The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Recent Works*, an exhibition by Tom Gilbertson, at the Courthouse Gallery from June 5 – September 26, 2024. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.*

Thirty Years of Flowers

"LFDM (procession)", watercolor, image transfer, metal leaf, paper, 222"x85", 2024

About thirty years ago, when painter Tom Gilbertson was living in Virginia City – he was running a little gallery there, with a studio in the back – he was given an empty Coke bottle by the sculptor Larry Williamson, scrounged up somewhere in southern Nevada "out in the sticks." The bottle stood on Gilbertson's windowsill for years, and then one day he stuck a dead white rose in it and decided to make a watercolor painting – capturing the rose on paper proved very satisfying. "But if someone told me, thirty years later, I'd still be painting flowers," Gilbertson said, "I would've told them they were nuts."

Complications of Beauty

"Nuts" partly because, as a contemporary artist, he's been trained to give beauty a sideways look. Beauty is suspicious because it can easily act as an opiate – arresting thought, rather than stimulating it. "Anybody can appreciate a painting of pretty flowers done in an impressionist style," he told me. "I am almost repulsed by it." And anyways, Gilbertson has long been aware of the helplessness of the artist, measured against the sublimities of nature. "I remember when I would still try to shoot sunsets, which was decades ago… If you're looking at something that is really astounding in nature, you can't replicate in a painting or in a photograph. You can make something different from it."

Some of the most beautiful sunsets he remembers were in Vietnam; he's a veteran of the war. He knew the sunsets were so beautiful because of the bombs – the smoke, debris, and carnage hurled into the atmosphere, where the sun could work out its vibrancies and subtleties of color.

Which is all to say that by both temperament and experience, Gilbertson doesn't treat beauty as a simple destination. He has no desire to avoid it, but he does have a desire to complicate it – because beauty is, in fact, a complicated business. The most obvious way he complicates the flowers is by layering the paintings with text or other images, ensnaring them in a web of diagrams and language. These elements are printed on top of the paintings – he photocopies the elements, then uses image transfer processes to transmit them to the painted paper. One method is Gelli plate printing, where the photocopied image is pressed onto an

inked gelatin plate, then peeled up, leaving the impression of the image on the plate – then the plate can be laid, inked-side down, on the painting, and rolled with a brayer to monoprint the image onto the painting's surface. He also uses a solvent transfer method, saturating photocopied images with the paint remover Goof-off, placing them face down on the receiving paper, and then after a few minutes rubbing the back of the photocopy – the solvent softens the toner and allows it to be fixed to the watercolor paper.

The scraps of text aren't meant to "explain" the images – and he often prints the text in reverse, so it can't easily be read. Rather than delivering a message, the text gives the impression of chatter – perhaps they're the traces of sound or radio waves, passing around or through the flowers like a kind of textual weather. The printed images come chiefly from two archives, both originally published in the 19th century – one, a text on plant pathology, and the other, Henry T. Brown's "507 Mechanical Movements", a compendium of diagrams of gears, pulleys, pumps, and other mechanisms of mechanical engineering (lazy-tongs, oblique rollers, and epicyclic trains).

It's a very direct way of extracting the flowers from a sphere of bucolic reverie. It places them among a chain of visual analogies, and in the midst of infrastructures – Gilbertson's flowers have not become political entities, but they exist in a world of politics and industry (as all flowers actually do, much as we'd like to leave them in their oases of gardens or meadows – or use those oases as a buffer against the mechanized architectures that sustain us).

Aesthetics after Apogee

"Elegy for an American Dream (for Dr. Van)", watercolor, image transfer, metal leaf, paper, 22"x30", 2024

Another strategy of complication Gilbertson employs is a focus on flowers past their "prime." He's often drawn to flowers that are dead, or on their way there – heads bowed, petals dry and drawn up like shrouds. Though he knows flowers in that condition inevitably call up echoes of the human form, slouching toward mortality, he resists thinking of the flowers as being in a state of decline. In our reflexive human narcissism, we take for granted the idea that the beauty of flowers at their apogee is thrust out from their stems for us, presented for our admiration. We cultivate them and hybridize them for our pleasure, which muddies the waters, but their beauty is really designed for their pollinators, and we're just following that lead.

