



SEPTEMBER
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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

The Flower Show at L.A. Louver Coincides with a Rare Superbloom in California



Penelope Gottlieb, Colocasia esculenta, 2023, acrylic and ink over a digital reproduction of an Audubon print, paper: 60 x 40 in. (152.4 x 101.6 cm), framed: 62 x 42 in. (157.5 x 106.7 cm) © Penelope Gottlieb

The Flower Show

L.A. Louver, 7 June through 8 September, 2023

By Lita Barrie, August 2023

The Flower Show at L.A. Louver coincides with a rare superbloom of California poppies and other wildflowers this summer after four years of drought, brown lawns, dying plants and frustrating water restrictions. But a perfect mix of heavy rain and historic wet winter followed by sunshine created a spectacular superbloom that was so large it could be seen from space. Crowds flocked to the Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve and other places in the Golden State to walk the trails because the last superbloom was in 2019. I even saw Korean ladies in long floral summer dresses and wide, floppy sun hats carrying Oriental parasols who arrived in buses to walk the trails in long lines – inspired by the ladies in French Impressionist paintings.

Understanding the aesthetic significance of this renewed passion for flowers, Elizabeth East, a director at L.A. Louver began contacting the gallery's artists, other gallerists, and collectors to curate an exhibition of floral art. Even at short notice, many artists were so enthusiastic about the idea that they created new paintings for the exhibition. Others had turned to painting flowers during the COVID lockdown, when people were filling their homes with flowers as an antidote to the sense of death. East told me, "My intention was simple: to curate a visually stunning show that included a rich diversity of perspectives and intentions. Flowers are timeless and universal; I set out to capture that essence."



Rebecca Campbell, Where Have You Been My Blue Eyed Son?, 2023, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
© Rebecca Campbell. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.

The exhibition includes 55 artists and over 90 artworks, installed in small groupings that enable viewers to recognize parallels between artworks. Entering the exhibition, one first sees a delicate 18th century botanical painting of snapdragons by Pancrace Bessa, one of the artists who raised the genre of botanical painting to preeminence with the patronage of Duchesse de Berry. This painting is about astute observation rather than symbolism or the formal artistic concerns of later artists. It introduces humble, common flowers as one of the main throughlines of the exhibition, and hangs beside a 19th century

oil painting, *Vase de fleur* by Adolphe Monticelli, who was an inspiration for Van Gogh referenced in his letters. A David Hockney iPad painting of a simple vase of flowers on a kitchen table, created in 2021 in Normandy, France, is included in this group. The simplicity of this still life is offset by the skewered overlapping perspectives of the checkered blue tablecloth which challenge the viewer's perception.

On the floor, a weed seems at first glance to grow through the cracks in the concrete, but on closer inspection, it is actually a painted bronze by Tony Matelli, which looks so real it confuses the viewer. Invasive plants are another interesting throughline in this exhibition. Penelope Gottlieb's witty acrylic and ink over a digital reproduction of an Audubon print, depicts a giant pink flamingo in chains, entrapped by an enormous invasive plant wrapped around its legs and neck against a background of smaller plastic flamingos, is a humorous take on the significance of origin. Introduced plants can become invasive when they are removed from their origins and transplanted.

An historic, art nouveau watercolor by Paula Rosler of toadflax continues the theme of common, humble plants. This piece was made in Germany during World War I, and much like the works made during COVID, uses flowers to express life force and hope in a dangerous time period.

Rebecca Campbell's lustrous painting of a larger-than-life Icelandic poppy in an intense hue of red orange was made for the exhibition, and uses multiple layers of glaze to increase the depth of shadows to create an inner glow that recalls ancient

religious paintings. The title, *Where Have You Been My Blue-Eyed Son?* is taken from Bob Dylan's anti-nuclear war anthem, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."



Yvette Gellis, Poppy Happenings, 2023, oil, acrylic and digital inkjet print collage on canvas, 12 x 12 in. (30.5 x 30.5 cm) © Yvette Gellis. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.

Enrique MartInez Celaya's melancholic painting of a bouquet of flowers floating in a primordial ocean, *The Omen (Lily and Daisy)*, is a poetic play on dualities of time that reminds us of the fleeting moments of beauty flowers symbolize. Lauren Doolin McMillen's *River of Stars* explores this same theme with an ethereal painting of stars in desert light juxtaposed with wild flowers that bloom at night. Astrid Preston's romantic *Giverny Garden* is an homage to Claude Monet's famous impressionist paintings of his garden at Giverny.

