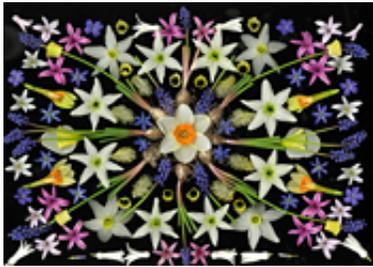




Print Article



Portia Munson

Bulbs
2006
P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson

Queen Anne's Lace
2006
P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson

Love Lies Bleeding
2006
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Portia Munson

Cut Daffodils
2006
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PETAL PERFECTION

by Ilka Scobie

Portia Munson, "Green," Jan. 5-Feb. 3, 2007, at P.P.O.W., 555 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Portia Munson's photographic flower mandalas, though contemporary, fulfill a mystical ideal -- their concentric structure reflects the shape of the outside universe while striving for a celebration of perfection within. Each petal in Munson's mandalas has been gathered from her own upstate garden or surrounding field or forest. "In another life, I'd like to be a scientist," Munson said, a few hours before the opening of her show at P.P.O.W. The careful dissection and arrangement of the blossoms reflects a craftsman's care as much as the luminous hues represent a master colorist.

Munson, a painter, began working directly with flowers in 2002. "I've always been a painter, but I also give myself freedom to work in other ways. I can't express every idea in a painting." Each limited-edition photo, done in pigmented ink on rag watercolor paper (the flowers are arranged directly on a digital scanner, and not subjected to digital enhancement), is the result of one day's peak harvest, and reflects "what's in bloom from that day."

Plucked only shortly before being photographed, the four-leaf clovers or marigolds are damp with dew -- Munson's delicately sensual blooms bare little resemblance to the hothouse bouquets sold on city corners. The flora is so intense in hue and freshness that it suggests a psychedelic influence. Munson laughingly explained, "What immediately comes to mind is that I'm very allergic in the spring. So I am physically intoxicated in terms of psychedelic visuals. I do love color, but I'm trying to make more than pretty colors."

Munson studied with Vito Acconci, Leon Golub, Barbara Kruger, Joan Semel, Martha Rosler and Harriet Shorr. She acknowledges that "my esthetic doesn't follow theirs, but my approach has certainly been influenced." She also cites Kiki Smith and Fred Tomaselli as artists she finds kinship with.

In *Bulbs*, the symmetrical arrangement of flowers is marked by grape hyacinths, whose graceful tendrils end in the coda of the hairy hued bulb. "I wanted to show the whole thing," Munson explains. Interspersed with the purple flowers are dissected daffodils, with one perfect daffodil specimen in the center. *Green Aftermath* is a paean to spring. Adolescent milkweed bulbs, immature berries and weeds form a verdant rainbow, displayed as an artful cornucopia.

Two companion pieces, *Queen Annes Lace* and *Daffodil*, are color-coordinated constellations transmuted to geometric perfection, with bisected blooms nestled in lacy herb nests or petals. The one work that is not drawn from Munson's garden is *Rose Bed*, which uses flowers from a funeral arrangement.

P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson's *Green* (2007) installed at P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson
Doll Slip
2002
P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson
Angel Food
2006
P.P.O.W.



Portia Munson at P.P.O.W., 2007

"Some of my earlier pieces were feminist. Now the pressing issue seems to be the environment," Munson explained, as we viewed the large-scale floor installation *Lawn* that fills the middle of the gallery. An astonishing agglomeration of plastic, everything is green, though in varying tones. The juxtaposition of plastic toys (some filched from her young children), soda bottles, an avocado-hued sink, tangled Christmas lights, discarded shoes, sad gloves, Halloween wigs, laundry detergent jugs and lawn furniture makes every corner an emerald revelation of our disposable society. The verdantly polyethylene *Lawn* is the antithesis of a natural meadow.

The show concludes with 13 jewel-like paintings in the rear gallery, each a still-life of a singular idiosyncratic object. In Munson's hands, a thrift store *Vase* or an upturned *Fur Hat* has a quirky poignancy. Everyday stuff takes on the status of a cultural relic, like the tender pink *Doll Slip*, a sweetly delicate painting of a bit of doll garb, or the *Mermaid Dish with Potatoes*, a swirling 1950s ceramic surrounded by a spud corolla.

Inherently optimistic, Munson's vision presents a luminous antidote to midwinter despair. Like traditional mandalas that center and inspire the viewer, "Green" represents a postmodernist oneness with nature that is both mediated and spiritually pure.

ILKA SCOBIE is a poet.