

Flower Power

Karin Pliem's paintings banish winter blues

By Catherine Aman

If your eyes are starved of colour, and it feels like your garden may never, ever bloom again, then go directly to Anglia Ruskin University's Ruskin Gallery. There you will find Austrian artist Karin Pliem's huge, flower-stuffed paintings gracing the walls, on display until 21 February 2013. The brilliant canvases - combined with the artist's first-ever video piece and a cool, jazzy soundscape - will revive your spirits and tickle your intellect too.

From a distance, Pliem's paintings appear to be merely a lush swirl of colours. Drawing closer, blossoms, tendrils, seed heads and all manner of other natural forms emerge, layered, intertwined and painted with virtuoso skill. The combination of vibrant colour, energetic brushstrokes and rich array of forms make the paintings almost seem to move. They made us think of the flux of life in a garden, from seed to blossom, rot to rebirth. More than this, the pictures also felt like an exuberant celebration of painting, which isn't often found in galleries these days.



This is Pliem's first show in the UK and she spent the past seven months developing her work specifically for the Cambridge setting. As she painted, Pliem talked with staff at our own Botanic Gardens. Discussing the pictures, Pliem pointed out a distinctive plant that blooms in the glasshouse range. See if you can spot it in the paintings and find others too.

Pliem, who grew up in Salzburg, has lived and worked in Vienna since 1983. She paints exclusively in her studio, but her subject matter - leaves, seeds, flowers, shells and other natural materials - has been collected on global travels over the past 20 years. She also draws and photographs specimens in situ.

Back in her studio, Pliem opens her 'Botanikbox', selects and juxtaposes items from widely disparate sources. She might combine tropical coral with Alpine flowers, for instance, or jellyfish and hydrangeas. 'To distance them from their original appearance in nature,' she says in her Artist's Statement, 'I deliberately play with and vary my "collectibles" in size,

coloration and perspective.'

Pliem, whose English is somewhat imperfect, notes: 'The paintings should speak to you, out of language.' And they do, but there is also rigorous and verbal thought behind them. Although her Artist's Statement, translated from German by Maia Damianovic, is a bit opaque, Pliem's interest in humanity's fraught relationship with nature is clear. In gathering and transforming natural objects, says Pliem, she seeks to bring together opposites and thus create a dialogue. Lucas Gehrmann, the show's guest curator, has written that Pliem's work is 'a quest for a middle, in which even the most heterogeneous things in the world find a common ground.'

The show's title, [*Diversity of Voices*](#), perplexed us until we finally thought about it in musical terms. Perhaps Pliem is thinking about polyphony, music with multiple, simultaneous melodies that together make a beautiful, intricate whole. In any case, Pliem's pursuit of unity or, as she describes it, 'togetherness' has yielded some marvellous work. We urge you to go and enjoy it.



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