Another throughline is abstraction that alludes to figuration as seen in paintings by Raychael Stine, Heather Gwen Martin and Yvette Gellis. They are all known as abstract artists, but Stine uses trompe l'oeil in abstract floral motifs that look like a torso with a belly button. Martin's more minimalist, elegant abstraction explores floating red shapes that look like a falling rose. Gellis' exuberant impasto paintings, *Poppy Happenings* and *Remembrance & Hope*, were made for this exhibition using silhouettes of the red poppy motif in an exuberant celebration of nature's splendor.

Christopher Pate and Rachel Lachowicz combine geometric patterning with floral motifs. Pate's two paintings, *Dominion: Huntington Gardens 2 and 4*, are dazzling overlapping geometric patterns in black and white, offset by peonies and old-fashioned roses in the foreground. Lachowicz, best known for her red lipstick sculptures, continues with her treatment of makeup as a feminine signifier in *Gerberas (Orange)* from her series of pressed eye shadow paintings. Two splendid orange and yellow flowers appear to float in the foreground against a background subtle grid.

The use of unexpected mediums for creating floral motifs is yet another throughline in this exhibition. Don Suggs uses plastic objects and acrylic paint in a pop art wall sculpture, *Fleurs du Mall*, that alludes to Baudelaire's iconic *Fleurs du Mal*, a volume illustrated by Henri Matisse with flower etchings and lithographs – on display nearby. Nick Cave uses ceramic birds, metal flowers and a ceramic Basset Hound on a vintage settee in

a humorous sculpture. Tony Berlant is known for his mixed-media collages laboriously composed from photo-printed tin scraps on plywood with steel brads, re-assembled like a jigsaw puzzle. His four works in this exhibition transform into flowers bursting with energy in riotous colors. Pritzker Prize-winning architect Thom Mayne and teamLab – a Japanese collective of hundreds of artists, engineers and coders – both use digital technology and coding in their works. *Flowers and People*, teamLab's interactive digital work, responds to the movement of the viewer which then changes the imagery : flowers shed their petals, wither and die, or come to life and blossom again. Mayne's innovative architecture is known for its offset angular forms and layered exterior walls, and he continues this aesthetic fascination in his two-dimensional works on aluminum.

In the small side gallery off the main gallery, white wax hanging sculptures with silk flowers by Petah Coyne are grouped with Eileen Cowin's primarily black and white color photographs of orchids. The calm, graceful tempo of these works is offset by a gray wall. Coyne made these whimsical hanging flower sculptures and small floor pieces in glass vitrines during the pandemic and named them after women she admires: Sylvia Plath and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



Luis González Palma, La Rosa, 1989, hand-painted silver gelatin print, image: 17 1/2 x 17 1/2 in. (44.5 x 44.5 cm), framed: 34 1/4 x 32 1/4 in. (87 x 81.9 cm), edition of 35. © Luis González Palma. Courtesy of Peter Fetterman Gallery

The upstairs galleries continue these interesting pairings with a beautiful Tom Wudl, Buddhist-inspired mandala using .22 karat gold with acrylic and gouache alongside a Tsherin Sherpa Hindu-inspired floral painting with a gold leaf background. Flowers have always been used in both Western and Eastern religious paintings to symbolize spiritual ideas, and gold is associated with a divine sphere. Wudl is known for his jewel-like intricate reflections on *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, a foundational text of Hua-yen Buddhism. His intricate flower petals are made from hundreds of tiny clover shapes that require intense focus, like a visual meditation, while Sherpa's floral motifs combine hand gestures from Hindu scriptures. The

upstairs Skyroom is devoted to seven colorful stoneware *Flower Tree* sculptures by Matt Wedel, who has had a long interest in painting and sculpting whimsical, potted flowering plants.

Two of the most striking artworks in this exhibition are Luis Gonzàlez Palma's haunting photograph, *La Rosa*, which features a beautiful young girl with flowers and skulls crowning her hair, and Alison Saar's *Black Eyed Susan*, an acrylic painting using found seed sack, depicting a young pregnant black woman with tall yellow daisies sprouting from her hair. Saar is known for using hair as a leitmotif for galactic feminine majesty. This impactful painting is more celebratory than her best-known defiant Black Warrior Queens expressing rage against sexual and racial oppression.

Founded in 1975, L.A. Louver is an A-list, destination gallery with a long and respected history. This uplifting exhibition lives up to the gallery's prestigious reputation, and it is my hope that the gallery will do more Flower Shows in future summers.

Flowers are a limitless subject for artistic interpretation, which have always been and will continue to be an inspiration for art. When art is based on nature, it has a vibrancy and vitality which fills us with joy. **WM**