

The Berkshire Eagle

“Berkshire Botanical Garden exhibit shimmers,” May 29, 2019

Sharon Smullen

While some artists prefer watercolors or oils, Nancy Lorenz paints with mother-of-pearl and burnished gold leaf.

This summer, at the Berkshire Botanical Garden's Leonhardt Galleries, Lorenz's well-observed plant studies are part of an eclectic show incorporating cast-bronze tabletop landscapes, lacquered boxes and an abstract screen. There's also an epic gilded panel of wildflowers on a rocky terrain.

"Shimmering Flowers: Nancy Lorenz's Lacquer and Bronze Landscapes" presents the New York City-based artist's distinctive view of nature.

At Friday's opening reception, Ikebana master Kan Asakura will create flower arrangements in Lorenz's rustic bronze containers. Shallow trays hold islands of striated forms resembling rocks and caves, some with water bubbling around. All are created using corrugated cardboard molds and mottled with a verdigris patina.

"There's an earthiness to the texture," Lorenz said by phone from her Queens studio. "I do enjoy using everyday materials and transforming them, that is key to the work."

Guest arrangers will interact with the landscapes all season long and fill them with flowers. In the fall, Asakura will revisit his original arrangements with the same plants in their later forms.

Created especially for this exhibit, the pieces are a "whole new direction" for Lorenz, who enjoys an international following with works in public and private collections, as well as galleries from San Diego to Dubai.

Lorenz spent her formative teenage years in Tokyo, where her father was working. While peers embraced popular culture — she still exchanges Hello Kitty birthday gifts with her sister — Lorenz visited artisan studios, learning about Japanese creativity through pottery, textiles and wood-block printing. Fascinated by the tools she saw, she wanted to use them herself.

"It was there I decided to become an artist," she said, "so, I draw from that experience and Japanese art."

Lorenz is also rooted in the Western tradition. She spent a postgraduate year in Rome, where she "fell in love with Sieneese panel painting" on gold backgrounds, and counts Whistler and Louise Bourgeois among her influences.

In 1988, she settled in New York City and honed her art while restoring Japanese lacquer antiques.

"I was lucky to have been exposed to all that fine craft and elevated sublime objects early on," she said. "Between Tokyo and Rome, my senses were full. There are elements of these traditions throughout the work."



FIELD | 2018 | GOLD LEAF, CLAY, ON CEDAR PANEL | 84 X 120 IN

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Her wooden screens, in particular, meld the two approaches, she said. Long-standing collaborations with designers included large-scale commissions of coromandel lacquer screens — Coco's favorite style — at Chanel stores all over the world.

At the garden, a wood panel screen, "Night Sky," suggests a swirling, tumbling scene, moody pools punctuated with splashes of blue inlay, indigo lacquer and white-gold leaf. Intricate inlaid wildflower studies, however, "have a much more Victorian feel to them," Lorenz said, while delicate textile petals on heavy bronze flower stems recall the gauzy tutu of Degas' "Little Dancer" statue.

In 1998, Lorenz received a Guggenheim award to create a "very poetic interpretation" of periodic table elements. Burnishing silver leaf to evoke Mercury, she said, "led to all the other uses of that material."

"So much of my creative beginnings begin with this curiosity of materials," she said. Using time-consuming, water-gilding techniques, built-up gesso is covered with meticulously polished gilder's clay. Gossamer-thin gold leaf is laid over wet surfaces, then burnished with agate until it gleams. Often, Lorenz will "distress" the resulting finish with sandpaper.

Molten gold appears to run down the sides of a wooden lacquer box decorated with chrysanthemums, pooling on the table below. Golden landscape panels depict wildflower fields on shaded wood grain and corrugated backgrounds, freeform gestures suggesting hills, trees, rocks and clouds.

On panels and boxes, thick gold and delicate pink and blue inlays define petals and leaves of showy peonies, while shimmering thistledown slivers waft over a sea of shiny specks.

Since the Center House gallery renovation, art at the Berkshire Botanical Garden "has really grown," said Executive Director Mike Beck. Its year-round exhibits focusing on horticulture, flowers and the natural world are now embedded in the Berkshire artistic landscape.

"Even though [Lorenz] is a contemporary artist and sometimes abstract, she features beautiful, clear references to nature," Beck said. "This is a show about flowers in the broadest sense. She focuses on art that really brings forward the botanical aspect of her work."

"She is excited to be showing in a non-traditional gallery setting," Beck said. "There's a counterpoint between very high-gloss panels and lacquered boxes and the cast-bronze work, which has that rustic rough quality.

"It's a great variety of work in a small gallery space."



STUDIO VIEW | 2018