



Austyn Weiner, *A Poem* (2017).  
Oil stick on canvas, 84 ¼ x 69 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Ibid Gallery.  
Photo: Chris Adler.

# Perennial Bloom

## Florals in Feminism and Across L.A.

California's wildflower super bloom of 2017 felt like a miracle after the darkness of the presidential inauguration. An unusually wet winter not only lifted California out of drought but also blanketed the state in a burst of pastel wildflowers. In droves, Angelenos traveled east to catch a glimpse of the array. A friend and I drove to Diamond Valley Lake, our cell service weakening by the hour, where we parked in a dirt lot, paid a woman in a booth, and wandered out into color. It was a wholly somatic experience: fields of orange California poppies relieved by washes of indigo-colored thistles cresting over hills and ending only at the water's edge. A perfect triad of orange, purple, and green soothed us like color therapy, our eyes adjusting in the sun. Afterwards, everything else in sight looked grey and sandy; our vision piqued, like coming down from psychotropic mushrooms. The super bloom took us outside, brought us together and dislodged us from the alien glow of our phones, unwittingly compelling us to meditate on the natural world. The super bloom only lasted a quick three weeks, but elsewhere flowers germinated unseen: an uncanny amount of floral imagery began to emerge in Los Angeles art after the inauguration and the super bloom, as though flowers had buried themselves into the subconscious of artists across the region.

Florals in art have been ubiquitous since the lotus flower symbol of ancient Egypt. They're fodder for studio studies and still lifes,

cornerstones of landscape painting, and hold a long symbolic history. Though flowers always have been common fodder for art, the sudden burst of floral-oriented work in Los Angeles is hard to ignore. Flowers as a new zeitgeist. From absurdist patterning, to tightly controlled photography, to physically arranging flowers on the body in performance, florals have the power to challenge gender and the baggage that comes with it. Artists are retooling the flower in order to expand the role of femininity in art-making by reclaiming symbols and aesthetics that once signified frailty and coquetry.

At Ibiid Gallery last November in Austyn Weiner's show, *Here's Your Fucking Flower*, florals figured as props in interpersonal, possibly romantic, transactions. This turn to the flower was new—the Los Angeles artist's previous experiments in abstraction focused on the figure. Moving beyond eroticized parts of the flower, the pistil and stamen, the petals and hips, Weiner's flowers feel resentful and uncooperative. In Wiener's paintings, flowers have moods; they call bull shit. They droop expressively, styled in oil stick. "California's dry season comes to an end when" is written at the bottom of a pink canvas whose title finishes the sentence: *The Bloom Begins* (2017). Larger canvases feature stemless blossoms floating and clustering on the plane, like faces in a crowd seen from above. Swarms of flowers aggressively fill negative space, refusing to budge and or wilt. The aggression of her treatment pulls flowers out of a conversation of delicacy, and shoves them under the nose of the viewer as the exhibition title dictates; the dissonance of a refusal and an advance happening simultaneously.

The turn to flowers in Los Angeles art and the phenomenon of the super bloom coincided with another monumental event: the Women's March, first held in January 2017. The L.A. march, attended by an estimated 750,000 Angelenos, helped to pull certain feminist ideas

into the mainstream. Being together in the flesh felt better than arguing online; standing outside together, crowded in the street, skin bumping up against skin. But as inspiring as it felt, critiques of the Women's March appraised its optics: participants were overwhelmingly white and imagery on their signs overwhelmingly gynocentric. While a women's march may be one of the few public places one might see an exquisite rendering of a uterus and ovaries, its inclusion and the tradition of centering reproductive rights as the essential women's issue harkens back to the second wave and the Women's Liberation Movement, whose issues (somewhat reductively) centered on the concerns of white women. Focusing heavily on gynocentric images is also considered trans-exclusionary as not all women are defined by their biology; nor should they be. The sense is that reproductive justice is the premier cause of feminism when so much more is at stake and it isn't that reproductive rights aren't important, it's that they aren't the *only* issue. Feminist aesthetics need a serious update and to push beyond the platform taken up by the early makers of so called Women's Art, the cunt-imagery of Judy Chicago, the repetition of the Venus symbol of genetic science. Abuse of Flower Comes as No Surprise.

The sexual innuendo of vagina as flower is enduring. But why can't the floral aesthetic signify outside of essentialist renderings of femininity or womanhood? Can't flowers be queer? (Let me rephrase, flowers, like most living things, are queer.) Even Georgia O'Keefe famously railed against the notion that her floral compositions were vaginal (a characterization made and proliferated by her husband no less) because she was a woman artist. As if that's the only thing a flower could symbolize when painted. It wasn't so much that flowers were like women, but that women should be more like flowers: delicate, fragrant, decorative, silent.

