

Notes on *The Flower Show*
By Elizabeth East, Director L.A. Louver
 Summer 2023

Flowers are about flowers.... and about art.

Ever since the ancient Egyptians symbolized the sun and creation with a lotus, flowers have held a place in art: Song dynasty Chinese art, Ottoman Empire ceramics, large scale “millefleur” tapestries of the Middle Ages, and the lush still life arrangements painted by 16th Century Northern European artists have all showcased the flower as motif. Nevertheless, within the canon of Western art, until the later decades of the nineteenth century, the depiction of the flower was largely relegated to a lower echelon of artistic endeavor and often assigned to the decorative. But since the birth of modern art, the flower has been held in loftier regard, liberating the artist to explore multiple modalities including expressionism, symbolism, and abstraction, among others. It has also served as a *tabula rasa* for the investigation of art’s formal elements—line, color, form, shape, texture, space and value—that is to say, a kind of art which concentrates more on itself, rather than theme or narrative.

A single flower, the still life and formal concerns.

L.A. Louver’s *The Flower Show* begins with an exquisitely detailed botanical study of foxgloves by **Pancrace Bessa** (1771-1846), an artist renowned in his day for his meticulous renderings of flora. In this work there is no context other than the close examination of the flower as flower.

The flower is more than just *that* in the work of **Adolphe Monticelli** (1824-1886), whose still life reveals all manner of artistic concerns. In Monticelli’s composition actual flowers are difficult to identify, but that is not the point. It is the atmosphere of the flowers, the effect of the light on petals, the changing value of color, and the space that the vase holds



Pancrace Bessa,
Snapdragons
 (Date unknown)

in the picture plane that hold our interest. Flower arrangements inspire to this day, and with new technology: **David Hockney** paints in the iPad and prints images in inkjet; *The Flower Show* includes *30th January 2021, The First One* (2021) that inaugurated a recent series of informal flower arrangements the artist painted at his kitchen table in Normandy, France.

In *Saint Peter of Alcantara* (1995) **Jacquelyn McBain** paints a flowering orchid in closeup, naming the blossom for the patron saint of night watchmen and embodiment of patience. Employing traditional materials and techniques, the small scale of the composition invites close looking, as its foreground status gives us the viewpoint of a bug. At a slightly further remove, *Giverny Garden* (2008) by **Astrid Preston**



Astrid Preston, *Giverny Garden* (2008)

places the viewer deep amongst the flora where there is no horizon line but rather a shallow, theatrical space. **Eileen Cowin's** ...*Seemingly without End* (2023) series also presents flowers that emerge from a mysterious place, where the color and form of white orchids are given full expression through the richness of the archival pigment print offset by an unfocused backdrop. This lighting contrast with that of *Backlit Sunflower. Winthrop, MA* (1965) a gelatin silver print by **Paul Caponigro** that focuses on shape and value.

The single flower is the focus of a series of studies created by **Tony Berlant** with his signature use of collaged found and fabricated printed tin and is the recurring motif in the cobalt blue porcelain plates that **Zemer Peled** created in 2019 while resident at the Fondation Bernardaud in Limoges, France. The blossom is enlarged to mural scale in **Gajin Fujita's** depiction of a red peony in the drawing *Study for "Invincible Kings of this*



Zemer Peled, *In Bloom* (2009)

Mad Mad World" (2018). Outlines of petals---accentuated by the negative spaces created when the artist spray paints over small triangular weights that he uses to hold the stencil drawing in place during his painting process---give form and strength to a flower that symbolizes bravery and honor. The flower is taken out of the narrative context of the larger painting, and we benefit from singular looking: flower as form.

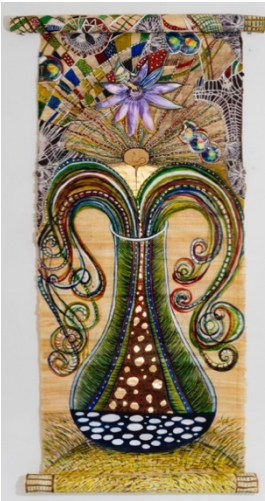
The universe and interconnectivity.

As climate change poses an urgent issue for humanity, the theme of environmental fragility and connectivity within the natural world proves rich inspiration for artists today. To address the deterioration of the natural world, **Penelope Gottlieb** employs a strategy of intervention in which she appropriates the iconic bird images of John James Audobon and pairs them with invasive plant species. In *Colocasia esculenta* (2023) a near extinct pink flamingo is entwined with a predatory flowering vine: nature at war with itself. This



Penelope Gottlieb, *Colocasia esculenta* (2023)

intervention serves to question the 19th-century belief of an unending abundance of nature over which humans have unfettered right and rather, using the artist's own words, presents "a revisionist vision of nature in its current state of compromise and literal bondage." Appropriation is also the strategy of **Rachel Lachowicz** as she recreates with eye shadow the canonical flower motif of renowned appropriator himself, Andy Warhol.