That apogee is actually just one point in a broader, more comprehensive cycle. Gilbertson is indulging in a kind of post-apogee aesthetics, which underlines the question: who, or what, are these flowers for? I have an apple tree in my backyard - its foam of white blossoms, in the spring, is always a delight. It produces far more apples than my family can consume, or even give away – and the season always ends

with a raking of shriveled, sloppy, mealy apples into trash bins. I remember lying down under the tree one summer, regretfully observing a litter of apples around me, fatally past their ripeness. And then I observed the insect traffic that had arranged itself around the apples – bees and flies alighting on their wrinkled skins, ants dipping their heads into their cavities and wounds, and then fussily wiping their antennae with their forelegs. And I thought “Oh, the apples are no longer ripe for me – but they’re perfectly ripe for the ants.”

The grave dignity of the flowers portrayed in Gilbertson’s paintings has nothing to do with us. He captures the flowers in a state beyond us, when they no longer exist for the pollinators, or even for the future. Those postures of implosion – curling inward, leaving symmetry for more warped convolutions – are the state where they exist, or persist, only for themselves.

Objects and Subjects

The flowers, at their most basic level, are scraps of reality for Gilbertson to observe, contend with, translate from three dimensions to two. “I don't even think about it as flowers when I'm painting. It doesn't matter to me what the subject matter is. It's just about working on it and playing with the space and the edges and the colors.”

I was fortunate to be pursuing my Masters degree at UC Davis while Wayne Thiebaud was a Professor Emeritus there, and he said something similar in the class I took with him – though his famous paintings of cakes and pies enshrined his work as Pop Art because of the moment when they were made and seen, he had no conceptual interest in Pop Art. He was interested in geometry, cylinders, planes, form, and light – and the cakes and pies were a perfect scaffolding for his investigations in those areas. In Western Classical Art, it will remain an open question to what extent the artists who dutifully portrayed the historic and religious scenes necessary for the ornamentation of empire actually "believed" in them. Some artists certainly did – creating images whose relation to ideology and patronage was one of sincere flattery. Others, just as certainly, saw the images with a skepticism held in abeyance, and treated them as scaffolding – scenography to be draped with their genuine concerns of the human figure, light, color, proportion, perspective – or most concretely, that tactile event that happens with brush and paint meet the canvas.

"Study for 2 Irises", watercolor, image transfer paper, 22"x30", 2024

Gilbertson isn't painting for any Royalty, Popes, or Medicis – he's come to his scaffolding through his own interest and volition, even though he was approached by Renown Health – through Turkey Stremmel – for a commission of flower paintings for the hospital. Renown has taken an explicitly therapeutic approach to art, following studies that have suggested, for instance, that art featuring nature scenes can help patients recover more quickly (I recall one study that suggested pure abstraction can be problematic in a therapeutic environment – the effort to interpret something can be a strain, when all of your cognitive effort is focused on healing your body). Renown didn't want any paintings dominated by red (a color that provokes alarm rather than calm), but otherwise, Gilbertson's flower paintings seemed a good match, and he produced five for the hospital walls. When Stremmel suggested that he change the title of one from "Study for a Dying Rose" to "Study for a Drying Rose," he was happy to oblige, clearing out any trace of linguistic morbidity.

Private Symbolisms

Of course, despite Gilbertson's attachment to his flowers as things-unto-themselves, there's a vast library of symbolism affixed to flowers, emanating from mythology, tradition, social ritual, and marketing (it's apparently mandatory for any florist website to have a section on symbolism and meaning, as if the flowers themselves had organized their resumes for potential customers). Victorian-era floriography, or the Japanese "language of flowers" (Hanakotoba), have a structure and specificity that approach semaphore. Burnett's floral handbook and ladies' calendar, published in Boston in 1866, "containing a complete and reliable dictionary of The Language of Flowers," lists out flowers' meanings that are by turns blunt ("Clover, Red… Industry" or "Cypress and Marigold… Despair"), histrionic ("Asphodel… My regrets follow you to the grave"), and cryptic ("Bay-Leaf… I change but in dying").

