

On Exhibit Albany: Works of longtime UAlbany professor on view at Opalka

"JoAnne Carson: Rise Up and Shine!" is a survey of the artist's work over the last 20 or so years

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Stepping out of the bleak gray and white landscape of Albany and into the Opalka Gallery one feels like they've taken a visual vacation.

Vibrant colors burst from paintings and assemblages. Flowers and other familiar vegetative figures are seen through a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that seem almost otherworldly, but nonetheless buoyant in attitude.

"JoAnne Carson: Rise Up and Shine!" is a survey of the artist's work over the last 20 or so years. Carson, who has taught at the University at Albany for 35 years, is well known for her over-the-top sculptures, assemblages and paintings.

Her work is featured in the Brooklyn Museum's collection, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, as well as many private collections. She's worked steadily since the 1980s, and, in this latest exhibition, Carson has found the storyline of her career.

"It feels like, after 40 years of making art, everything has come together. . . You always think about the next work, the next thing. But to be able to step back and see [that] all of this has language and it goes together. There were times when I felt so lost and now I think 'I don't look lost,'" Carson said.

The jumping-off point for the survey is an incredibly eccentric and active piece called "Tree of Desire," in which a woman is stuck in a tree with arms sticking out of it, each holding a painted apple. Eyes dot the tree and the arms, hinting at Daphne's curse of being an object of infatuation and, as the apples symbolize, desire.

It's placed at the forefront of the exhibition space, as is some of her most recent work, which reveals a complete change in medium, but perhaps not in attitude or vision. In paintings like "Wishful Thinking" and "I Was a Zombie," she brings together all these vegetative characters, including oversized flowers and winding trees. They resemble Cubist cartoons in a way, and though they're still, they seem to have a sense of movement that goes beyond the canvas.

These characters, like the dinner plate-sized roses in "I Was a Zombie," show up in earlier works too, like "Early Spring," and other sketches. As viewers, we're privy to the development of these characters and ideas, journeying along with Carson as she goes from sculpture and assemblages to drawing to painting.

“All my drawings led me to make paintings because it was such a struggle to try to get the spirit of the sculptures into the paintings. Not paint a picture of them but develop a language that had that energy and vibrancy,” Carson said.

Several of those said sculptures are on display in “Rise Up and Shine!” including the twisted, perhaps Dr. Seuss-like “Blue.” Four “feet” hold the piece’s twisted trunk as puffy leaves sprout from it.

Not too far away is the arresting “Chlorophyllia (For a World Without Color).” Bursting forth from a sloping trunk are flowers and leaves that have been mostly sapped of their color. Here, Carson has experimented with materials, taking note of professional theater-prop designers and using thermoplastics and apoxie clay, adding polka-dotted and rough-looking textures to some of the flowers.

In what might be the largest piece in the exhibition, “Wood Nymph,” Carson also experimented with materials, using fiberglass, resin and oil paint to create a giant woodcut with a woman coming out of the center, holding several pies.



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While much of Carson’s work in the exhibition seems garden-like, Carson didn’t explore the hobby until 2012, when she moved into a house in Vermont.

“We bought the house in ‘11 and I knew not one thing about gardening but I was driven by the fact that [the] back hill is at an angle. So it was [all] wild brown weeds [and] when you have a window what you have is a rectangle of brown and I thought to myself, ‘I can make something [here],’ ” Carson said.

For two summers she worked 12 to 16 hours a day to cultivate an intricate garden. It was similar to making a painting, or perhaps a sculpture, just with a different medium.

Her experience gardening is perhaps reflected in her more recent works, like “Breezy,” which hosts a mix of flowers and out-of-this-world greenery.

“I was making a painting and I feel like now [my] painting has become more park-like,” Carson said.

Taking the time to step back and see her work through the timeline of this exhibition has given Carson a different outlook on her artistic path. She hopes it also lifts visitors up.

“That’s why I named this ‘Rise Up and Shine!’ because I wanted this to have buoyancy. Plus I’ve taught for the past 35 years at the University of Albany. So it’s a kind of, not [a] responsibility, but a feeling for my students, an encouragement,” Carson said.

“JoAnne Carson: Rise Up and Shine!” is on exhibit through Feb. 29 at the Opalka Gallery (140 New Scotland Avenue, Albany). There will be an artist talk on Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. For more information visit opalka.sage.edu.