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ARTISTS WHOSE WORKS SHOW HOW THEIR GARDENS GROW

BY SARAH KAUFMAN

“I paint flowers so they will not die,” wrote Frida Kahlo. She painted them for other reasons, too, as you can see in a show at the New York Botanical Garden: “Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life.”

Kahlo had deep feelings for greenery and flowers. We think of her as consumed by darkness — with her injuries and pain, her tempestuous marriage, her early death. But this illuminating exhibition in the Bronx reveals the artist’s brighter side.

More than a dozen of Kahlo’s botanically focused artworks are on display there: still lifes with fruit and parrots, self-portraits framed by fuchsias and zinnias, surreal depictions of engorged vegetation and magical mandrakes. Loss and injury are present in some of these, but in many cases those themes are softened by whimsy and a connection to the natural world.

The conservatory is planted to evoke the origins of such imagery: Kahlo’s vast courtyard garden of tropical and desert plants at Casa Azul, her “Blue House” near Mexico City. This was her lifelong home — where she was born, where she died and where she surrounded herself with lushness: scarlet bougainvillea; ruffled pink canna lilies; elephant ears with exuberant open-faced leaves, like choir members singing at full volume.

Kahlo isn’t the only visual artist who was pulled to the soil as much as the easel. Monet was “just an absolute nut,” says Karen Daubmann, who should know. She’s the New York Botanical Garden’s associate vice president for exhibitions, and proudly identifies as a gardening nut herself. In addition to overseeing the Kahlo exhibition, which runs through Nov. 1, Daubmann was

