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## Finding hidden worlds within

The Boston Globe



Jesa Damora draws on her imagination of what lies beyond pistils and petals to create her floral and garden renderings. Her works are featured in a solo show at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston.

By Denise Taylor

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Jesa Damora stands in her artist studio, her gaze firmly fixed on the huge, velvety, brain-like red blossom of a celosia cristata. At first, as she shows the exotic flower (also known as cockscomb) to a visitor, she calmly describes the dried bloom she has been drawing for months. But then her demeanor shifts.

The petite blonde artist's speech quickens. Her gestures grow large, and her voice louder. And although she stays in place, it's as if some part inside her is shrinking and zooming right into the blossom itself as she delivers a fast and furious travelogue.

"It looks like a spaceship," she says. "The landing bays are down there," she points low on the blossom. "And you're going to find your docking port right here," she points to a dark recess in the flower's middle. "And you go in the port and there's some sort of booming party down below and you can hear it. And you're like, 'Oh my, God. What's there? I've got to find it.' And you're looking down and you see little lights moving around and there are people and you

know it's a big, great party, and 'Where is that party? I've got to find it!' "

Then she comes back. Pauses. Breathes.

"So, yeah. That is a celosia cristata," she says, her voice once again as calm as a math professor's. "It's spelled C-E-L-O-S-I-A."

Such unexpected associations and their subtle presence in her artwork are partly what sets Damora's drawings of flowers apart. Her florals are no simple still lifes. Instead, they are rambunctious, tricky little worlds that hint that what lurks in the garden is more than mere pistils and petals.

"I'm sort of equal parts expressing femininity and expressing the monstrosity of the world or the things that we feel uncomfortable with and that feel alien," says Damora. "I like taking something that is commonplace and that we think we have tamed and under control, like a garden - which is almost emblematic of sweet, managed, controlled landscape - and turning it into something else that allows for some reassessment of it."

Walk through her solo show at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston and dead sunflowers in deep blue seem to breathe like blowfish hovering over unexplored depths in the sea. A giant close-up of bright red amaryllis blooms looks like the canopy of some gaudy circus tent that is inexplicably empty. A pale-pink peony seems to swirl like a delicate ball gown, but its blood-red recesses speak of something sensual and dangerous.

"One of the things that Buddhism has brought to my drawing is an understanding that things that have nothing to do with one another and that are pure opposites in some Cartesian framework are really quite compatible. Because you know what? There they are, and who cares if they make sense," she says.

But Damora, who is based in Somerville, is up against plenty of preconceptions about what to expect from floral and garden imagery. Some see flowers and expect pat, dime-a-dozen images. Others immediately think of the greats like Monet and O'Keeffe and expect similar approaches.

"I once got turned down for a grant specifically because I do flowers. They said my drawing skills were extraordinary, but that I could have picked a more challenging subject," says Damora. "What could be more challenging than trying to do something that's been done by everybody but in a new way?"

But what can't be overlooked in her work is the prickling energy of her lines.

She draws with graphite pencils on Mylar, building up darkness with more lines and introducing light with five kinds of erasers. Each image is then digitally painted and archivally printed.

"I don't use shading, because the vitality of the line is lost. All those wonderfully articulate hyperrealists who shade make everything look like it's made out of glass. It has no life. The atoms are all dead. It's beautiful, but it's dead," she says. "So I keep all those little lines there. That's what so many great artists did. They did washes over the lines, but they didn't shade."

She's choosy as well about what flowers she will draw. "I like to draw big, dangerous-looking things. For me, it's those outrageous plants, like this banksia seed pod," she says, holding up a stalk bursting with open clam-shaped pods. "It's all mouthy, like they're going to eat you or something. But hydrangeas? They don't speak to me. Sorry."

When she's not drawing full gardens, her gaze is always zoomed in. Often she works with a magnifying glass. The result is the difference between merely looking and diving in.

"I started drawing from farther away, but what you get then is an object. When I started getting closer and closer, I realized what I got was a landscape, and I wasn't somewhere looking at that landscape, I was in it," she says. "And I want other people to have that feeling, too - to wake up in a new place and see it freshly, too. . . . When you take something small and make it big, that's when people begin to wonder. That's where the fun begins."

Or in other words, it's where to find that party.

Jesa Damora Solo Exhibit through Aug. 3 at Tower Hill Botanic Garden, 11 French Drive, Boylston. Hours: Tues.-Sun., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Wed. until 8 p.m. Admission: \$10; seniors \$7, youths (6-18) \$5. Call 508-869-6111 or visit [towerhillbg.org](http://towerhillbg.org).