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Latest Denver Botanic Gardens show supports — rather than rivals — Mother Nature

‘Blue Grass, Green Skies’ is an apt, artful complement to the organization’s flourishing summer fare



Granville Redmond, “California Poppy Field,” oil on canvas, circa 1926. (Provided by Denver Botanic Gardens)



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The Denver Botanic Gardens has a long history of bringing big art projects to its grounds during the

summer months. For several years, it produced mega-exhibits with international superstars, like Henry Moore, Dale Chihuly and Alexander Calder, before toning down its act over the past few seasons and importing work from less-iconic, and less-hyped, artists.

Maurice Prendergast’s “Cove, Maine,” was painted between 1907 and 1910. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

Those flashy shows were legendary, local moments, and they are sorely missed by local art fans, who had gotten spoiled by their high production values.



But the garden was not trying to deprive culture vultures of their prey; it was simply sticking to its core mission. It is, after all, not an art museum meant to glorify the wondrous works of humankind, but a showplace for nature. Really, the flowers, bushes and trees it grooms to perfection should be enough of an extravaganza to please anyone who wanders among its pathways and ponds.

Personally, I always felt the blockbuster shows tried a bit too hard to win attention over the flora around them, and it was rare that the work of any artist was able to stand up to the

stiff competition of Mother Nature. The exhibits could seem more like a rival, rather than a complement, to the garden experience.

That background is good to know for understanding just how right the garden got it with this summer's offering, "Blue Grass, Green Skies," which hangs on the walls of the indoor galleries in its Freyer-Newman Center. The show of American Impressionist paintings, many of them portraying gardens and landscapes, is a nice bridge between the garden's past and present exhibitions.

In some ways, it is a big and unexpected event with the aura of a spectacle. The exhibit, a traveling attraction featuring objects from the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has work by some very well-known names on its roster.

There is "Woman and Child" by Mary Cassatt, probably the best-known American Impressionist. The painting, dated from the late 19th or early 20th century, is a good example of the artist's penchant for capturing domestic scenes with a loose paintbrush but a sharp focus on true human nature. The little girl in the picture is a bit antsy while the mother holding her is a strong and steady (and perhaps exhausted) presence. Cassatt was skilled at presenting these ideas without turning things too sentimental, something contemporary painters would be loathe to do. The work was ahead of its time.



Mary Cassatt painted "Woman and Child," an oil on canvas, in the late 19th or early 20th century. (Provided by Denver Botanic Gardens)

There is "Strawberry Tea Set," by Childe Hassam, an artist represented in the collections of most serious, encyclopedic American art museums. It's a delicate oil painting that shows Hassam's fascination with female figures, which he posed in sunlit, interior settings, allowing him to freeze light as it filters through an inside room. The painting appears to be about its subject, who is closely examining her dinnerware, but it is really about brightness and shadows.

And more to the point of place, there are numerous landscapes — John Henry Twachtman's 1900 "Harbor Scene," George Bellows' 1916 "The Coming Storm," and Granville Redmond's 1926 "California Poppy Field" — that demonstrate how Impressionist painters were deeply inspired by nature. Those are lovely tie-ins between this group of paintings and the wares that the garden shows year long throughout its grounds.

The botanic garden drives home that link by placing several oversized, gilded frames at strategic points before its water features and flower beds. The frames are empty, except for what a viewer sees behind them — the real-life lilies, sunflowers and grasses that sparked

the Impressionists' thinking. It's a little gimmicky — a selfie moment more than anything — but it is also fun and fully relevant.

The exhibit does a bit of teaching, but not too much. Via wall text and QR codes, it makes the connections between the more famous French Impressionists and the Americans who followed their lead. It breaks down the work into neat categories — landscapes, interiors, urban scenes, portraits — and it tries, with just a little effort, to connect the paintings to the trends that were happening simultaneously in plant cultivation and personal gardening during the same time period.

Best of all, the show accomplishes a lot while knowing its real purpose as a sideshow to the plants and flowers that take center stage at this Denver institution. There are only 18 works on display, but it makes its point, without trying to steal the show from the headliners, which in this particular summer includes thriving hydrangeas and zinnias and dazzling patches of purple globe thistle.

All that said, the Impressionist exhibit does face off strongly against one of the garden's main elements: its gift shop. “Blue Grass, Green Skies” travels with its own little pop-up store selling exhibit-related goodies, and the Denver Botanic Gardens has installed it inside the Freyer-Newman Center.

It's a bit of a cliché. You do have to “exit through the gift shop,” a phrase borrowed from the street artist Banksy's 2010 documentary about how the institutional art world exploits artists for its own gain, and that is now a popular reference to the tackiness of selling greeting cards and umbrellas with famous artworks emblazoned upon them.

But the shop also underscores the kind of “important” art that is on display this summer at the Denver Botanic Gardens. It is a signal, for better or worse, to take the work seriously.

Or, maybe, because the shop feels like a folly as much as a practical endeavor, to take “Blue Grass, Green Skies” just seriously enough, to appreciate that it is special, but a bit player in the overall scheme of a garden visit.

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IF YOU GO

“Blue Grass, Green Skies” continues through Sept. 14 at the Denver Botanic Gardens, 1007 York St. More info: 720-865-3500 or botanicgardens.org.