

Meditations on the Flowers of Jane Jones

BY MICHAEL CHARLES TOBIAS

Jane Jones nurtures a fascinating floral aesthetic. It combines a deep knowledge of the life cycles of her subject matter—she grows the flowers that she paints—with every intuitive and technical facility incumbent upon an artist whose creations are inseparable from the reality of environmental crisis in the 21st century. If it were not for the unrelenting stress and disastrous shipwrecks of the current sixth extinction spasm (the Anthropocene epoch), her work might be viewed as merely one of the most recent and elegantly inevitable outcomes of a human meditation on flowers that has persisted for millennia.

Indeed, in her work, one can decipher that irresistible allure that botany has always exerted upon humanity's expenditures in the garden. The flower is a garden's quintessential ambassador. But the flower, in itself, is enough: a telling icon that will never be stayed. This calling is also the wild, commingled in the hearth of domestic engenderment, a combination that seems to be our species' insistent need to be reminded of the Garden of Eden and all the reverberations—ethical, kinetic, contemplative, fantastic—that are embodied in the earliest legends accompanying our odyssey on earth.

There have been periods in our art history when flowers took center stage, as during the 10th century Chinese Sung Dynasty era of bird-and-flower painting, which in turn schooled the Muromachi kacho-e styles in Japan several hundred years later. In Europe, particularly with the onrush in the late Middle Ages to produce illuminated prayer books brimming with delicately painted flowers, there has always been a passionately evidenced addiction to the symbolism, and reliance upon herbal remedies that were the mainstay of human medical treatments. But never did flowers enjoy quite such celebrity as during the 17th century in the Netherlands, when aesthetic predilections were honed by both scientific applications of the first microscopes, and a bustling traffic in global, biological artifacts. The resulting botanical and zoological artistic realism, born of all the qualities of keen painterly observation that had been relished upon the human face, fine fabrics, and jewelry gave flowering plants their own sovereignty. That botanical pageant of the Dutch Republic's so called Golden Age has never ceased.

All of those Dutch Renaissance (and to some extent, Flemish and Burgundian) qualities of tonal clarity and photorealism are at once discernible in Jones' mythopoetic flower gallery, pellucidly

conveyed in her latest show, curated by David Wagner, a world leader in nature-based art exhibitions. Dr. Wagner's interest in context, particularly environmental issues and activism, has lent to the terrific projects he has undertaken for many years a most powerful synergism with viewers who are invited to contemplate not just the beauty and great quality manifested by the artists he selects for museum tours, but the reality of ecological breakdown we all share by our very complicity in the myriad of environmental problems exploding across every day's headlines.

Jones calls her botanical style a hyperrealism, and in many aspects of perspective, lighting, minute displacement of folds, shadows, linear and non-linear adjustments, trompe l'oeil layers of precision, the term plays well both within and uncannily outside the familiar portraiture of many of those flowers we have all doted upon, cultivated and/or simply admired throughout our lives. We are affiliated with Jones' body of work by primordial things, the thread linking Aldo Leopold's land ethic to the earliest PreSocratic ideals embodied in the notion of physiolatry, the love of nature, which excites/invites us to crave, celebrate and, as the season dictates, lament loss in the complex maelstrom of plant life. We are phylogenetically attached to plants, and plants to vertebrates. These are necessarily co-mingling deep lineages, the miracle of biodiversity. And all of this world so much with us is expressed by every picnic; a mortal muse by which consciousness has become the artistic expression hosting insights into what the earth ceaselessly explores by evolutionary experimentation.

A painted flower too easily disguises what's happening in the soil, the turnover of nutrients, the humidity, whorls of meteorology, competing plants, menacing herbivores, invading or symbiotic invertebrates. All of these facets of a plant's crucial success or failure are backstory to the beauty and lure that is their most prominent message to pollinators, or human viewers in a museum space. But beauty today, unlike its counterparts throughout the 17th century, comes with ecological trappings that declare the unique context of destruction. A beautiful flower, under even the best of circumstances, is a most fleeting and miraculous gift at a time when so much botanical despoliation, habitat loss, extinction of wild plant species, hovers beyond the borders and archives of every art gallery.