Faith Wilding,
Passionflower (2019)

Interconnectedness combined with the iconology of the energy and force of growth pervades the work of avowed eco-feminist **Faith Wilding**. The mutability of nature also imbues the work of **teamlab**. Activated by the presence of the viewer in *Flower and People - Gold* (2015) an endless emergent presence of flowers bloom and die; the viewer is agent of this cycle. The artists acknowledge, "Everything exists on a fragile continuity of life that knows no boundaries and has continued for a long, long time." A sense of "all over-ness" is also a striking feature of *Toadflax* (1917) by **Paula Rösler** (1875-1941), in the endless field of sunflowers *Tournesols, France* (1987) by **Édouard Boubat** (1932-1999), and in *Pink Lantana* (2009) by Preston. This feature is insistently conveyed by the monochromatic *Untitled* (1992) by **Mary Beyt**, who creates a reflective, meditative space, in her



Édouard Boubat, *Tournesols, France* (1987)

repetitive use of flower images in a seemingly endless modulated purple field of color.

While infinity is conveyed in Beyt's work, a sense of space is flattened. By contrast, in *River of Stars* (2009) by **Lauren Doolin McMillen**, a large Joshua tree bloom dominates the foreground while the infinite night sky stretches beyond; between the two lies a vast desert landscape. The entire composition is painted predominantly within a limited range of blacks and dark umbers, to give form and space center stage; encouraging the viewer to seek the subtleties of the natural world under a night sky. The flower itself seems to be the torch-bearer; its petals kissed by the stars as it reaches up to the cosmos. A small campfire and a barely discernable figure in the middle ground accentuate our insignificance within the natural world.

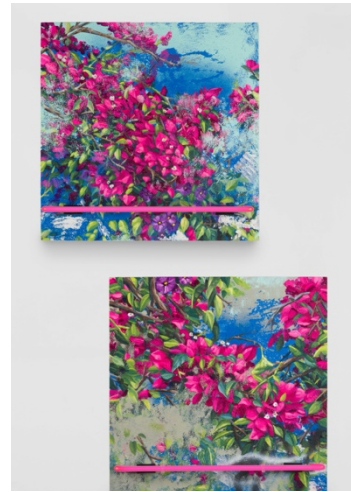
Setting the scene. Symbolism.

The flower's dynamic life force has striking presence in *Cactus Flower* (1979) by **Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin** as it shoots out from its plant base and into the central field of vision. **Tony Matelli's** sculpture *Weed* (2023) also surprises us as it emerges from the crack between wall and floor in the gallery space. That most humble of flower, which finds a home in the most inhospitable of circumstances: a crack in the pavement, a demolished building, or a freeway median. The weed somehow survives hanging on despite all. Symbolizing hope and perseverance, it invites us to recognize strength in adversity, and beauty in the mundane.



Tony Matelli, *Weed* (2023)

For **Nick Cave** the object is a holder of memory and carries its own history. Flowers made of metal are formed into a bower that protects and halos the ceramic dog at the heart of *Rescue* (2014), giving him majesty: a pseudo naturalistic setting for a loyal “subject.” In celebration of Washington D.C.’s cherry blossom season, flowers also form the backdrop to **Glenn Hardy Jr.’s** proud young man throwing the peace sign in *May Flowers* (2023). In the diptych *Monterey Park / East LA Bougainvillea* (2023), **Patrick Martinez** contrasts the brilliance of the pink bougainvillea commonplace in Los Angeles -- the artist’s home -- with the city’s gritty landscape. By contrast, **Jennifer Vanderpool’s** new series *Dorothy!* is imbued with mid-century nostalgia through her exploration of the Modern Baroque via the interior designs of Dorothy Draper that incorporated lavish, fanciful floral arrangements.



