: I believe this series of essays and interviews discussing Gerakaris' work can play an integral role in increasing the awareness of AIE projects abroad during the program's 50th Anniversary Year.*
-Heather Zises (www.readartny.com)

Image (right): **Peter D. Gerakaris**, *Terrarium Tondo IV*, 16 in. diameter, Oil on canvas over panel, 2011, AIE Permanent Collection (Libreville, Gabon)



Peter Gerakaris' Terrarium Tondos (2011) are a series of five metaphysical oil paintings that offer lens-like perspectives into worlds comprised of botanical abstractions, cosmic fields and oscillating color. Executed on canvas that has been stretched over panel, and ranging from 16" to 24" in diameter, these paintings explore Nature-Culture tropes – themes and images that germinated from Gerakaris' initial fascination with the organic reflections, distortions and subsequent transformation of his houseplants in various chrome appliances. Equating this to Claude Levi-Strauss' notion of "The Raw into the Cooked"—the transformation of nature into culture—Gerakaris highlights invisible patterns in culture through a sophisticated reading of Nature. The hyper-graphic aesthetic makes references to modes of contemporary pop culture, visual propaganda and personal cosmologies of the artist.



Terrariums foster a symbiotic relationship between the botanic, and that which is self-contained. Having grown up in bucolic Walden-esque surroundings, Gerakaris tends to this conceit with colorful homages to cisterns of nature. By marrying terrariums with celestial backdrops, the Terrarium Tondos are a series of moon gates that offer visual passageways into capsules of galactic botanica. Within each composition, Gerakaris creates vignettes that have seemingly been adulterated by Nature. Vibrant shocks of color erupt promiscuously and sear into one another like pyrotechnics. Swirling scopes of black and white arc like ghostly rainbows over the night sky, perhaps a subtle homage to the awe induced by witnessing aurora borealis as a child in Northern New England. Color-fields combust and collide. Fecund fields sprout with flora and effervesce with curious bubbles and coordinates. Cosmic vignettes of biomorphic forms suggest buried narratives and whispered secrets. Tessellations of hexagons dramatically degrade into feathery dendrites. Pulsating planets and pastel prisms become shredded and spliced.

Image (left): **Peter D. Gerakaris**, *Terrarium Tondo I*, 24 in. diameter, Oil on canvas over panel, 2011, AIE Permanent Collection (Libreville, Gabon)

Ultimately, looking at the Terrarium Tondos series becomes like playing a game of capillary chutes and ladders.



Installation View: Peter D. Gerakaris, *Terrarium Tondo Series I-V*, 2011, Oil on canvas over multiple panels, AIE Permanent Collection (Libreville, Gabon)

The Terrarium Tondos are complex optical amalgams that evoke a surreal and cosmic Nature. Like retinal rebuses, each painting offers a careful construction of microcosmic/macrocosmic domains that juxtapose seemingly disparate elements together. The circular shape of the tondo lends itself to modes of vision—human eyesight, a camera aperture, or a microscope lens—while rhyming with the compositional theme of an ovular terrarium. The tondos also conjure the notion of a peephole, activating a voyeuristic quality within the series. Incidentally, Gerakaris' inaugural tondo series entitled "Standards" (an homage to film noir, jazz standards, and American Precisionist painting, executed in 2004) were conceived of as cinematic views through peepholes rendered in high contrast black and white. The Terrarium Tondos present an interior/exterior element that creates an optical sensation of spatial distortion for the viewer. While geometric patterning, color pairing and foreground/background devices pull our eye inward, the negative space that surrounds the edgeless composition pulls our eye outward. Not unlike a motion parallax device that is used in cinematography—where convex and concave become polysemous based on integrated movement—the tondos seem to ripple and strobe out visual distortions. Simultaneously compounding this optical sensation is the unsettling in-camera effect of a dolly zoom. Our visual perception of the tondos become undermined as the foreground enlarges, the background shrinks and the canvas seems to augment. Subsequently we become transported into a wonderland of unfamiliar time and space, where forward may be backward and the realm of reality blurs with the realm of dreams. Like an echo, it is almost as if the artist painted two different layers of focus for each tondo—one micro and one macro—minced them up, and then reassembled the picture plane into a heady cosmic concoction. Ultimately, looking at the Terrarium Tondos series becomes like playing a game of capillary chutes and ladders.

Similar to Renaissance compositions that present high and low registers, many of the Terrarium Tondos incorporate this device though the use of color. *Terrarium Tondo I* presents shocks of pink hummingbird-like flowers and cyan dragonflies kinetically bursting like Tillandsias against a jet background. In *Terrarium Tondo II*, raging reds and electric blues melt into monochromatic Milky Ways creating gorgeous stereoscopic effects. *Terrarium Tondo III* invites the viewer to splash in bioluminescent pools amongst curves of green while pressing up against rosy Rosenquist-like striations. Like a peacock, *Terrarium Tondo IV* fans plumages of marigold, persimmon and cobalt paint amongst a skein of fractal graffiti. *Terrarium Tondo V* projects poetic apertures of monochrome that frame vibrant cinematic vignettes, culminating into a cosmic swirl. When viewed collectively, the largest tondo, *Terrarium Tondo I*, anchors the center of the horizontal installation, flanked symmetrically by two smaller tondos on either side. Taken as whole, the series presents a powerful unit amplified with aural, thermal and emotional charges. Deliberate color pairings and geometric configurations instill specific tonalities within each tondo, creating a symphony of visual soundwaves. Frosted whites and icy blacks temper balmy lagoons of tropical color ranging from scarlet, mango and lemon. Themes of genesis and rebirth emanate from the spinning discs, impregnating each tondo with hope and promise. While floating in orbit with the Terrarium Tondos, the viewer is invited to contemplate philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the universe as a living host and our own role within the miasma of cultural chaos. Like fantastical seasons, the Terrarium Tondos function as a dual metaphor for transformation within our selves and regeneration within our universe. ●

See more of Peter D. Gerakaris' work online:

<http://www.petergerakaris.com>

<http://art.state.gov/ArtistDetail.aspx?id=166356>