

THE NEW YORK TIMES

N.Y. / REGION|ARTS | LONG ISLAND

Flowers, Yes, but Figures, Too, at ‘Garden Party’

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MARCH 21, 2014

Though the curators of “Garden Party,” the new exhibition at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor, could not have foreseen the brutal winter that has preceded their celebration of luscious flora, they nevertheless feel fortunate about the timing.

“It was serendipitous,” said JoAnne Olian, who curated the show with Franklin Hill Perrell. Mr. Perrell added, “People are really starved for signs of spring and summer.” The two curators talked about the exhibition as they toured it with a reporter.

Visitors are greeted by four whimsical enameled steel flowers by Gloria Kisch in the lobby and move on to paintings and sculptures that depict people lounging in gardens, monkeys cavorting, Adam and Eve under a tree and a giant bee dangling from a ceiling. Glamorous dresses from bygone eras and an array of floral-patterned handbags by Judith Leiber also echo the exhibition’s title. The show encompasses some 95 pieces, most borrowed from galleries, collectors and artists, on the museum’s ground floor. Several of the 52 artists whose works are on view, like Ms. Kisch and Ms. Leiber, have homes on Long Island, said Mr. Perrell, the museum’s former senior curator, but he and Ms. Olian found that approach “flat.” “We felt people in, or with, a garden would be more interesting, and a garden party is the most emblematic example of that human activity,” he said. Without evidence of people interacting with nature, said Ms. Olian, curator emeritus at the Museum of the City of New York, the exhibition would be “literally a still life.”

There are, however, some striking works that depict only flowers, like the two black-and-white photographs of a single rose taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in the 1980s, and a close-up of a purple flower called a coxcomb, painted in 1931 by Georgia O’Keeffe. But these are interspersed with more complex images. In “Le Repos” (“The Rest”), a 1980 gouache, watercolor and pastel work by Marc Chagall, a pastoral scene of human and animal figures, including a nude reclining outdoors with a mother and child seated nearby, surrounds a large formal bouquet in the foreground.

Nearby is “Song of Springtime,” a 7-foot-high leaded glass window from Tiffany Studios. It is owned by the museum, Mr. Perrell said, and shows a mythical scene with a female figure at the center and cherubs on either side, surrounded by flowers and greenery. The image is typical of the Gilded Age during which Louis Comfort Tiffany lived, Mr. Perrell said. Also on display is an undated oil painting by Tiffany himself, titled “Fountain at Laurelton Hall.” Laurelton Hall was Tiffany’s estate in Laurel Hollow. The Chagall, O’Keeffe and Tiffany pieces are in the first gallery, which has a springtime theme, the curators said, and is dominated by a 46-foot-long mural by Robert Kushner. Made in 2005 with oil, gold leaf and glitter on 10 canvas panels. It is called “Spring Scatter Summation,” and suggests a Japanese influence, as well as evoking paintings by Matisse, Mr. Perrell said.

The curators first thought they would use the idea of the four seasons to organize the exhibition, they said, but decided during the installation to diverge from a strict adherence to that idea. So, they said, the first gallery is mostly about spring and the second, which contains some very playful pieces, is mostly about summer.

Two of those pieces comment directly on well-known paintings by other artists. In Larry Rivers's 1997 "Matisse Still Life: Violet Robe and Anemones," he reproduced, with a few alterations, Matisse's 1937 oil painting, "Robe Violette et Anémones," usually translated as "Purple Robe and Anemones." A swirl of bright colors and busy patterns, it depicts a woman sitting behind a vase filled with flowers. Mr. Rivers cut along the outlines of various elements in the picture and mounted them on sculptured foam board to make a three-dimensional painting, adding a portrait of Matisse to the background.

Nearby is "The Manet Box," a 1992 wooden cube by George Deem that imagines what the scene in Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur L'herbe" ("The Luncheon on the Grass," which features two fully-clothed men and a nude woman) would look like if one could see it from the sides, back and top as well. Also in this summery room is "Virginia Garden," a site-specific installation of hundreds of tiny cast-resin flowers cascading down a corner wall, made by **Carson Fox**, an associate professor at Adelphi University in Garden City. Near the flowers is a 1989 carved and painted wood sculpture by Richard Gachot, who lives in Old Westbury, that shows Adam and Eve standing under a tree around which a serpent is entwined. (Another squiggly Gachot serpent, "Red Eyed Snake," lurks near the ceiling in the far corner of the room.)

Suspended from the ceiling nearby is Mr. Gachot's 2009 "Giant Bee," made of found objects that include a Jell-O mold, an oil can and tea strainers, Mr. Perrell said. The piece demonstrates Mr. Gachot's "wit and whimsy," he said. Providing their own whimsical touch, he and Ms. Olian placed the bee so that it appears to be diving toward the plump centers of Lois Dodd's "Cone Flowers," painted in 1995.

The mischievous quality continues in two junglelike sculptures by Hunt Slonem. His "Monkeys and Monsters" of 2006, nearly eight feet tall, and his seven-foot-tall "Monstera" of 2009, which features parrots amid greenery, are both made of acrylic and resin on wood.

In coming months, the museum will present several programs in connection with the exhibition, some of which will take advantage of the gardens on its 145-acre property. The museum's director, Karl Emil Willers, said the museum is also collaborating with three other sites — Old Westbury Gardens, Bailey Arboretum in Lattingtown and Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park in Oyster Bay — to extend the exhibition with smaller related shows that Dr. Willers said would open soon.

"The idea is that people could make a day of it, or a weekend," he said. "And they could see all the gardens, too."

"Garden Party," Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor, through July 6. Information: nassaumuseum.org or (516) 484-9337.

A version of this article appears in print on March 23, 2014, on page L110 of the New York edition with the headline: *Flowers, Yes, but Figures, Too.*