Jones has described her fascination with the Dutch Republic Golden Age, that was as much about landscapes and unforgettable,

poignant faces, as it was about gardens and flowers; flower arrangements, settings, and the trappings, from vases and sea shells to butterflies. The 17th century Dutch Republic's economic success story fueled the interest in exotic objects, Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam famously teeming with them; whether of geological, biological or ethnographic interest, but also precious bulbs and specimens. By the early 18th century, the Dutch fascination with natural history had produced such remarkable figures as Maria Sibylla Merian and her daughter Dorothea Maria who would produce in Amsterdam a large volume of engraved plates based upon their two years in Dutch Suriname—1699 through 1701—observing and painting insects and plants. Similarly, Johan Nieuhoff throughout the latter part of the 17th century would travel from Holland to Brazil, India, China, eventually disappearing in his early 50s in Madagascar. Each of those journeys involved his meticulous recording of wildlife, indigenous peoples and in particular, detailed anatomies of plants, all published in volumes in Amsterdam around the same time that the Merians were showing their work. Other Dutch and Flemish artists had in turn earlier invited scientific and psychological precedents. Painters like Jan Breughel the Elder (the “Flower” Breughel), Jan van Huysum, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, Jacob Vosmaer, Willem Van Leen, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Dirck de Bray and Rachel Ruysch. Differentiating their work requires some degree of contextualizing their biographies, motives, personalities behind those imparting the commissions, even their travel itineraries. Few journeyed so far as a Merian or Nieuhoff for purposes of what we would later term plein air painting, though this would become a basic practice by the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly among painters of birds.

In the case of the Flower Breughel (1568–1625) he might juxtapose in one vase well over a hundred flower species, often mixed out of season, his favored bouquets including “tulip, rose, lily, peony, iris” among others, and often, in his largest works, life-sized.¹ While Breughel did not venture so far as Brazil or Madagascar, like others of his age, he did study the palace gardens in Brussels of Albert and Isabella, and would write to one of his most beloved patrons, Cardinal Borromeo, who owned 172 Breughels, many of them landscapes and flower paintings, that “I do not believe that so many rare and varied flowers have ever been painted, and with such diligence.”² Breughel knew well his clientele. The Cardinal believed that the artist's gift for botanical minutia was ample proof of a Catholic God's bountiful Creation. Each painting represented a moral proxy serving Borromeo's relentless combat against the Protestant Reformation of his time.

In a written conversation with Jones, she described her own outdoors work, and many of its motivations, at the base of the

Rockies in Colorado, on the fringes of Denver where she and her husband live. It is a region noteworthy for its over-development (e.g., the Denver-Boulder effect that has managed in one generation to all but overtake the previous green space), and the rampant effects of climate change, biodiversity stress, and the omnipresence of wildfires. There are well over 100 threatened plant species in Colorado, so the context for Jones' flowers is an urgent one. Like Breughel's efforts to infuse the religious contests of his day with utterly miraculous and soul-satisfying reminders of the beauty and diversity of nature, Jones provides the viewer an intimate space in which to focus on a few daffodils, roses, iris, and their nearly Zen like backgrounds or enclosures (e.g., a vase), with a variety of successfully-achieved goal-orientations. Her paintings are not morality or passion plays, or even obvious appeals to environmental activism of any sort, though this latter narrative is very much present in her personal through-story.

Jones describes 26 years “of laying sod and then digging it up because I wanted more and more flowers.” And her passion not only for the Dutch, but for a painter like Georgia O'Keeffe who “first claimed attention for flowers by painting them very large,” writes Jones. And quoting from O'Keeffe, she reiterates, “I decided that if I could paint that flower in a huge scale, you could not ignore its beauty.” In fact, it was the reading of a biography of O'Keeffe that got Jones to enroll in art school.

Years later, coming back to the outdoors context for her work, Jones says, “Every year animal and plant species go extinct. I know that part of that is just the way of nature, but what if today we destroy the plants that could save us in the future? Or could be the cures for diseases that maim and kill people today? The part of this that bothers me the most is how little attention and action is being taken to change the current direction. It's also very discouraging that my fellow students and I were discussing these very things in college in the mid-1970's. That's almost 50 years ago! And nothing was done, or even talked about for most of that time.”

