

Gathering Flowers: Mary Temple and the Maturation of the Beautiful

"Where you tend a rose, my lad, a thistle cannot grow."

– Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

I started my first garden in my late twenties. I was interested in food sovereignty, so my top priority was planting vegetables. Flowers were frivolous, I felt – they could be planted at the end, after I was done with all the “working” crops. Seven years later, in my mid-thirties, I moved and started a new garden. Many things had happened in the intervening years, and among them was a matured concept of the importance of beauty and self-care. Where before I had considered flowers superfluous because they “merely” made me happy, I now had far greater respect for their power – both as sustainers of the pollinators that form the critical base of our food system, and also because I had come to view my own happiness as no “mere” thing, but the critical base of my ability to be emotionally and functionally available to the world.

Mary Temple came into her art career at a time when beauty was a verboten concept. Even Dave Hickey’s scene-rocking book *The Invisible Dragon* (1993) was not enough to shake the art world’s broad conviction that art could not be simultaneously beautiful and ‘important.’ From 2001 to 2015, Temple rose to prominence through a series of “Light Installation” works that she described strictly in terms of their philosophical implications, never daring to acknowledge that they were also beautiful. These installations dovetailed with a period of explicitly political work, “Currency,” as Temple undertook to create a portrait in ink of a political figure every single day, beginning September 24, 2007, through November 6, 2012. Practically idyllic, compared to the political upheaval that has since transpired, produced through a process that was disciplined and rigorous, to be sure—but one could never accuse geo-politics of being beautiful. As if our fraught and crumbling democracy were not enough cause for grief and burnout, set against a social landscape forever altered by the COVID pandemic, in May of 2022, Temple suffered a more personal loss – that of her mother. Immersed in grieving, and simultaneously surrounded by the floral condolences sent by loved ones, Temple felt called, for the first time, to consider flowers as subject matter. Beginning in Sumi ink on paper to produce black and white drawings for the next six months, Temple still resisted the notion that she would make paintings of flowers. During the pandemic, she moved into making daily abstract landscape paintings, based on her socially distanced walks and other experiences around her Brooklyn neighborhood, but moving into acceptance of flowers as a subject for paintings represented a paradigm shift that finally opened the field.

“Painting flowers helped me grieve in such a tangible way,” Temple says. “To be able to concentrate on something, to look at something specific, and record it in some way was so healing. That opened the door to the idea of making it an oil painting, and once I did, I realized that working from observation could really just be an entry point to what I love, which is material.”

Indeed, Temple’s signature technique involves the application of oils in thick layers, using the brief liminal period before the paint has set to drag the material in ways that move the composition from strict realism into sensory impression. Pulling through the paint to change the look, dislocating the image from the subject, backtracking, intentionally complicating the issue, softening or changing the view are all ways for Temple to reorganize her point of inspiration.

“I have to dig my way out of the problem, which leads then to something that I don't know and haven't seen,” says Temple. “If it gets too representational early in the process, I kind of understand it too soon, and that's not really very interesting – because it's something I've seen before, or feel like I know.”

Flowers are a fascinating metaphor for grief and beauty, because of their impermanence. The painting of flowers is, on some level, a pursuit to capture that which is already lost to us. Sometimes plants that are suffering will throw out flowers as a last act, a desperate bid to cast their genes once more into the pool, even as the host is not long for the world. Paintings, too, are a way to capture that which is fleeting: the vision of a particular artist. How rare, the ability to take the world in through observation and then produce a document that can be shared with others – your contemporaries or those as yet unborn. Just like genetics, just like pollination, artists disseminate their vision through time. It is a healing thought.

As these works were a revelation to Temple in their making, they are a revelation to us as viewers. The same kind of observation that helped the artist to regroup in her grief can help us to regroup as we suffer through challenges on the personal, political, and environmental level. Activism is serious work, and most people of good conscience grapple with how to make an impact in systems of injustice that out-scale us by an order of magnitude – which is why antidotes to grief and burnout are crucial to sustain the energy necessary to combat them. Beauty, it turns out, is not frivolous; it is the pollinator that keeps us returning, year after year, to the fray.

This is, in part, because flowers cannot be insincere. We are all, I hope, recovering from the scourge of irony, which blisters the face of every intention. We are all, I hope, ready to stop insecure posturing around notions of *importance* that deny accessibility, pleasure, care, and beauty. Can we offer our vulnerable and sincere selves to seed better connections, better outcomes, better values? Mary Temple has done it. Let us meet the future in her garden.

~ Sarah Rose Sharp, July 2024