

Arlette Jassel is an artist whose family history was both exotic and unconventional. Born in a refugee camp in Cuba to an unmarried Dutch mother she seemed destined to be an artist. Though early aspirations of being a dancer were dashed, the spirit and joy of movement morphed into the visual arts.

Arlette walked me through her paintings in her Mt. Rainier, Maryland studio. The studio, part of a warehouse complex hums with the sound of moving freight trains just feet from her front door. The studio is filled with fresh cut flowers, racks of painted sculptural swimmers and walls overflowing with tondos and rectangular canvases. The canvases are assembled on the wall in preparation of her upcoming show at Kentlands Mansion in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

In conversation with Arlette one very quickly learns about her family, her teaching of children, her belief in feminist pursuits and her long interest in science. The hearing of all these topics gives insight into understanding how her paintings are determined.

Arlette's paintings of roses, irises and orchids are constructed in the moment. There are no initial preliminary sketches. Questions and solutions are tackled with each brushstroke and color choice, and when necessary in detailed additional studies. Observations of these flowers and their petals generate a reaction in shape, line and color. Imagined muons (subatomic particles) additionally appear in various states throughout the work. A sinuous line surrounds many of the forms and crisscrosses it way through the paintings. At times these gestural, joyous lines defy the image and create a new layer of observation. Negative space in these paintings gets pushed into the forefront by bold patterning and equally strong hues. Everything is taking front stage in these operas on canvas.

What immediately strikes you about the work is the exuberant palette of strong cadmium reds and oranges permeating and punctuating most of the fields. The rest of the painting is equally vivid with clear, cool blues and greens done in acrylic and oil paint. The floral images expand right up to the edge of the picture frame, moving laterally across the canvas as constructed patterns and colorful shapes.

The use of flowers as metaphor is not new but a timeless image upon which each viewer can ponder. There is no shortage of art historical precedent for using flowers. O'Keefe, Warhol, Ori Gerst, Van Gogh and Lowell Nesbitt all see and saw flowers as iconographic shorthand. In Arlette's case we question if the meaning is autobiographical or figurative? Do they represent growth and decay, sentimentality or are they neutral and complex symbols to deconstruct and explore?

After our conversation what became eminently clear is the sincerity in which they are painted. They are not enveloped in post modernist irony or contemporary cynicism. Her feminist roots explore the floral form with sensitivity and curiosity. We follow the immediacy of her gesture, her dancer's passion of movement and a suggestion of the passage of time through layering and change. I gathered from Arlette that she considered many of these ideas as reasons for using the flower. No one reason seemed to stand out although she did seem to imply that these paintings may subconsciously be a bow to nature and the complexity of the universe. In the same breath however she also talked about the paintings as investigations of fabricated space. Whatever the specific reason for the flower symbol Arlette is visually treating us to a performance that touches on all aspects of her soul and personal history.

Arlette Jassel's solo show at Kentlands Mansion in Gaithersburg, Maryland will be on view from August 9th through October 4, 2013.

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