ARTISTS CONTINUED ON E12

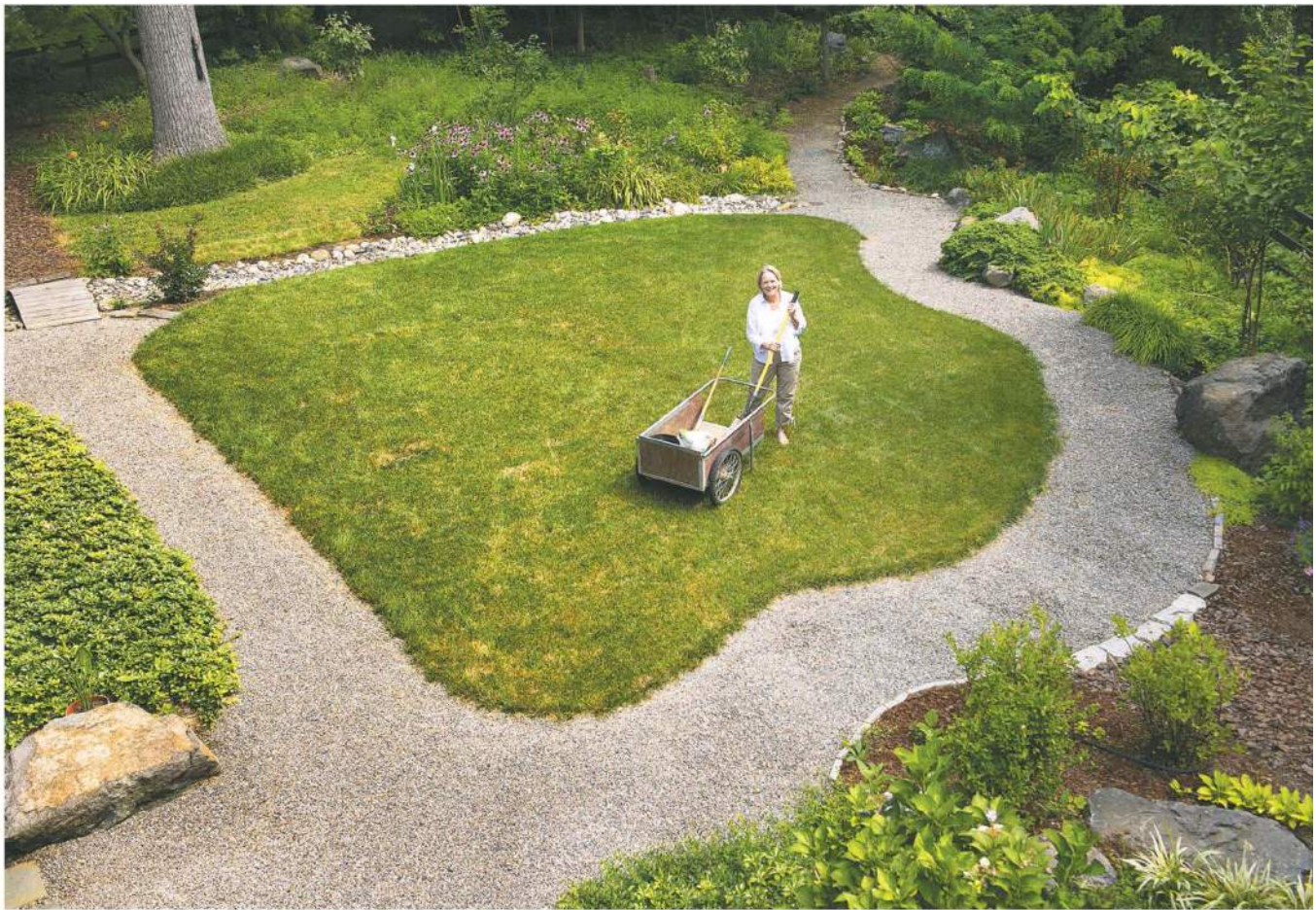


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COURTESY OF GEORGIA NASSIKAS

Encaustic artist Georgia Nassikas in her studio overlooking her garden in McLean. She has beehives on the property and incorporates beeswax into her artwork through a process of heating, mixing, scraping and layering. “I would have to say the landscape, nature and gardening have infused my DNA,” she notes.



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Gardening as an extension of the brush

ARTISTS FROM E1

involved with the garden's Monet show in 2012. The plein air impressionist was obsessive about plants, Daubmann says. He hoarded textures and colors, bought new varieties every season and kept extensive records of his water lilies and other specimens. He considered his garden at Giverny, outside Paris, as one of his greatest masterpieces.

"Nothing in the whole world is of interest to me but my painting and my flowers," he once declared.

Not every artist is a gardening nut. But the popular Kahlo exhibition — a blockbuster for the NYBG — prompts reflection on those artists who unearth inspiration in their gardens. How can those who experiment and fail and struggle with pests, drought and derechos like the rest of us — and love it — inspire our own backyard, balcony and container-garden dreams? Their creativity is nourished by loamy mess, by dried-up death and leafy success, by the quest for the perfect shade of red or the best spot for a stone.

For many of these artists, gardening is an extension of the brush.

"It is a way of thinking out loud, actually, about painting — proportion, mixture of things, changing," Robert Dash once said. The abstract expressionist had works in the Corcoran Gallery, the Guggenheim and other collections. He was also known for his whimsical two-acre home garden, called Madoo, in Sagaponack, Long Island. In a 1974 interview for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, he said that gardening, like painting, illustrates "the unlimited possibilities in a small area, because the garden is very small."

Dash shaped his all-organic garden over decades, "carving the very air," as he put it, creating living tableaux of boxwood balls and graceful ginkgos, cascades of climbing roses, fluffy mounds of asparagus, allium and other native plants. He died in 2013, but visitors can still tour the Madoo Conservancy.

"Gardening is an obsession. You can't stop, and once you start, you're doomed," he said.

Kahlo, who pinned bougainvillea from her own vines into her iconic updo, was one of the doomed. She transformed her garden over the years into a showcase of native plants and sculptures she collected with her husband, muralist Diego Rivera. It also was a habitat for her beloved menagerie of monkeys, snakes



COURTESY JANET FRY ROGERS



and melts a mixture of pigment, fir tree sap and wax from her beehives. To raise happy bees, she grows plants for pollinators: fennel, milkweed, fuzzy Joe-pye weed. She dug a pond where the bees drink amid water lilies.

She grew up with a love of art and land. Her father was John Chafee, former governor of Rhode Island and later secretary of the Navy and a U.S. senator. He often parted ways with his fellow Republicans to champion environmental legislation, such as the Clean Water Act. Organic gardening was part of Nassikas's childhood. Her great-grandfather was the artist George De Forest Brush, whose Native American paintings have been featured at the National Gallery of Art.

Her home, on several acres of meadow and

gestures to the trees at the far edge, where birds are singing so loudly you would think they were directly overhead. "So I don't bring it in here.

We walk past the chicken coop and vegetable plot to the beehives — "the source of my medium," she says. Five towers of wooden boxes, painted yellow and blue, stand in the grass. The bees in all five survived the winter; some years only one or two make it.

The bees reward the artist in many ways. "Put your ear next to the hive in the middle of winter, and they're so powerfully active inside," she says. "Maybe that's indicated in my art. It's quiet yet powerful."

