

VOGUE

The Scary, Pretty Flower Paintings of Shara Hughes

Dodie Kazanjian | April 30, 2019



Shara Hughes

Where would Van Gogh be without sunflowers? Monet without water lilies? Or O’Keeffe without her close-ups of black irises, whose voluptuous contours reminded some people (to Georgia’s great annoyance!) of female genitalia. From all those great Dutch still-life artists to Magritte and Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Peyton, almost every artist you can think of has painted them. And some examples—Picasso’s *Woman-Flower* of Françoise Gilot and Warhol’s quartet of silk-screened hibiscus—take up permanent residence in your consciousness.

Flower paintings, in general, got a bad rap (too pretty), and often still do. And women who paint them run the risk of having them dismissed as “women’s work.” This certainly won’t happen to Shara Hughes, the 37-year-old Brooklyn artist whose new show, “In Lieu of Flowers,” opens this Friday at Rachel Uffner Gallery on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where it will be shown until June 23.

First off, her flowers are fictional: To me, they’re portraits, individual and group portraits of strange growths, some ominous, some sexy, some hilarious, some tired or wilting. These are misfits who dare to defy the genre. Most of them are large—up to eight feet tall—and they come in bold and clashing colors. They’re not easy to like right away. Her *Naked Lady* is a joker and a hussy. *Pretty Prickly* almost makes you itch, and delight isn’t



High Energy Habits by Shara Hughes JSP Art Photography

ings in the past, but typically you think of them as still lifes in vases. I wanted to use the flower mostly to challenge myself.

DK: Walking into your studio, I was struck by the non-pretty colors and by the enlarged scale—the largest paintings you’ve ever made. These are not like any flowers I’ve seen in art before. They’re not flowers in the landscape, they’re more like large-scale portraits—portraits of imaginary flowers. What’s on your mind with them?

SH: Yes, so many of them turned into portraits or multiple figures in the space. They often feel dramatic and sad and scary and ominous. I wanted the idea of flowers to twist into something that could be dangerous or ugly. It didn’t always turn out that way, and I think they can be both beautiful and scary or humanlike but also unfamiliar at the same time. I’m always interested in a subject that can be flexible in that way.

DK: Were you channeling any other artists—O’Keeffe, for example? She always said that reading sexual overtones into her flowers was absurd. What’s your view on that and on your flowers? Do you see them as sexual or genderless?

SH: How can you not think of O’Keeffe? I thought about her, and I thought about Van Gogh, and I thought about Klimt and Hilma af Klint, but also I tried not to think about these artists. I kind of related to O’Keeffe’s thoughts

exactly the word that comes to mind with her *Earthly Delights*. But as with Van Gogh’s and O’Keeffe’s and Warhol’s work, you won’t easily forget them. Shara and I talked about this new turn in her work. An edited version of our conversation is below.

Dodie Kazanjian: You’ve been working with landscape for the past three or four years. What led you to concentrate on flowers?

Shara Hughes: I had made a few flower paintings in the recent past while working on the landscape series, so it wasn’t super unfamiliar. One of those, called *True Loves Kiss*, was about two lovers tangling and strangling each other during their first and last kiss. So in a lot of ways I’ve always felt they were somehow stand-ins for figures when I painted them in a more close-up way. But I thought of flowers because I wanted a more detailed look at one element in the landscape. The flower isn’t a huge departure because I can still use the landscape, but it is a huge departure in a lot of ways because I wasn’t sure how to paint a flower. I love the symbolism it holds both in spiritual and mythical ways, but also in art history. There have been many flower paintings



You're Highly Evolved and Beautiful by Shara Hughes JSP Art Photography

from: *In Lieu of Flowers*.

DK: Painting flowers is often looked upon as decorative art—women’s work. But nobody could accuse you, or your flowers, of that. With their acid colors and bold stances, they put you off and then pull you in. Did you have this in mind when doing them?

SH: Yes. I was very aware of the flower’s relation to the idea of beauty. Some of the work I did get caught up in letting it be pretty. In *My Organized Flare*, the tendrils follow a physical gesture in a way that is satisfying. In a lot of ways I see myself as all of these paintings. Scary, aggressive, powerful, weak, pretty, ugly, boring, sad, happy, et cetera, so when the work was veering one way, who am I to say it should or shouldn’t end up a certain way. I think that’s why the push and pull happens. They become all of these ideas so it leads you to a very active interaction as the viewer.

DK: What are your favorite flower paintings in art history, and what makes them great?

SH: Oh, my gosh. This is a crazy question. I want to say so many people. I have to think of Monet, as predictable as that is. He may not be my favorite, but what he did with the water lily paintings was super influential for so many artists after him. Even just small corners of his paintings bring the painting apart in such a way that you can’t help but to think how someone like Joan Mitchell or Per Kirkeby would have been influenced. But then there’s the epic flower painting *Flowers, Italy* by Joseph Stella that I love. It’s really hard to say just a few.

on her stance that her paintings weren’t sexual. I don’t totally know what I think because I kept going back and forth on her point of view. I think there are some genderless flowers in my paintings and some female and male ones. There’s something about flowers that immediately make you think female. I think the idea of female has changed, however. We are strong, we are scary, we are powerful, we are a force, and we can still be beautiful. I think these paintings are all of those things. I hope you see many things in the work that aren’t just about this idea, so that’s probably why Georgia was so adamant on her sentiment that they weren’t sexual. I think they can be sexual and abstract, and confusing, and beautiful, and scary and powerful. Maybe it’s the idea that one description won’t do it justice. I like that I can say, “Oh, I made a flower show this time,” which can feel boring or disappointing, but when you see the show it’s the opposite of that, exceeding the expectations we have already set for the flower. I think that’s also where the title came