And while her work's sheer beauty is of obvious importance to Jones (“My work has always been about the beauty, power and fragility of nature. I used to think of my paintings as representations of altars honoring nature”) more recently she says that “In the last few years concern for the environment and climate has become more urgent in my work. Unfortunately the more overt it is, the less likely the possibility of the sale of that painting.” And when the conversation verges towards such realities as the extinction of bees and polar bears, and the potential for total ecosystem collapse, she says, “I live in a state of horror about it all.... my soul is connected to plants. I am so fascinated by the evolution of plants that if I had more lives to live, one of them would be as a paleobotanist. Another reason that I love flowers is for their

spiritual and energetic qualities that can be used for healing...and the geometry and structure of plants is completely aligned with their energetic qualities. They fit together as surely and absolutely as mathematics.”

With titles such as *Sheltered*, *Handle with Care*, *The Triumph of Nature*, *Three Graces* and *Gentle Embrace*, Jones’ suggestive co-creative nurturance of individual plants and entire systems of growth is apparent. She writes that “I am fascinated by the power of plants to grow up through rocks, concrete, asphalt, abandoned buildings and even out of ancient architectural ruins. Given enough time, nature and plants will reclaim whatever people have built. They are tenacious.”

About her painting, *Gilded Stars*, she writes, “I love the drama of late afternoon light...It can reflect off of them [plants] very beautifully, or pass through delicate structures so that the colors look like stained glass in the light. For me, that beauty is absolutely mesmerizing!”

And with respect to *Handle with Care*, the focus of which is one of her favorite roses, Double Delight, she says, “Sometimes when roses are delivered as a gift they arrive wrapped in tissue paper inside of a box. The paper is there to protect them, so I like using it as an allegory of protection, for both the flower, and the rock vase; which for me symbolizes and is a piece of Earth.” About her painting entitled *Survivors*, says Jones, “I made this painting as a tribute to the irises that survived last spring’s weather, and what they illustrated for me...Most flowers look really fragile, and are, but they are also flexible enough to bend out of the way as a hail stone hits, and avoid damage...The lessons for me are, hold onto hope, and remain pragmatically flexible.” And in her work, *Convergence*, she writes, “I am inspired by the insistence of plants to grow even when the conditions for their survival are minimal... There is such determination to express their life force.” This grand global pageantry of plant life, one of the most obsessively tracked biological processes in the collective human unconscious—the very foundations of humanity’s survival—is technically delivered onto a canvass, or sketch pad after resolving any number of challenges.

“The most difficult part of my creative process,” writes Jones, “is capturing the images that I want to paint from. It’s pretty obvious that I work from photographs and using my camera to capture the images can be a lot of creative fun, but each photography session requires the confluence of the materials, light and energy that I want, as well as my feeling highly energized and creative, and sometimes with my husband as a helper. I want the flowers to be fresh and alive and at their peak at the same time that the sunlight is unencumbered by clouds, and I want it to be early or late in the day. And absolutely no

wind. I do most of my photography in my back yard and wind is the enemy of cut flowers and glass.”

Of her painting *Special Occasion*, Jones writes that “Flowers are celebratory.... Part of that is because they are momentary; their beauty is transitory, so like joy they must be enjoyed in the moment, and that brings focus to the ‘here and now.’”

In her committed workshop of flowers real and hyper-real, Jane Jones has provided all of us a wondrous window on the irreversible love affairs that catch us off-guard, in the presence of sublime humility. The oxymoron hits a true zenith in textures as rich as those color-saturated fabrics or the quiet repose so fundamental to each scenario of daily life silently choreographed on the canvases of 17th century Holland. Jones’ flowers are steadfast ambassadors of the original world, calling to us, declaring their fragility and heartbreaking beauty on a planet where life struggles to remain free, even as human civilization seems to work adamantly in the opposite direction.

1. See *Jan Brueghel and the Senses of Scale*, by Elizabeth Alice Honig, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2016, pp. 70–71.

2. Cited on pp. 50–53, in *Jan Breughel The Elder—The Entry of the Animals into Noah’s Ark*, by Arianne Faber Kolb, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2005.