

# How Mike Gibson Became Artist-in-Residence at the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden

“This is my Versailles,” Mike Gibson states as we stand in a yard in Bishopville, South Carolina. He stops briefly for a minute, concerning this ideal website of exactly cut trees and geometric shrubs, and shows an abundance of pride. For me, this topiary garden is a wonderland. Standing in the shadows of a row of slinky, sensual, and hulking trees, I feel a deep sense of letting go as the trees accept my affection.

Five months ago, Gibson obtained the distinct title of topiary artist-in-residence of the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden, and as we stand there the 35-year-old exhibits a sureness that he is precisely where he needs to be. But structure something to last permanently is hard. Everything here is constantly a work in development. Nothing is lost on Gibson: There is a passingaway juniper, and numerous of the beds require cleaning. The longer he looks, the longer his to-do list grows.

*Alex Christopher Williams*

You marvel how one guy might have actually developed all this. Yet one guy did. Pearl Fryar started this journey back in 1980 after looking for a house near his task as an engineer for a Coca-Cola bottling factory. Fryar, who is Black, felt undesirable in a white area near the plant (“Black individuals put on’t keep up their backyards,” he was informed) and settled on a primarily Black property street further out in Lee County. It was there that he started his unrelenting pursuit of the little Garden of the Month yard indication that a regional garden club granted to thoroughly groomed lawns in the area. Fryar would work 12-hour shifts at the factory and then labor through the night on his garden with the aid of a floodlight, a double-blade gas-powered hedge trimmer, a unsteady ladder, and a jury-rigged hydraulic lift. He did this with no training or horticultural books. He just listened to the trees, opening them up, enabling the sun to shine in.

In 1984 a little pom-pom topiary captured his eye at a regional nursery. The garden center’s owner offered Fryar a three-minute pruning lesson and a throwaway juniper to practice on. Fryar planted it, cultivated it (with no fertilizer or pesticides), pruned it, and was hooked. Soon came another plant, then another, primarily whatever he might rescue from the nursery’s garden compost load, undesirable

or near-death plants that were offered to him or offered to him low-cost. Gibson approximates that 40 percent of the trees in the garden came from the garbage.

*Alex Christopher Williams*

On his three-acre home, which was as soon as a cornfield and nearly definitely a plantation prior to that, Fryer developed one of the most elaborate and welcoming landscapes of living, breathing, free-form sculpture possible. Notably, there is no set strolling course, no blessed path; you are in the art. You should relocation gradually to show on its mathematical accuracy and think about each cut. After 4 years, the garden has swelled to more than 400 abstract topiaries, and each tree and shrub is entirely particular. This is Fryer's masterwork, his statement of creative bold, his flag of

improvisational self-reliance.

Consider the physical toll an accomplishment like this should have actually taken on the artist. The raising, the climbing up, the twisting of the body, the whipping sun, the late nights (the city in fact setup a streetlight in the lawn), the requirement to prune ceaselessly. Due to health problems, Fryar, now 82, has actually utilized a wheelchair for the past 2 years, notable to keep his garden. As Gibson expressions it, "Leaving a tree uncared for, for 2 years, is like shaking up a bottle of pop." Fryar's spirits weakened. He started speaking of accepting that the garden may die. How would one maintain such a website, all born out of the special vision of one guy? Then Gibson pulled up in his truck.

*Alex Christopher Williams*

He was constructed for this, having began cutting the bushes around his household's house at the age of 7 prior to establishing an interest in geometric topiary and turning that early task into his life's work. As Gibson started to ascend in the occupation, his dad revealed him images of Fryar's garden. His mind was blown, both by what Fryer had developed and by knowing he was not the just Black guy in the field. His very first checkout to the garden was driving down from Youngstown, Ohio, in 2016,

and he has brilliant memories of stopping in the roadway prior to pulling into a grassy field and gazing at the junipers. The pictures hadn't done them justice.

Gibson went to each year after that, taking down his tools and ladders to aid Fryar out and establishing a relationship with the older guy. He started to believe of it as a 2nd house. When his phone call to Fryar went unanswered in early 2021, he chose to drive down and examine. He strolled up to knee-high yard, rough bushes, and a team from a horticultural business doing a tough shearing, attempting to get things to a workable state.

A month after that got to, Gibson jam-packed up his household, set aside his own effective topiary company, and moved to South Carolina, having actually accepted an deal from the Garden Conservancy, a not-for-profit conservation company, to end up being the garden's topiary artist-in-residence. His residency is supported by the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina, which has actually been assisting with raising funds.

*Alex Christopher Williams*

I had concerns about an artist setting aside his own pursuits to work on another artist's vision, however Gibson brushed these off. He feels he is getting a topiary master class, an chance to researchstudy the work of an artist who shunned all convention. He's not simply slicing away with hedge trimmers, however slowing down, knowing the patterns, thinking how Fryar would make these bushes into sculptures. Fortunately, prior to Gibson's arrival, the Garden Conservancy had worked with a garden supervisor who watched Fryar for a year, recording his whole procedure. This has actually been the map back to the treasure—the secret to a effective repair.

Gibson's objective is clear and exceptional. He desires to make sure Fryar gets his due prior to he leaves this earth by having the garden acknowledged as a nationwide monolith. "I am in the endgame

right now,” he states. He calls his task the conclusion of “everything I’ve discovered and done. To end up at Pearl Fryar’s topiary garden—this is the embodiment of topiary in the world.”

Source: [How Mike Gibson Became Artist-in-Residence at the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden.](#)