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Burgers' 'Eternalism' : flower power with philosophical twist

At Seattle's Foster/White Gallery, a showcase of Bobbie Burgers' lush, exuberant floral paintings. The show runs through Jan. 26, 2013.

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The flowers in Bobbie Burgers' new show at Foster/White Gallery are something more than flowers.

They're states of mind, conditions of memory, moments of self-scrutiny, all intricately couched in blossoming/disintegrating floral forms. Exuberantly eruptive in their bright and smeary acrylic colors, they practically shout their way onto the canvas.

Burgers, an artist from Vancouver, B.C., calls the show "Eternalism." The title, in both its grandeur and its suggestion of a school of philosophy, is apt. As she explains in her artist's statement, "Over the past couple of years my florals have moved from being portraits of flowers, to being portraits of time." In them, she adds, "past, present and future play out for me simultaneously."

Some of them buzz with a Van Gogh energy, thanks to the thick vigor of her brush strokes. Others slide from figurative to abstract in a matter of inches, as Burgers' impressionistically rendered blossoms turn to splattered or slithering drips at the bottom of the canvas.

"Thinking Through the Impulse" appears to be a pale yellow rose or carnation just past its peak of bloom. It's a lusciously complex and multidirectional affair. Impulse, plainly, dominates here. Any thought going on in it is just trying to marshal that impulse's energy after the fact.

In "Addicted to Her Privilege," the magma-bright colors of a parrot tulip surge upward in viscous yellows and reds. The intoxication of the image — and the lure of returning to it again and again — are self-evident. "A Little Kingdom I Possess" puts a similar spin on the all-absorbing petal-patterns of a rose. "Closer," in pointing its red and yellow tulip sideways across the canvas, makes it festive to the point of being ecstatic.

Other paintings allude to more precarious states of mind.

“Silence, Screaming, Presence” picks up on something violent in an effusion of lilies, as their green buds and yellow blossoms, up top, phase into random scattered drips below. “My Heart Crashed” shows bright red blossoms falling in similar disarray toward the lower edges of the canvas.

A few titles — “Tell Me How I Feel,” “More Memory than Present,” “Wondering When Her Moment Might Come” — suggest ambivalences of feeling or perspective, shrewdly and fluidly reflected in the way their floral imagery is arrayed on the canvas.

The tipsiest item in the show, “Optimistic Impulse,” shows six tulips practically springing up into their white-canvas space, heedless of the tumbling downward trajectory that seems to await them once they launch themselves into the void. Like much of Burgers’ work, it’s a visual delight and a meditational memento mori. That tension between life-pulsing bloom and inevitable wilting and decay makes Burgers’ “Eternalism” a show as appealing to the mind as it is pleasurable to the eye.

It has good company at Foster/White with two other small shows.

New York artist Jeri Eisenberg continues the floral theme in “A Sojourn in Seasons,” five photograph-based works using, as the artist explains, “a purposely oversized pinhole or a radically defocused lens” to distill images of trees, foliage and blossom to their barest essence. The photographs, printed on Japanese kozo paper, have molten encaustics painted over them that saturate the paper, making it translucent. The effect is both elegant and ghostly.

Another show, “In Costume,” by Seattle ceramic artist George Rodriguez, is a fanciful grouping of stand-alone dresses, wildly varied in their glazing and texture.

“Frame” looks remarkably like a wooden-hoop barrel repurposed as a garment. “Airy” has breezeway qualities. It’s a shapely skeletal structure with colorful desert and garden imagery painted on its ribs and supporting limbs. “Phoenix” takes a fiery, feathery, golden form. “Extrovert,” a bodice made of dark berries, is boldly symmetrical in shape. The opulent gold glaze lining its interior seems the source of its brash outward confidence.

The show was inspired by Rodriguez’s boyhood memories of his mother’s work as a seamstress, making wedding gowns and quinceañera dresses. It couldn’t be a more loving tribute.

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