

NATASHA BOWDOIN'S
CREATIVITY BLOOMS

RICE MAGAZINE



SPRING 2019

NATURE'S LANGUAGE

By Lynn Gosnell

In the massive Central Gallery at Rice's Moody Center for the Arts, gigantic fun house images of flowers, leaves and vines entwine visitors within a landscape that seems barely natural. Garish greens, yellows and reds splash across the walls, stretch toward the two-story ceiling or escape the space into the nearby halls. Some of the painted and cut out drawings are mounted on stage carts, ready to be rolled away and reoriented to performances inspired by artist Natasha Bowdoin's creations.

For a visitor, the effect is one of being dwarfed by an overgrown, beautiful and somewhat menacing tangle. If nature is a language, as a line in a song by The Smiths goes, the language employed by Bowdoin shouts, entices and warns.

"It's a kind of positive way to think about human insignificance in relation to nature," said Bowdoin, an assistant professor in visual and dramatic arts at Rice, whose collage-based works have been exhibited widely over the past decade. "The scale is meant to overpower the viewer, reorienting them to my natural world." The bold colors she employs

NATASHA BOWDOIN: "SIDEWAYS TO THE SUN," 2019

Jan. 25–
May 18, 2019

Commissioned
by Rice
University's
Moody Center
for the Arts







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at large scale are “playful and fun, but also a little bit too much, almost poisonous.”

Bowdoin was invited to create this site-specific work for the Moody by Alison Weaver, the Suzanne Deal Booth Executive Director of the Moody, as part of a curatorial focus on ecology and the environment.

Bowdoin’s installations draw from myriad inspirations — cartoons, 19th-century scientific illustrations, the language of transcendentalism, textile prints and, intriguingly, lo-fi special effects in films such as the endearing “A Trip to the Moon” by French film director Georges Méliès.

While Bowdoin’s current work interrogates the relationship between people and nature, this particular piece grew out of her interest in the “language of the flowers,” a Victorian practice that used floral arrangements as a secret language. “Flowers had specific meanings assigned to them, and floral dictionaries were produced so that one could become fluent in the vocabulary. You would arrange your bouquet to convey a particular message your recipient would then read in the flowers themselves,” Bowdoin said. “Often these messages expressed sentiments not deemed socially acceptable to speak out loud at the time, hence why they needed a floral disguise.” So Bowdoin set out to create her version of a less-than-subtle “decoder bouquet.”

“There’s a long symbolic tradition of the feminine and the floral being framed as representative of one another. I think

that degrades both of those things — both nature and the feminine,” Bowdoin said. In these “loud,” larger-than-life landscapes, Bowdoin subverts conventional and historic ideas about the feminine and the floral in efforts to disentangle them from old meanings.

At an artist talk this spring, Bowdoin was asked about what secret message she may have included in her flowers. She thought about it for a while. “I think my message is ‘don’t mess with me,’” she laughed.

“Sideways to the Sun” not only subverts the relationship between the feminine and the floral, it also references writings by transcendentalists, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1836 essay on nature. “The whole notion of transcendentalism is the idea that the divine, however you choose to define it, is readable in nature,” Bowdoin said.

One of the most visionary ideas in Emerson’s essay is called the “transparent eyeball.” It’s a concept and an image that resonates deeply with Bowdoin. “He was arguing for permeability with the world,” Bowdoin said. “Nature is you and you are nature. There’s not such a distinct separation between the two,” she said.

Bowdoin, who grew up in rural Maine, connects with transcendentalist thinkers through her New England roots as well. “My family members are all fishermen or stonemasons. They learned an intimate understanding of nature, its beauty and its threat, pretty early,” she said. “Even when I try to get away from nature in my work, it always creeps its way back in.”

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Go back to school by completing this homework exercise. We won't even charge tuition!



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OUR UPCOMING SUMMER ISSUE is all about life after Rice. We're sharing advice and stories for fledgling Owls and rolling out a practical guide to navigate the wave of unending postgraduate decisions. For our newest alums, we're diving into your pressing questions: Should you stay in Houston or move to a new city? Should you go to grad school, and if so, when? We'll explore the stages of job searching — and keeping — as well as ways to prioritize self-care and how to change career paths. We're tapping into our resources to bring you some post-grad life hacks. No matter where life takes you after Rice, the support and camaraderie of your fellow Owls are never far.

ON THE WEB

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EXCLUSIVE

Recipes

Want to be a nerd about plant-based cooking? You totally flan. Elana Margosis '19 shares a simple and highly adaptable vegan flan recipe online. Also, Cesar Tovar, chef de cuisine at Seibel Servery, shares a cooling agua fresca recipe — just in time for summer.

VIDEO

Listening to Creativity

Our “13 Ways of Looking at Creativity” feature was inspired by the 2018–2019 Scientia Lecture Series and how the creative impulse unites us all. A link to the full series is online.

INTERACTIVE

Homework Help!

On Page 42, we gave you a homework assignment. Online, we show you examples of how students enrolled in Creativity Up Close completed the same assignment. Creativity Up Close was taught as both an undergraduate course and as a Community Learning and Engagement course through the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies.