



TODAY'S
MASTERS

A GARDEN GROWS ON 28TH STREET

By coincidence, two shows of fresh art depicting flowers and other plant life will open on July 1 in Manhattan's un-garden-like Chelsea gallery district. Located at 508 West 28th Street, Sugarlift will open *Flora Nova: Painting Nature Now* at the same hour that Carter Burden Gallery (548 West 28th Street) is unveiling *Contemporary Works by The New York Botanical Garden's Botanical Art and Illustration Certificate Program*.

Here *Fine Art Connoisseur* editor-in-chief Peter Trippi introduces *Flora Nova*, which he co-curated with Sugarlift's Wright Harvey and Sylvie

Kuvin, and then Robin A. Jess describes the Carter Burden project, which she has guided to fruition in her role as coordinator of NYBG's Botanical Art and Illustration Certificate Program. (She previously served as executive director of the American Society of Botanical Artists.)

The organizers look forward to seeing you in your gardening clothes on 28th Street this July.

Information: sugarlift.com, carterburdennetwork.org/carterburdengallery



ALEX MERRITT (b. 1981), *Silent Morning*, 2020, oil on canvas, 78 x 96 in.

Sugarlift

Sugarlift's *Flora Nova: Painting Nature Now* features recent work by five gifted artists who each regard the natural world in a unique and compelling way: Rose Frantzen, Lara Call Gastinger, Sarah Margaret Gibson, Alex Merritt, and Katie Whipple. Together their contributions will offer a thrilling snapshot of the possibilities being explored by artists who not only see but *feel* their fertile subject matter. On view are ravishing beauty and the wondrous intricacy of botanical forms, but also glimpses of the inevitability of decay and of nature's propensity for enchantment, mystery, even danger.

Each of these artists is immersed in a deep, ongoing dialogue with nature, yet their aesthetic and technical approaches are nothing alike. Their individuality reminds us that flowers and other foliage are so diverse in appearance and meaning that we humans could — and surely will — go on forever trying to capture and process them.

Timeless as their effort may be, we can no longer gaze at such art without recalling that climate change triggered by mankind's carelessness is causing many species of flora to disappear. All the



ROSE FRANTZEN (b. 1965), *Thistle Series*, 2015.
oil on 28 panels, 8 x 8 feet overall



KATIE WHIPPLE (b. 1991), *Angels for Giotto*, 2021, oil on panel, 48 x 24 in.

more reason, then, for us to marvel at those that remain, and to do all we can to pass along their visual and emotional power to future generations.

Based in Maquoketa, Iowa, Rose Frantzen is a painter of allegories who seeks to immerse viewers completely. It is telling that she often mounts her exhibitions and installations in a space called the Maquoketa Art Experience, where visitors are enticed to stop, think, and look again. Never shown in New York before is her ethereal *Thistle* series, a private commission of 28 panels depicting both nature and people, completed in 2015 and measuring 8 by 8 feet. Frantzen is also exhibiting a new easel-sized painting of peonies.



SARAH MARGARET GIBSON (b. 1988), *Floral Composition with Birds, in the Dutch Manner*, 2020, oil on linen, 35 7/8 x 28 in.

Traditional botanical painting blends science and art, requiring practitioners to understand plants' complex anatomy and communicate this knowledge on a white ground that minimizes distractions. As chief illustrator for the *Flora of Virginia* Project and a two-time gold medalist at the Royal Horticultural Society (London), Lara Call Gaster has become a master at capturing details, yet she also transcends her discipline's conventions in order to create "portraits" that reveal plants' true character. On view are works reflecting her fascination with decay and the never-before-exhibited watercolor sheet (measuring 30 x 22 inches) to which she added a different plant every day throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Born in Cincinnati and now heading an atelier in Glasgow, Scotland, Sarah Margaret Gibson captures the personality and life force of her floral subjects by using Old Master techniques in a modern way. She believes that light and its symbolic qualities are at their most poetic when contrasted against the dark, and the resulting drama is amplified with varying textures such as heavy impastos alongside thin passages. *Flora Nova* offers a classic example of this approach — a large vase of flowers (37 x 30 inches) vibrating with birds — and juxtaposes it with a new group of spare — yet somehow totemic — oil studies of tulips.

Flora Nova will present a large oil painting by Alex Merritt, whose powerful expressiveness is enhanced by his customary build-up of hundreds of paint layers — sometimes measuring four inches deep. *Silent Morning* is a reflection on the transitory nature of existence made visible in the world constantly changing around us. Merritt started this painting while observing the rapid decline in a loved one's health, yet it morphed into something more universal — the hope we feel as a long winter gives way to spring.

Born in Indiana, Katie Whipple was on course to become a figure painter when she was stopped in her tracks at a Roman museum by



LARA CALL GASTINGER (b. 1976), *Large Leaf Magnolia*, 2019, watercolor on paper, 26 x 18 in.

the ancient wall painting of a garden from the Villa of Livia. She immediately began painting flowers, and rejects their classification as “still” life, proposing instead that flowers have a living spirit that demands to be captured. Based on Long Island, Whipple is exhibiting new paintings that hover between realist and abstract: her blooms are so life-like we could touch them, yet arranged in strongly graphic patterns that betray a modern design sense.