"Elegy for an American Dream (for RDG)", watercolor, image transfer, metal leaf, paper, 22"x30", 2024

To take a flower Gilbertson has returned to, the Amaryllis– for Victorian gardeners in Europe, its bold, outflung character suggested "pride," in a positive sense. The name is supposedly derived from a figure in Greek myth – a woman who pined after the shepherd Alteo. Alteo wasn't interested, and when Amaryllis appealed to the Oracle of Delphi for advice, the Oracle suggested a regimen of self-mortification. Amaryllis was to appear at Alteo's door for thirty nights, piercing her heart with a golden arrow each time. On the thirtieth night – depending on the teller of the tale – Alteo either found Amaryllis surrounded by the flowers that bear her name and returned her adoration, or tragically found Amaryllis had vanished, and the silent, beautiful flower had taken her place on his doorstep. The details are sufficiently

malleable that I'm not certain this "myth" hails from genuine antiquity, or whether it was invented by a cunning florist attuned to certain perversities of romanticism.

The particularity of Gilbertson's gaze brushes past – or perhaps even scrapes away – the social conventions that accrue to his chosen flowers. It would be absurd to think he would approach an Amaryllis as some investigation into, or expression of, the idea of "pride," or amorous masochism. The flower comes first, and the "ideas" come after.

LFDM (large white amaryllis), watercolor, image transfer, metal leaf, paper, 22"x30", 2024

Still, while these paintings sprint past received symbolism, they're not disengaged from symbolism altogether. They instead navigate a more internal symbolic register. He's named several of his flower paintings "Elegies," or more expansively, "Elegies for an American Dream" – these are dedicated to people, some personally known and some in the news, who have died. The latter category includes Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena, though in his titles, Gilbertson just identifies them by initials ("for MS," "for BT") – "I don't want to be virtue signaling." The pairing of flowers with elegy is a nod to the status of flowers in funerary tradition, and in that sense the paintings participate in socially constructed symbolism. But the real substance of grief, while it may be acknowledged publicly, is received in its deepest soundings privately – and the stillness and gravity of the "Elegies" seems tuned to these deeper, more mute, dimensions.

These paintings reminded me of the D. H. Lawrence story "The Odour of Chrysanthemums (per Burnett's floral handbook": "Chrysanthemum, Rose, I love," "Chrysanthemum, White, Truth," "Chrysanthemum, Yellow, Slighted love"). The story's main character, Elizabeth, lives in a mining town. When her daughter, Anne, sniffs some chrysanthemums, and says "Don't they smell beautiful!" we get a quick sense of the flowers' place in the rituals of the town, and Elizabeth's own personal sense of their "meaning," which runs counter to the conventional one:

> "No," she said, "not to me. It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk, he'd got brown chrysanthemums in his button-hole."

The "brown" recalls Gilbertson's interest in expressive floral decay – those chrysanthemums in the button-hole hadn't been cultivated for that color, they'd arrived at it through degradation – dropped out of their communally color-coded semaphores, and into a signification that only Elizabeth understands. That night, after waiting up for her absent husband, Walter, and sending after him in the local bars, she learns that he has died in a mine collapse. Two workmen bring Walter's body home – Elizabeth has cleared the floor in the parlor to make space for it, in anticipation of washing it down. She notices, with a candle, that there are two vases of pink chrysanthemums in the parlor – "There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the

room.” Later, one of the workmen will knock a vase over, and Elizabeth will clean it up – those flowers have been joined inextricably to that moment, that night, and Elizabeth’s fate.

This is a way a flower can turn into a symbol – not because a culture has assigned a value to it, but because there has been a correspondence between an object and an indelible personal experience. Symbolism can function at a collective level, or at an individual one – and sometimes it functions, furtive and nearly hermetic, somewhere between those poles. This is the zone where Gilbertson’s flowers bloom (or wither). He was working on one of the Amaryllis paintings in the show – one where he netted it in a penciled grid, with some of the quadrants decked out in gold leaf – when he got a call that one of his brothers had died. At that moment, that painting became another one of his “Elegies.”

Chris Lanier

Reno, Nevada

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Tom Gilbertson

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