

IN THE GARDEN

Orchids As Art, With a Nod To Brazil

By ANNE RAVER

IF you expect the usual fantasy rain forest with orchids dripping from trees when “The Orchid Show: Brazilian Modern” opens on Saturday at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, you are in for a surprise.

“We’re not doing any huts with orchids,” said Raymond Jungles, the Miami-based landscape architect who designed the show, now being installed at the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory. “We’re doing bold, in-your-face Brazilian modern.”

That means Cubist-inspired vertical planters 12 feet high billowing with silvery bromeliads; great chandelier-like baskets of green philodendrons dripping with fuchsia and purple orchids; a free-standing wall covered with 800 white phalaenopsis, or moth orchids; and a single staghorn fern the size of a condor.

So why the break with tradition?

“It’s a great opportunity to introduce contemporary design, a new way of looking at plants and gardens,” said Todd Forrest, vice president of horticulture and living collections at the botanical garden. “We chose Brazil, because it’s where our scientists have done so much of their work in preserving biodiversity. And it has such a vibrant culture, so full of energy and life, just as New York is.”

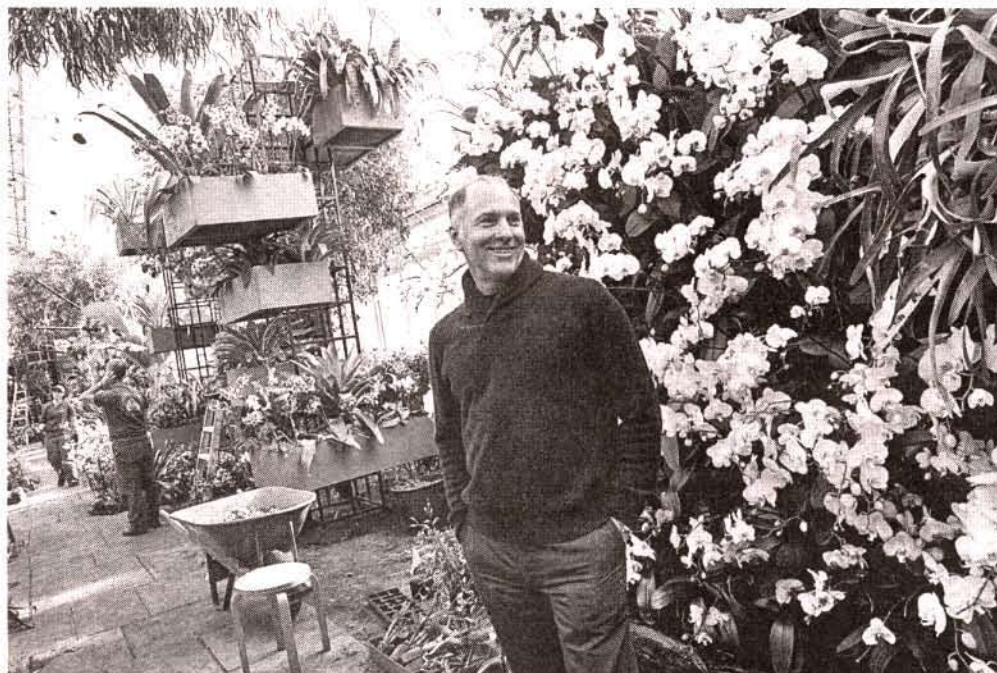
The modernist forms and sculptural plants are a nod to Roberto Burle Marx, the late Brazilian artist, plant collector and landscape gardener whose bold sense of color and form and ebullient use of tropical flora inspired Mr. Jungles’s design.

“When I first saw his work, the freedom, the boldness, the clarity of it changed my life,” said Mr. Jungles, 52, an award-winning designer who considered Burle Marx, who died in 1994, a mentor and a friend. “His gardens are all encompassing.”

Shortly after graduating from the University of Florida in 1981 with a degree in landscape architecture, Mr. Jungles began traveling through Brazil with Burle Marx, collecting plants and visiting gardens. He also spent time at the designer’s rambling estate outside Rio de Janeiro, which has one of the largest plant collections in the world.

“Other landscape architects before Roberto used boulder formations and native plants, but not to the level he did,” Mr. Jungles said. “He designed gardens from different ecosystems, and showed the beauty of those natural systems.”

Born in 1909, when Brazilians were still tending hybrid tea roses in French-style gardens, Burle Marx championed the plants of his native land and



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATIE ORLINSKY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



NEW TRADITION Raymond Jungles, top, designed the orchid show at the New York Botanical Garden as a tribute to Roberto Burle Marx’s modernist forms, left; at right, a dendrobium.

showcased them in minimalist gardens he built for Le Corbusier and other modernist architects.