The use of the flower as symbol for an essentialist feminine

quality was born from a limiting gender binary. Under this framework, women are either mothers or artists, where one type of labor compromises the other. A woman is not only limited by her biology, but also by a narrow duality restricting her labor, whether maternal or artistic. Addressing this in poetry, Lesley Wheeler writes, "The flower has provided a powerful idiom for female lyricists negotiating a double role as both aesthetic objects and creators of beauty."<sup>1</sup> Women are limited to the option to blossom in only one of two seasons: motherhood or in career. Wheeler positions this as either blossoming or cultivating, either the flower or the flower-gatherer.

*Garden Variety*, a recent group show curated by Katie Bode at the Brand Library in Glendale, likened artists' labor, collective or otherwise, to tending a garden. Bode writes in the press text, "A garden is a witness and participant, as it is a historian and time-keeper." Flowers appeared throughout the exhibition including the manipulated scanned flower prints of Megan Mueller, the precise photographs of Arden Surdam, and the enormous paintings of Sarah Ann Weber (among others). Weber, who's been painting Monet-sized paintings of gardens for the last three years, cites moving to California as an initial inspiration for her recent solo exhibition at Club Pro, *Scenic View*. "It all felt so exotic to my Midwestern brain: the skies were pink, and the succulents were straight out of Dr. Seuss illustrations," she said. "Flowers budding, bloomed, and dying create a sense of entropy in my compositions that I find exciting."<sup>2</sup>

Flowers are exemplars of temporality. The photographic work of Arden Surdam, included in both *Garden Variety* and *A Curious Herbal*—a recent floral-centric group exhibition at Garden—provides glossy studio shots of plants and floral arrangements on the verge of wilting. Like traditional still lifes, her high production images make for an exploration of death and time, drawing the contemporary notion of a photography



Megan Mueller, *Bent* (2018).  
Silver halide archival print,  
artist frame 20 × 16 inches.



Arden Surdam, *Elephant Ear* (2017).  
Archival inkjet print, 20 × 24 inches.  
Edition of 3 with 2 AP.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Garden,  
Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.

studio together with the tradition of the Renaissance painter's atelier. In comparison to Wheeler's analysis, Surdam's work reflects the quick lifespan of flowers as a parallel to the short window of youthful years for women (during which they are considered most valuable by society). If cultivation and arrangement are metaphors for a woman's life, Surdam captures the precise moment when both begin to turn.

Tucker Nichols' single bouquet paintings, which premiered at Charlie James in June of last year, were meant as protest paintings, as a kind of gentle flower power in the face of toxic masculinity that shouts from the bully pulpit the president has made of his platform. After equating what he saw as the futility of lawn signs with the uselessness of painting as a mode of engagement or activism, Nichols filled the room with flowers that could not die.

Poet Eileen Myles is said to have wielded a fistful of daisies at the Baltic Pride March in 2016, "and raised them in the direction of homophobic protesters, it was revelatory: You hate, but I love."<sup>3</sup> The Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos was ostracized by the literary community for his sexuality and penned the famous line: "What didn't you do to bury me / but you forgot I was a seed."<sup>4</sup> At the national level and for the majority of 2017, Kehinde Wiley spent hours placing white jasmine (Hawaii's state flower), chrysanthemum (the national flower of Chicago), and African violets into the backdrop of Barack Obama's presidential portrait. At the foot of the portrait, a flower blooms near his left foot, undisturbed and uncrushed. Never before had a presidential portrait included flowers as a signifier for identity or at all.

Moving away from essentialist renderings of gender and womanhood, from vaginal florals to single-issue politics is a means of expanding our understanding of feminism. Perhaps floral aesthetics point to an idea of life force and sexuality that is unhindered

by prescriptive gender roles, marked instead by our relationships to one another when we are outside, side by side, roused by anger, desire, and a determination to keep growing. Perhaps flowers as a symbol are a more fitting metaphor for the complexity behind feminism's cultural trajectory than waves: flowers blossom, wilt, and blossom again, where no season is without a bloom (at least in Los Angeles).

Angella d'Avignon is a writer living in Los Angeles.

1. Lesley Wheeler, "Both Flower and Flower Gatherer: Medbh McGuckian's 'The Flower Master' and H.D.'s 'Sea Garden,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003), 494–519.

2. Sarah Ann Weber, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2018.

3. Jenny Zhang, "The Right to Idle," *Rookiemag.com*, July 18, 2014, <http://www.rookiemag.com/2014/07/vilnius-travel-diary/>.

4. Mark Savage, "Ibeyi: 'They Tried to Bury us But We Were Seeds,'" *BBC.com*, September 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41366656>.