

Datebook



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James Tensuan / The Chronicle

Painter Kevin Woodson only paints his flowers in their natural setting, like at the Lakeside Garden Center in Oakland.

ART

Flower painter's 'world garden'

Artist obsessed with plein air work gets a show at Oakland City Hall

By Bojan Srbnovski

Oakland artist Kevin Woodson was 2 when his parents took him out into the family's garden to play. He remembers standing among the zinnias — ball-shaped, brightly colored flowers that stood a little taller than he was. When he reached up for the blossoms, he says, he got “as close as a child gets to touching something magical.”

Kevin's Flowers: Kevin Woodson's flower paintings. Through Sunday. Oakland City Hall. www.kevinwoodson.com.

This is the moment Woodson summons in his mind every time he begins one of his watercolor paintings of flowers. He never sketches, and he never takes photographs to bring back with him. He carries his easel, his brushes and his colors in the back of his bicycle, and the garden becomes his studio. His method makes his subject fleeting — if he misses the one week in the year when the daffodils are in full bloom, he has to wait a full year until he can paint them again.

Painter continues on E3



Courtesy Kevin Woodson

DATEBOOK

Artist's work adds color to City Hall

Painter from page E1

Woodson has painted at the Folsom and Castro street fairs, in the traveling circus Chimera and in almost every public garden in Oakland. He was also invited to exhibit his works at Oakland City Hall and at the International Flower Essence Centre in Taiwan.

Late bloomer

"I was not always this bent on painting flowers," says Woodson, who grew up in Illinois. "When I moved to San Francisco after college, I wanted to do what every young gay artist wants to do: sketch nude male figures for the rest of my life."

That plan did not work out. His liberal arts degree from the University of Michigan helped him get illustrator work. Twenty years later, he is the co-owner of an illustration company — VI Creative — that helps support his artistic practice.

Woodson believes that flowers are probably the most accessible and famil-

iar image that he can represent in paintings. They link to a history that is as old as humans themselves. Half of the world's plants came from the Fertile Crescent, the vast lands of Western Asia once inhabited by the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians.

For the first time in history, Woodson says, we live in a "world garden," because we have flowers from all over the world within a 50-mile radius of where we live. He always felt (but never found the anthropological evidence) that when the early tribes of humans were deciding where to settle, flowers would have been a good reason to favor one place over another. Woodson believes that such a choice shows humanity's profound, almost spiritual investment in beauty, amid a struggle for survival.

His first flower paintings were given as gifts to people he loved. In 2011, he had a large exhibition at the Gardens at Lake Merritt, where he usually



James Tensuan / The Chronicle

Kevin Woodson (left) paints with his boyfriend, Polun Yeh, at the Lakeside Garden Center in Oakland.

paints.

This spring saw Woodson's greatest artistic success to date. With the support of the Oakland Department of Public Works, he brought an exhibition of his paintings to Oakland City Hall. "Kevin's Flowers" will run through this Sunday, and Woodson says the show is "the closest I'm ever likely to get to public office."

Making connections

"It's fascinating to talk to the people who walk past the paintings at City Hall: engineers, politicians and lawyers," he says. "They always say they're not flower people but that they connect with

the colors and the shapes and the aesthetics of my projects."

Woodson's parents, he says, are equally responsible for his love of flowers. His father, a Shakespeare professor at Illinois State University, exposed him to fantastical stories about the forest, such as "A Midsummer Night's Dream." His mother, a librarian, brought home from work paper and colors so he could paint the flowers that she was growing in their home garden.

Woodson also credits his mentor, Matthew Matsuyama. This floral designer taught him how to "talk to the flowers" —

how to engage with them in a way that is at the same time meditative and creative. Matsuyama is also responsible for Woodson's decision to place a Japanese signature on his paintings. The literal translation of this signature is Florid Person.

The relationship between master and apprentice ended abruptly six years ago, when Matsuyama died without ever having seen Woodson exhibit his work. A grieving Woodson did not paint for a full year, but he says that meditating with the flowers helped him heal. Now he says that more than any other person, Matsuyama is in all

the flowers he paints.

No stopping

Woodson's work will appear at Art + Soul, Oakland's art, music and food festival, on Aug. 2 and 3. In the fall (starting Sept. 5), Creative Framing & Gallery in Oakland will showcase his flower paintings in a combined exhibition with Ellen Dreibelbis. With hundreds of paintings behind him, he does not plan on stopping.

"I intend to die in my garden," he says, "with a paintbrush in my hand."

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James Tensuan / The Chronicle

Kevin Woodson captures the magical whimsy he felt as a toddler in the garden in "Rhododendron and Thrush," above.

Woodson, left, fetches the canvas he let soak in a pond at the Lakeside Garden Center in Oakland. He carries all his supplies.