Nassikas describes caring for the bees and harvesting honey and wax as a kind of meditation. "It's one of the few places where you're using all your senses. It's very Zen," she says. "You can't hurry; you're seeing and smelling and touching. You have to be very clear about what you're doing, or you'll screw up."

She has been stung a few times. "Yes, there's a little pain and suffering!" Nassikas says with a laugh. "Maybe there's more Frida Kahlo in me than I realized."

"One man's weed is another man's art project," says Janet Fry Rogers, pulling at a leafy clump with pale green pods. "My next drawing will be Chinese Lantern. It's invasive!"

Rogers welcomes mess and chaos. Her half-acre property in a quiet Annapolis neighborhood near the Severn River had a tidy Japanese garden when she and her husband bought it 20 years ago. She kept it up, though she didn't love it. But in April 2014, the night before it was to be featured in the neighborhood garden tour, the careful landscaping was destroyed in a mini-derecho that also took down her deck and three of her poplar trees.

"Rather than being devastated, I saw it as an opportunity," she says. Rogers is 75, and her face, framed in a soft bob, has a kind, patient expression. She turned what had been a manicured plot into a meadow, with new young dogwoods and wildflowers.

"It's all going native," she says, pointing out maple and ash saplings that popped up on their own. "Oh! There's a butterfly — I'm so excited! This is exactly what's supposed to be happening."

"When you plant things at 75, it's an act of faith," she adds with a laugh. "Our peers are moving to Florida. But this is such a pleasure to us.

"I find the personality that brings me to art is the same that brings me to gardening. I think

"Landscape Revisited," a painting by artist Janet Fry Rogers, resembles her garden, shown in the top photo. Rogers's style has included transparent watercolor realism, landscapes in oil, experimental works on paper, and silver and gold leaf on wood panels. Some of her other works

her beloved menagerie of monkeys, eagles, hairless Mexican dogs and parrots.

Kahlo's studio overlooked the garden. In 1954, having lost a leg to gangrene, she died at Casa Azul in the bedroom with the best view of her flowers and fruit trees. She was 47.

The NYBG's conservatory conveys Kahlo's plant passions. As in her paintings, she had an eye for drama in the garden, and those dramatic elements are re-created there: bright colors, bold shapes, intense sensations. A jasmine vine perfumes the air as you walk past spiked cacti and creamy oleander, deep-cupped calla lilies and zinnias in flaming red and orange. It's easy to think flowers like these must have given the artist joy.

"You're told to write what you know," says Georgia Nassikas, standing in the rain under an elm on her sprawling property in McLean. Her boots are plastered in mud; she has been weeding in the downpour. "For painters it's the same thing. I would have to say the landscape,



"Frida in Front of the Cactus Fence, San Ángel, 1938." The studio of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo overlooked her garden.

nature and gardening have infused my DNA." Nassikas, 56, who has a bright smile and easy laugh, is an artist and a gardening nut. Her artwork springs directly from her garden. She works in encaustic, a painting process that dates back to the ancient Greeks. She grinds

her nose, on several acres of meadow and woodland near the Central Intelligence Agency, was built toward the end of the Civil War. She converted the barn into her studio, where lavender and spotted squash vines fan out around the entrance. She painted it red so her yard would have a focal point.

"You always want to draw the eye into the distance," she says. "It allows the eye to find a point and extend, beyond the frame."

Inside, her restrained, soft-toned works on birch board lean against the walls. She shows her work locally at Touchstone Gallery. She often paints what she sees from the windows, but rather than capture the fullness of her landscape, Nassikas pulls back and distills it into geometric forms: the slope of a roof, the dip of the meadow by the pool.

"In my own way, I deconstruct it, getting rid of the noise, the distraction as you look at forms," she says.

"There's so much drama out there — " she

or her art was inspired by her garden, a work in progress.

use same that brings me to gardening. I truly don't have a green thumb, but I like the before and after. The design is what I like doing in the garden, pushing these plants around and coming up with a fun arrangement."

In her lower-level studio, which overlooks the garden, Rogers works with china marker or silver leaf on paper, re-creating the line and form of daffodils, spiderwort and hellebore from her garden. She exhibits at Susan Callo-way Fine Arts in Georgetown.

"Hard edges, soft edges, integrating the subject into the background: It's the same pleasure I have here in the garden," she says. "It's the fascination with shapes that gets to me."

A cardinal hops along a stone path and starts to sing. A tiny yellow bird, no bigger than a butterfly, lands on a coneflower.

Creativity is inherent in pattering around with the natural world, Rogers says. "I don't think there's a gardener who isn't somehow an artist."

sarah.kaufman@washpost.com