

# Artists take one on a garden journey, abstractly

**'Abstracting From Nature' exhibition opens at Sturt Haaga Gallery in Descanso Gardens.**



Artwork by Edith Hillinger, from left to right, entitled "Doubletake - Poppy Petal 9," "Spine," and "Doubletake - Poppy 1" are part of the art exhibit "Extracting from Nature" at the Sturt Haaga Gallery at Descanso Gardens in La Cañada Flintridge on Monday, May 5, 2014. (Tim Berger / Staff Photographer / May 5, 2014)



[Joan Kahn artwork](#)

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By Joyce Rudolph

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Artists have looked at nature with a new eye, creating works in paintings, photographs, installations, drawings and printmaking for "Abstracting From Nature," an exhibition that opened Sunday at the Sturt Haaga Gallery in Descanso Gardens

Upon first glance, it's not obvious which of nature's gifts are present in the works of this show. One needs to move closer to truly see the hillsides, rocks, flowers, leaves and trees that have found a niche in each piece on display.

In coordinating all the exhibitions for this contemporary art gallery, curator John David O'Brien said he seeks works that are related directly to the gallery's botanical garden location.

"The visitors are coming here primarily to see the gardens, so we want the contemporary art to be a reflection of, or give rise to, thinking about the botanical garden that surrounds us," he said.

While O'Brien provides the artists for the shows, decisions as to what path each show takes are a collaboration with Descanso Executive Director David Brown, who is a graphic designer and former president of Art Center College of Design, and a committee.

This exhibition came from a suggestion by Brown, who was considering his own experience and his discovery of contemporary artist Elsworth Kelly, O'Brien said.

"Kelly's work spans drawings that are very beautiful but very clearly derived from botany — from trees and leaves — and it goes straight over to extraordinary rigid geometric abstraction," he said.

Brown wanted the show to feature artists who are drawing from nature but creating very abstract patterns. One example is, if one were to look at geography from a satellite or plane, it would appear geometric, but up close, it doesn't look that way. In contrast, if you shrink it down to microscopic size, then things like leaf patterns become almost geometric — or abstract.

"So this show presents a number of artists whose roots as an inspiration are in nature but the work itself will be quite abstract," O'Brien said.

The mission of Descanso Gardens is to educate about the stewardship of nature and entertain through the beauty and the natural phenomenon that is found in the gardens and also provide a place to show examples of contemporary works by artists from the Los Angeles area as well as the different types of contemporary art that is here.

In her acrylics on canvas in this show, Roxene Rockwell has done a close-up study of trees and their bark. From say, five feet away, they become an abstract pattern of parallel lines, some dense, others with more space in between, which creates a black and white severe palette. As one is drawn closer to the pieces, they look like tree bark.

"She makes it so that at first glance, it's an abstract pattern, but at second glance, especially when you see the title, 'Forest IV' and 'Forest VI', you realize that she's talking about the unique pattern that bark forms on trees," O'Brien said.

Rockwell always uses trees as metaphors for humans and human condition in her paintings, she said.

"In these paintings because they are so dense it's really about searching for a place in a very densely populated work and if you look at these pieces close up, they are done with a real small brush — very intricate — so it's about individual personalities trying to show through on the bark. We all want to stand out but it's hard in such a densely populated world."

Another artist, Ann Diener takes tree limbs and vines and turns them into array of gestures, semi-circles and spirals into drawings that are 12 feet long.

"So you are getting the ebb and flow of the way in which natural elements can be transformed, and once again, on one level you see them as what they are — trees, limbs and branches — but on another level you see them as swirling patterns," O'Brien said. "On that scale, the composition changes the way that we perceive them."

Susan Joseph has four paintings in the show from a series of her paintings titled "Hopeful Monsters." Her inspiration was an article she read in the research journal "Experimental Botany", she said.

"It was about a kind of weed called the Shepherd's Purse that demonstrates how genetic mutation could adapt to environments," she said, adding that scientists hope to get a lot of information from it and so the name, "Hopeful Monsters."

"The way I work is kind of mutant flowers, which was one of the first studies of botanists or early naturalists as far back as the Greeks with a monstrous flower or the double flower — so that's what it has to do with the theme of the show, organic abstraction, our meditations on nature and our environment," she said.

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