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Finding Fresh Images for an Evergreen Subject

By MARGARETT LOKE

Imagine a show where a Robert Mapplethorpe is far less interesting than a work by a Regina DeLuise, where a Joel Meyerowitz or an Eliot Porter is eclipsed by a Richard Warren.

"Glorious Gardens," at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, includes a handful of big names, but they seem to serve as the pro forma backdrop for an astonishing number of little known photographers, like Ms. DeLuise and Mr. Warren, who bring surprising freshness to a very familiar subject.

Ms. DeLuise, for instance, Brooklyn born and in her 30's, produces classic platinum palladium prints with lush shadows and crisp light. But she trains her camera on a commonplace hydrangea on a white fence, or a terra cotta pot holding a plant seemingly on its last legs, or a plain wooden chair in front of a window looking out on an unusually wild formal garden.

Mr. Warren, a commercial photographer, also in his 30's, zeroes in on the backs of wrought iron garden chairs to create an elegant abstraction of bold swirls.

In an intricate study by Jean Kallina, the hard outlines of window panes, beyond which is an interior courtyard, are frames within frames for a thick twisting branch and the soft lines of trees and nearby buildings. Ms. Kallina teaches photography at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and has worked on collaborative prints

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with the painter Julian Schnabel.

"Glorious Gardens" keeps the familiar or copycat images to a minimum. It gets this problem out of the way right at the beginning of the show, through the varied work of Jed Devine, who teaches photography at the State University of New York at Purchase in Westchester County. In his pictures, which come in all sizes, you see traces of Walker Evans (with whom Mr. Devine studied and printed), Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston and Josef Sudek. Similarly, Tom Baril's sumptuous, relatively large (23 by 18 inch) close ups of lilies and a sunflower invite comparison with the Mapplethorpe flower photographs. Mr. Baril, who for many years was Mr. Mapplethorpe's printer, seems to have absorbed his chilly esthetic.

Although "Glorious Gardens" doesn't include the intoxicating splendor of an Imogene

Cunningham, there are lots of treasures, even from the well known.

Karl Blossfeld is perhaps too famous for his studies of plants with unpronounceable names that put up a dramatic front, shooting straight up or curling at the ends. Here there is an unusual picture of *Achillea clypeolata* blossoms, which resemble baby sunflowers with thick dark centers that in turn resemble colonies of insects. Josef Sudek is, as always, superb: an old wicker chair about to be overtaken by plant growth looks nonchalant, seemingly content with what it has already seen.

Pride of place (that is, hanging over the gallery's fireplace) goes to Sandi Fellman's large prints of daisies. Ms. Fellman's close ups are the same size as Mr. Baril's, but they are different on two counts. One, there is much less of a need to show the perfect flower under perfect lighting, so there is more spontaneity. Two, Ms. Fellman's flowers aren't the showy lily or sunflower but the simple daisy and the tiny lily of the valley. The results are photographs that transform the humble to amazing objects of desire.

Now and then, the show pairs disparate work, and occasionally such pairings work to one photographer's advantage. Airy pictures by Dr. Dick Arentz, for example, are positioned above murky ones by Rocky Schenck. Dr. Arentz, an oral surgeon in Flagstaff, Ariz., has been a photographer since the early 1970's, and his panoramic views of wrought iron chairs in a French

park are wonderfully calligraphic. In one, the chairs are lined up in a big, lazy swirl; in the other, they are randomly scattered.

The Schenck pictures, while accentuating the minimalism in the Arentz images, are by themselves unsatisfying. Black on black some of Roy de Carava's photographs come to mind can be dazzling, but murk for the sake of murk is not. Similarly, the patently synthetic pictures of red and yellow flowers by Peter Dayton, which he describes as color laser Xerox collages with polymer resin, can be construed as down-

town ironic. But given the company they are keeping, they are about as appealing as political buttons.

In any show of gardens, it's probably inevitable that greeting card images will creep in. And the Polaroid transfers of flowers by Masaaki Kazama are no different from the images on cards carried by the pricier stationery stores.

Perhaps they, too, are in the show for a reason. For on the same wall as these pretty things, and gaining handsomely by the proximity even as it is inexplicably wedged along a narrow corridor, is the show's

last, largest and most transcendent work.

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"Glorious Gardens" remains at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, 52 East 76th Street, Manhattan, through June 28.