He often massed plants of a single color and species, covering the ground with, say, thousands of bromeliads. But he was careful to allow enough space so that certain plants could be appreciated for their sculptural shapes, Mr. Jungles said, or the striking texture of their bark or leaves.

That’s how the orchids, palm trees and other tropical plants are arranged here — massed together, or set apart like treasured objects.

“We’re really using plants as art, in a museum of living things,” said Francisca Coelho, a curator at the botanical garden, who has been working for weeks to build Mr. Jungles’s vision. “It’s very different from other shows, where we would hang orchids from trees or arrange them over fallen logs, the way they would grow naturally.”

Last week, Ms. Coelho was working on attaching all those white moth orchids to the free-standing wall. “Real orchids don’t grow this way — some of them are blooming in the wrong direction — so each one has to be tied and staked,” she said.

Parts of Mr. Jungles’s design have suffered a bit in the execution. This particular wall, for exam-

ple, was supposed to rise 12 feet under the glass hall. But it has been cut to eight feet “to get it to fit under the eucalyptus tree,” Ms. Coelho said.

Still, the staghorn fern makes up for it. Its chalky green fronds reaching from the center of the white orchids form an Olympian six feet wide.

“That fern is 35 years old,” Ms. Coelho said. “When I first came to the Cary Arboretum as an intern in 1979, I took care of it,” she said, referring to the research site in Millbrook, N.Y., now called the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies. (When the Cary greenhouse closed last year, many of its plants came here.)

Staghorn ferns, even the babies that can fit in your hand, are not for the careless gardener.

Twenty years ago, Ms. Coelho tried to help me revive my pet staghorn, fried in an overheated Manhattan apartment. But it eventually succumbed to my neglect, and I realized that unless you are able to provide moist air (who has that in New York?) and cool nights for this epiphyte — a plant, like an orchid or bromeliad, that needs no soil to thrive — it’s better to admire it at a show.

A phalaenopsis, or moth orchid, is a good bet, though, even for the beginner. “It’s one of the easi-

Master Designer

BY the time of his death in 1994, Roberto Burle Marx had been hailed as one of the greatest landscape designers of the 20th century. The American Institute of Architects, awarding him its fine-arts prize in 1965, called him “the real creator of the modern garden.” An early defender of the Amazon rain forest, Burle Marx revolutionized Brazilian gardens not only with his use of tropical flora, but with his modernist designs that played with abstract art.

More than 50 plant species have been named after the self-educated botanist and plant collector, who amassed more than 3,500 at Sítio Roberto Burle Marx, his estate in Barra de Guaratiba, outside Rio de Janeiro. Now a national property, it is open to the public by appointment; (011) 55-21-2410-1412.

To mark the centennial of his birth, the Paço Imperial Museum in Rio is exhibiting through April 17 models of his landscapes as well as paintings, drawings, sculpture and theatrical designs; (011) 55-21-2533-4407.

The New York Botanical Garden’s exhibition of photographs, prints and books celebrating his life is in the rare book and collection room of the LuEster T. Mertz Library; (718) 817-8700, nybg.org. ANNE RAVER

est to grow,” Ms. Coelho said. “And the miniatures, which produce more than one spike, with many flowers, make nice table plants.”

Other gardeners working nearby were spending countless hours tying a mix of pink and purple orchids and variously colored bromeliads to abstract bamboo structures, painted glossy black, inspired by Burle Marx sculptures.

“We call them the oil rigs,” Ms. Coelho said, nodding at the angular poles, which looked rather human, like stick figures decked out in green rosettes and flouncy pink dresses.

The renowned landscape gardener loved bromeliads, “because they grew wild in the area where he lived,” Ms. Coelho said.

One particular beauty, *Alcantarea odorata*, which has rosettes of broad blue-green leaves, appears throughout the show, and a huge specimen, *Alcantarea imperialis* — a good five feet across — greets visitors as they step into the exhibition hall.

Burle Marx, whose diverse art works were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1991, designed abstract mosaics for his gardens. One of these, which Mr. Jungles owns — an 8-by-17-foot composition of 1,325 painted ceramic tiles — is suspended above the reflecting pool under the palm house’s dome, surrounded by thousands of red, orange and yellow orchids. Mr. Jungles hung the mosaic on its side in this forest of towering palms.

Burle Marx also loved music and dance, so live Brazilian guitar and samba performances will be held here on the opening weekend.

“Burle Marx’s joy of life affected me more than anything,” Mr. Jungles said. “I really want his spirit to be felt in this show.”

“*The Orchid Show: Brazilian Modern*” runs through April 12; workshops and lectures on the history and culture of orchids will be held throughout. For more information: (718) 817-8700 or nybg.org.