

Berkshire Botanical Garden's art show more than pretty nature

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JoAnne Carson, *Sunny*, 2022. Acrylic on museum board. (Photo courtesy Berkshire Botanical Garden)

Paintings of flowers and pretty trees? Ceramics in the shape of tree stumps? Dashes of color, saturated skies, intricate patterns taken straight from nature?

That's the grit and glamour of "Shimmer," a seasonally pitched new exhibition at the Berkshire Botanical Garden that debuted a month before the grounds are to

fully open to the public. There is a rich range of art here, some of it merely attractive, for sure, but some of it pertinent and timely. Timely to the season—it is April, after all—and pertinent to the area arts scene with some well known names included.

As with any show of 38 artists, it is the exceptional that pulls you along. Start maybe with a set of four small paintings by Kathy Osborn, mounted on a bizarre and ironically perfect wooden plank gallery wall. Osborn has grabbed little moments from the thin air of normal life, and painted them with an exacting tenderness. Somehow they transcend their simplicity by mining it in a discovery of ultimate and evaded meaning.

These may not seem directly related to the efflorescence of spring, but that is the strength of the exhibition overall. As the show statement suggests: “A shimmer can be a light in the darkness, but also can, at times, be hard to detect.” And so this is an open ended show with the almost undetectable as the goal, the find. That said, it’s inevitable that flowers and plants dominate, given the location and the thawing of winter. And some of the works in this vein—mostly paintings—are vivid and commanding, and bracingly sophisticated. A glance at a set of three studies of trees and their overlapping branches by Laini Nemett leads to a closer look, and to subtle observation and nuance. Alone they are striking, and as a group they compound with intelligence.

JoAnn Carson’s paintings are fully realized, and deeply felt, using botanical forms and colors in a complex and visually confident manner, creating a still life out of the tangle of a garden. The anthropomorphic forms add life to what is surely brimming already.

More designerly works like the digital drawing “You, Again, But Different” by Jennifer Hunold show visual savvy with an undertone of folk art mystery, a series of repeated tree-like shapes piling into a forest. Eric Wolf’s heavy ink drawing feels like a mid-century print of waves and distant mountains, stripped to the elements. And completely abstract works like Katia Santibanez’s “Floating in My Mind” and Audrey Stone’s “Through Line” find what seems like the inner energy of nature, and maybe the cruelest month, at its primordial best.

"Shimmer" has range, for sure. At one extreme, take in Kay Rosen's "I'm Green," a simple square of white with lime green capital letters saying, "LI'ME GREEN." At the other, a pair of subtle, dry, keenly observed black and white photographs of sparse urban settings by Lisa Kernan remind us of the beauty of beholding. Somewhere else altogether are Ricky of Luna Parc's comical tree stumps, ceramic sculptures with faces in them, many called "Tree Sprites," each glossy and playfully bizarre.

But plants, floral studies, compositions in organic forms, and a few landscapes form the vernal nucleus of the show. It's vivid, engrossing stuff. Many of these works demonstrate how perfectly the act of making art—and the actual oil, graphite, acrylic, gouache, and watercolor employed—meshes with the colors, surfaces, and whole rich substance of the living world.

I have to admit I left this show feeling rather cheerful. Maybe the world hadn't completely fallen to ruin, and here was some inspired and pretty proof.