Patrick Martinez, *Monterey Park / East LA Bougainvillea* (2023)



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1538 (Ruth Bader Ginsberg)* (2021 – 2023)

Symbolism pervades *The Omen (Lily and Daisy)* (2023) by **Enrique Martínez Celaya**, where flowers stand in for the human figure and the sea represents time. The duality of transience and permanence is embedded within the composition: the constancy of ocean waves a backdrop to the fleeting life and beauty of flowers. Dichotomy is also the hallmark of the materially rich, opulent chandelier of wax and silk flowers (among other materials) by **Petah Coyne** whose work embodies a range of themes: transformation and constancy, life and loss, beauty and darkness. And it is present in the strikingly bright blooms of **Yvette Gellis’s** *Remembrance & Hope* and *Follow the Yellow Blue Road* (both 2023). The luscious poppy of **Rebecca Campbell’s** *Where have you been my Blue-Eyed Son?* (2023) is portrayed both literally and metaphorically drenched – in moisture and a sense of loss and unknowing – the gorgeous bloom seems to lower its head under the weight of complex emotion.

Painted larger than life, a meticulously rendered bejeweled lotus blossom takes center stage in **Tom Wudl’s** *Radiance of Sublime Reality Filling the Cosmos without End* (2015). Drawing inspiration from the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra (The Flower Ornament

Scripture), Wudl merges aesthetics and mysticism by employing formal conventions to visually represent the interconnectivity and interdependence of all things within a cosmos of infinite realms. The flower symbolizes all that is beautiful within a universe of potential. **Tsherin Sherpa** also draws from the floral motif to symbolize instability as he examines issues of preservation and transformation of a scattered culture.

While a symbol of life, the flower also represents its opposite, as in the drawing *Afterlife* by **Kathy Moss** and is central to the recent work of artist **Flora Kao**, who has recently engaged with the motif in response to the death of her grandparents. Unable to travel during the pandemic, Kao was forced to mourn her loss from afar. In Taiwan's Buddhist tradition, grieving family members fold and burn origami lotus forms over a period of weeks. Struck by the powerful symbol of the ritual burning both as a portal for the dead to the afterlife, and for those mourning to solace, Kao has created a series of photographs as well as nine-minute video *Pyre*, 2023 that incorporates the rhythmic chants of Buddhist sutras to explore the mesmerizing beauty of the burning flower offerings.



Kathy Moss, *Afterlife* (2013)

The body, identity... and humor.



Raychael Stine, *Middle Lover*
(*Early Spring Color Bowl*) (2022)

As we have mentioned previously, the flower has been embraced by artists as a stand-in for the self and has a long association with the body, especially the female body.

Flower Person, Flower Body (1975) by **Ana Mendieta** (1948-1985) is a powerful meditation on the vulnerability and beauty of the human body and the passage of time. In this work a human form comprised of pink flowers is silently filmed floating down a gently flowing river. Subject to its currents, we see the form slowly break apart; an accompanying photograph captures a fleeting moment of this journey.

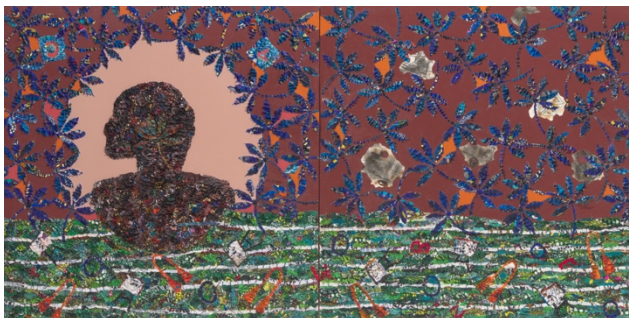
Amir H. Fallah permeates the entire body with flowers in his painted aluminum silhouette sculpture *Forgive and Forget* (2022) while **Raychael Stine's** cacophonous layered flower painting *Middle Lover (Early Spring Color Bowl)* (2022) substitutes the obfuscated and buried form of the female torso. Stine says, "I love to play with the idea that the entire cosmos, or our entire magical existence could be found within a wide-open flower. I wanted a way to honor tummies and breasts, turn them into prismatic gardens of luscious paint and cosmic sexiness."

A halo of flowers is symbolically employed in *Tattoo Lady* by **Alison Saar**, as well as in the serenely beautiful woman who is the subject of *La Rosa* (1989), the most iconic image of **Luis González Palma**. A woman, whose head is garlanded with white and toned roses and crowned with a human skull, stares directly at the viewer. In this portrait the artist conveys the essence of Latin America and her colonial history---its pain and beauty and paradox---as one of tension and foreboding.