Carter Burden Gallery

Botanical art has been popular with the public, collectors, and plant growers for ages. Intended to help readers treat a specific malady, “herbals” were early books that contained drawings and woodcuts of health-giving plants. During the Age of Exploration, artists documented new finds and horticulturists published catalogues to promote the sale of exotic flora to the elite who could afford to raise such treasures. Artists such as Pierre Joseph Redouté and Barbara Regina Dietzsch were commissioned by royalty to create “florilegia,” collections of paintings documenting their floral assets. Today botanical illustrators work with botanists around the world to illuminate their publications.

The resurgence of botanical art in the past 40 years owes much to the Hunt Institute of Botanical Documentation (Pittsburgh) and to the British writer and botanist Dr. Shirley Sherwood (b. 1933). Together their collections, publications, and exhibitions have drawn attention to the outstanding skill of many living artists. (The Hunt Institute opened at Carnegie Mellon University in 1961 and the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art was inaugurated at London’s Kew Gardens in 2008.)

Botanical art is thriving at The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG), too. Artists seeking to learn time-honored techniques that combine scientific accuracy and beauty can enroll in its Botanical Art and Illustration Certificate Program, which launched in the early 1980s and is currently taught online by a faculty of master practitioners.

NYBG Senior Director of Adult Education Lisa Whitmer notes: “Over the past three years, we have seen 25 percent growth in the number of people studying botanical art with us. I believe that people are drawn to how this art form asks them to slow down and pay close attention to nature.” (The word “slow” is apt, as an artist typically devotes at least 40 hours to creating one piece.) NYBG Vice President for Education Barbara Corcoran adds that the Garden also “demonstrates its support of this genre by providing offices for the international headquarters of the American Society of Botanical Artists (ASBA), with which it co-sponsors an international Triennial Exhibition.”

CAROL WOODIN (b. 1956), *Yellow Lady's Slipper* (*Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *parviflorum*), 2018, watercolor on vellum over panel, 16 x 16 1/2 in.



Amaryllis

WENDY HOLLENDER (b. 1954), *Amaryllis*
(*Hippeastrum* sp.), 2021, colored pencil
and watercolor on paper, 16 x 12 in.





(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) TAMMY S. MCENTEE (b. 1958), *Season's End* (*Cucurbita pepo*), 2017, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 18 x 25 in. ■ ANASTASIA TRAINA (b. 1960), *The Duet* (Glass Gem Heritage Corn / *Zea mays* var. *indurata*), 2021, watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 30 x 23 in. ■ SUSAN SAPANARA (b. 1958), *Stewartia's Seasons* (*Stewartia monadelphica*), 2017, watercolor on paper, 14 x 20 in. ■ DICK RAUH (b. 1924), *Bladderpod* (*Sesbania vesicaria*), 2017, watercolor on paper, 20 x 28 in.

This month a selection of 17 works by 14 NYBG instructors and graduates is on view at Manhattan's Carter Burden Gallery, which champions the creativity of older, lesser-known artists, especially New York City residents older than 60. The show's concept was originally suggested to both partners by Pata Llano of the art materials supplier Dick Blick, Inc.

Among the master artists represented in this month's exhibition is Carol Woodin, who works in watercolor on vellum, a prepared skin that has imparted a rich glow to her *Yellow Lady's Slipper*. (She and Robin A. Jess recently co-edited the award-winning book *Botanical Art Techniques* on behalf of ASBA.) Botanist Dr. Dick Rauh is renowned for his large watercolors of small subjects such as *Bladderpod*, in which he blows up a two-inch pod to 15 inches, reflecting his penchant for detail and devotion to close observation. Rauh's book *The Science Behind Flowers* teaches plant morphology to botanical artists and plant enthusiasts alike. Represented by the *Amaryllis* illustrated here, Wendy Hollender works in colored pencil mixed with watercolor and has published four books on the subject, including *The Joy of Botanical Drawing*. Her direct approach to exploring the intricacies of the plant world is encapsulated in the dissections she often includes.

Also participating in the exhibition are artists Elizabeth Fusco, Jean Galle, Gaye Grossman, Ann Hoffenberg, Rose Marie James, Robin A. Jess, Corinne Lapin-Cohen, Tammy S. McEntee, Lois Perlman, Susan Sapanara, and Anastasia Traina.

Contemporary botanical artists are intensely aware of the challenges to flora occurring globally and therefore desire to make others aware of the crucial relationship between people and plants. While staying true to the tenets of scientific accuracy and concepts of fine art, they explore their subject in a very personal way, spending hours studying the plant, mulling over how, when, and where it grows, what struggles it has, and its pollinators. The resulting work is often a sonnet of love to the unsuspecting subject. These plants go on with their life's goal of reproducing, improving, and continuing their line, oblivious to the artists who are so intrigued by them and eager to share their beauty and significance with the world at large. ●