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Using Nature to Depict Itself

By SUSAN HODARA

[Ellie Irons](#) keeps her eyes to the ground in her Bushwick, Brooklyn, neighborhood. She is looking for plant life, invasive species that pop up beside tree roots and between cracks in the sidewalk. She plucks what she finds and, back in her studio, researches their identities and their origins. Then she crushes them to produce colors she uses to paint maps tracing their journeys to New York.

Examples of these botanical maps are among the 50 works on paper in “Drawn to Nature,” the spring exhibition at [Wave Hill](#). The show features drawings and watercolors by seven contemporary artists who, through very different approaches, explore their fascination with and connection to the natural world.

Curated by Jennifer McGregor, Wave Hill’s senior curator and director of arts, the show is displayed in Glyndor Gallery, a Georgian Revival-style house in the 28-acre public garden. The artists, all women, range from their 30s to their 50s; their work occupies three adjacent rooms, each overlooking the Hudson River and the Palisades.

One of Ms. Irons’s favorite discoveries was an Asiatic dayflower growing at the edge of a cemetery. “It grabbed me because it’s true blue, which is unusual in nature,” she said. In her “Invasive Pigments: Asiatic Dayflower (*Commelina communis*),” the flower’s migration from East Asia to the northern United States is indicated by spots of blue painted on a black-and-white map.

From across the room, [Mia Rosenthal](#)’s drawings resemble details from the 19th-century landscapes painted by Hudson River School artists. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Ms. Rosenthal’s “brush strokes” are in fact tiny sketches of over 3,000 plants and animals found in the Hudson Valley, each one labeled with its name. Living things as varied as white-tailed deer, turkey vultures, moths and plankton are rendered in different colors and densities to form the scene. Ms. McGregor likened the method to pointillism. Of the drawings, she said, “They’re literally teeming with life.”

Ms. Rosenthal’s practice, like Ms. Irons’s, involves in-depth investigation. “I spent about a year researching, then about a year sketching,” she said, “and then I started actually making the drawings.”

In contrast, [Sky Pape](#)’s work is created in the moment. Using sumi ink on handmade paper, Ms. Pape exposes her materials to the elements, letting the weather alter her lines. “I might leave the paper out there in the rain and go have lunch,” she said.

The results are a configuration of splatters, streaks and blots that suggest underwater vistas or otherworldly landscapes. For her “Untitled (Image 9443),” she dragged palm fronds dipped in ink across the paper, resulting in calligraphic parallel swirls. Explaining that her pieces reflect the experience of being in nature rather than looking at it, Ms. Pape said, “I’m more about forces than places.”

The places conjured in the works of [Judith Belzer](#) and [Charlotte Schulz](#) inhabit the sometimes fanciful, sometimes mysterious realms where the built and natural environments coexist. In her “Edgelands” series, Ms. Belzer uses watercolor to produce whimsical, undulating grids that evoke farmland seen from above. Yet in certain areas lines and colors overlap, creating frenetic tension and even chaos.

Less frenetic but similarly unsettling, Ms. Schulz’s black-and-white, often crinkled or folded images incorporate references to historic upheavals like Hurricane Katrina and the Arab Spring into desolate settings dotted with elements of suburbia. Detailed miniature rowboats, beds, unconnected sections of rooms and an incongruous penguin are placed within disjointed and forbidding terrain. “You can glean bits of a fictional landscape, but they don’t add up to any one place,” Ms. McGregor said.

It is the narrative aspect of Ms. Schulz’s work that links her to [Firelei Báez](#), with whom she shares Glyndor’s south gallery. Ms. Báez’s installation “American Sampler: Aú” tells several stories through five large-scale gouaches of silhouetted figures adorned with vibrant flowers. “I am drawn to the history of the new world and how history and culture affect ideas of beauty,” said Ms. Báez, who was raised in the Dominican Republic and now works in a studio in East Harlem.

Captured from YouTube videos, Ms. Báez’s figures are all women either dancing or brawling: a duo wrestles head-to-head, another engages in a fistfight; one wall is covered by a voluptuous, high-heeled pair of legs. The multicolored floral pattern that fills these forms was derived from the embroidery on an 18th-century British dress. “Embroidery is typically a feminine craft, and it’s usually considered meditative and slow,” Ms. Báez said. “But the gestures that the figures are involved in are more aggressive. I wanted to bring in the friction between the two.”

Samm Kunce’s small watercolors hang above the fireplaces in each of the galleries, presenting

clouds in all their moods. Some fluffy, others ready to burst, they are titled to identify where and when they were painted. In “Ljubljana 9-07,” the clouds are low and threatening against an ominous mix of amber and gray; in “Fulton Ferry 5-4-08 (III),” they seem happily adrift in a cerulean sky.

Ms. McGregor hopes that Ms. Kunce’s clouds will inspire visitors to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds them. “They can turn around,” she said, “and look out the windows at the sky right here.”

“Drawn to Nature” runs through June 16 in the Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill, 675 West 252nd Street (main entrance at West 249th Street and Independence Avenue), Bronx. For more information: wavehill.org or (718) 549-3200.

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