Luis González Palma, *La Rosa* (1989)

A self-described "cartographer of culture and an icon maker in my lucid worlds," **Jiha Moon** draws on a wide range of both Eastern and Western art, traditional and popular references: in *Eye of Night* (2018) she combines peony buds from Korean Monwha with Mexican Otomi folk art to give the depicted flowers the appearance of a rose. The flowers of **Marcellina Akpotojor's** *Dede's Farmland of Dreams (from Ode to Beautiful*



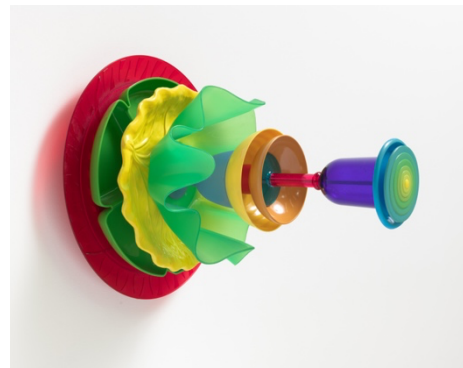
Marcellina Akpotojor, *Dede's Farmland of Dreams (from Ode to Beautiful Memories Series)* (2022)

Memories Series) (2022) are those of the cassava plant. Themes of memory, history, and collective understanding are explored in this work that pays homage to the artist's grandmother and the countless women who toiled the land and contributed to Nigerian heritage that makes up the artist's sense of self.

A more lighthearted approach to identity is conveyed in the elaborately impastoed *Golden Hour* (2023) by **Vanessa Prager**, whose subject's face is completely obscured

by blossoming flowers. With a humorous nod to Archimboldo's Proto-Surrealistic naturalist visages, Prager's portrait employs the flower as metaphor for both the transformative and transitory qualities of life. Humor is also at play in **Charles Garabedian's** (1923-2016) *Full Frontal* (2012), in which a flowering plant seems to leap out of a woman's dress; **Stas Orlovski's** *Wildflower* (2000), where flowers sprout from between the toes of a barely discernable disembodied foot ("sampled" from *Samson and Deliah*, ca. 1528-30 by Lucas Cranach the Edler); **Terry Allen's** *Barbara Rose Meets Frank Stella on Cloud 9* (1966), in which the head of the renowned art scholar is replaced with a pink rose; and not least in the archly wry *Iris*, (1963) by Berlant: iris the flower, Iris is the name of a woman and iris the part of the eye, the eye that looks at the woman's body.

Double entendre is also used by **Don Suggs** (1945-2019) in *Fleur du Mall #9* (2007). The wall-bound sculpture comprised of repurposed brightly colored found plastic forms makes for a surreal, strangely compelling monster of a flower, which asks us to confront questions of nature versus industry and the effect of easy disposability. It also punningly references a controversial volume of poetry written by Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil), first published in 1857 and of immense influence on artists and poets of the day for its themes relating to decadence and eroticism. In *The Flower Show*, Suggs' sculpture is displayed alongside a 1947 limited edition copy of Baudelaire's poems illustrated with etchings and lithographs by **Henri Matisse** (1869-1954).



Don Suggs, *Fleur du Mall #9* (2007)

A note on materiality and a return to formal elements.

While artists have increasingly drawn inspiration from an ever changing and disappearing natural environment to engage with the flower motif, they have also taken it out of nature and placed it in art's own space to explore formal concerns.



Heather Gwen Martin, *Falling Rose* (2023)

Shaun McCracken overlays his black and white photographs of flowers with lines; **Christopher Pate** juxtaposes geometric shapes with flowers, and **Dale Chihuly** draws inspiration from the color of cherry blossom in his glass sculpture. The flower shape girds form in **Dion Johnson's** *Satellite* (2023), and the color and shape of red roses influence the abstract paintings of **Heather Gwen Martin**.

Creating vases of flowers from fragments cut out from the Sunday magazine section of the *Columbus Dispatch*, self-taught artist **Birdie Lusch** (1903-1988) devoted herself to the subject in the mid 1970s, making minimal opaque collages with a focus on flatness and volume. Volume, together with shape, form, line, space and value are all mined in the shimmering abstractions of **Thom Mayne** who engages with the motif using advanced printing techniques layering UV inks on aluminum. Indeed, a hallmark of *The Flower Show* is its rich diversity of medium, embracing both the traditional: paint, graphite, textile, porcelain and bronze, as well as the more novel: eye shadow (Lachowicz), wax (Coyne), found objects (Suggs and Cave), neon (Martinez), and digital technology (teamlab), among others.

The exhibition concludes with an outdoor installation of ceramic flower trees by **Matt Wedel**. The flower tree is Wedel's signature motif - it is one that he has utilized throughout his career and continues to embrace in order to explore all manner of formal issues. For *The Flower Show* Wedel has created a verdant garden in the gallery's open air "skyroom" with sculptures of varying scale using both vibrant and muted colors, gloss and mat glazes; space, volume, and form draw the eye to the imprint of the artist's hand on the surface of these sculpture made of the earth itself; the artist has willed the flower into being.
