

## Capturing Nature's Colors



"Chroma Botanica" at the Arsenal Gallery features works by New York artists Ellie Irons and Linda Stillman derived from plants found in the city's parks. Photo: Daniel Avila/NYC Parks

### Two artists create works using plants found in city parks

BY GABRIELLE ALFIERO

Ellie Irons was working in her Bushwick studio on a sculpture into which she had incorporated algae, when she noticed that some collected in a way that resembled a clump of watercolor paint. She dipped a brush in the algae, and was surprised at how well it worked.

"Algae's mostly green, so I stepped outside my studio door and started looking for other colors, and was just kind of blown away by the diversity of plant life," said Irons, who studied both environmental science and studio art in college. "They were plants that I didn't know. I knew nothing about them. I'd kind of overlooked them. And so trying to find colors led me to get to know these plants, and that led me to the stories I tell by using the pigments I make."

Irons' work, along with that of fellow artist Linda Stillman, makes up "Chroma Botanica," an exhibition on view at the Arsenal Gallery in Central Park. Like Irons, Stillman's hues occur naturally. But while Irons works mostly with weeds and wild plants, Stillman, an avid gardener, focuses on the deliberately grown. Stillman first used plants as a medium in 2001 while getting her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She planted a living calendar in her garden upstate, using a different annual for every day of the month of August, and documented the process on a long horizontal scroll using various methods, from journal-keeping to photography, and even mapped her emotions about the project using a yellow string. The calendar marked the first time Stillman made stains from flower petals.

"I like to explore the idea of control, how we try to control nature, we try to control time, and we can't, so the whole idea of the calendar is a big organizing force for me," she said. "The necessity for it and the artificiality of it."

The pairing seemed natural, said Jennifer Lantzas, deputy director of public art for the city Parks Department, who came across Stillman's work while the artist was in an open studio program at Wave Hill, an expansive garden and art center in the Bronx, and first became acquainted with Irons through her exhibition at Silent Barn in Bushwick.

"The idea of working with natural pigments was kind of the very obvious thing that connected them in my mind at first, but I thought it was even more interesting that Linda was working with cultivated plants and what goes into creating a garden and what that means to people, where Ellie was much more interested in the weeds, in the spontaneous plants," Lantzas said. "I liked that there was that similarity to draw people in and introduce them to more complex issues in terms of what different plants they were working with and themes they were working with."

Both artists create with various floras, but employ different methods. Stillman rubs flowers directly onto paper, creating stains that sometimes contain fibers and plant residue. For some pieces, she cut bits from sheets of stained paper for collages; for others, such as for a map of Central Park's Shakespeare Garden, she stained the work directly, using a stencil to help her get precise shapes.

Irons creates paint-like pigments by grinding the plants with water, honey and a tree sap called gum arabic

and then dries the mixture, a method similar to that used for making watercolor paints. A video of Irons mixing pigments from a pastel blue Asiatic dayflower and the berries from a pokeweed plant can be seen at the gallery.

Gabriel de Guzman, the curator of visual art at Wave Hill who has exhibited work by both artists and wrote an essay for the show's catalogue, said that Irons and Stillman work within a minimalism and conceptual art vein, incorporating grids, geometric forms and text in their pieces.

“Even though Ellie, she has some science background, and Linda is a gardener and she knows a lot about gardening and different plants and how they grow, I think first and foremost they're artists and they're making artwork,” said de Guzman. “But they're making work that's asking people to think about our relationship to nature and what we do and how it affects the natural world and our experience of it, and the future of how that relationship is going to work.”

Some of the new works for the exhibition come from trips the artists took with experts to the city's parks. Irons' “Spontaneous Plant Clusters,” a map of a portion of the park dotted with her bespoke pigments was the result of a walk taken with specialists from the New York Botanical Garden at a construction site near Tavern on the Green, in which they documented the growth of wild plants in the area. Some were unintentionally brought into the park on out-of-state construction equipment, Irons said. She used her pre-made pigments to mark their locations.

Stillman, a longtime Upper East Side resident who went to Central Park playgrounds as a child and, later, with her own children, and whose interest lies in memory and the passing moments of daily life (she also paints images of the sky each day) joined a volunteer weeding group at Central Park's Conservatory Garden. She culled stain sources from their barrels of clippings, and created color wheels from the stains. Her color wheels complement similar pieces by Irons, who used pigments made from wild plants.

While their points of view and methods vary — Irons has a more data-driven bent and Stillman plays with documenting time — their aesthetics are similar, a quality that comes perhaps from their shared mediums but also from the influence they've had on one another as they've prepared for the exhibition, an opinion shared by both artists and those familiar with their work. Irons suggests her work got more “visually evocative,” while Stillman said that de Guzman pointed out she's become more research-driven and interested in plant origins.

“That's a really wonderful thing about collaborating with an artist who you're sympathetic with,” said Stillman. “You can look at your work in a different light.”

Irons, who recently moved closer to Brooklyn's Prospect Park, thinks the unintentionally green parts of the city, including those that pop up in vacant lots, have value beyond their source as her paint supply, especially in neighborhoods without much green space, like Bushwick.

“I hope that people see that pokeweed makes pink, and they think twice about pouring poison on it,” said Irons. “That's a really small shift, but that could translate into more care being taken for other living things in their lives, and perhaps that has other impacts that are much greater than that little moment where you decide not to kill the pokeweed.”