Art review: Hilary Irons imbues plants with spirit and symbolism

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By Jorge S. Arango

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Hilary Irons, “Meeting House 1792,” 2020, oil and acrylic on panel 14″ x 11″ *Photo by Luc Demers*

The paintings of Hilary Irons, she explains in the artist statement for “Orb Weaver,” her show at Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland (through May 1), revolve around “shapes in the natural world that counter the human need for pattern and clarity, through the disruption

and surprise of the non-human form."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Hilary Irons, "Orb Weaver"

WHERE: Dowling Walsh, 365 Main St., Rockland

WHEN: Through May 1

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; by appointment Sunday and Monday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-596-0084, dowlingwalsh.com

This is certainly true, especially as expressed by the plant world, which forms the foundation of Irons's visual vocabulary. There is no shape in the universe quite like a dandelion leaf, a fern, a bee balm flower or a thistle. They don't hew to exact geometries, even though one can see repetition of similar patterns throughout the universe; for instance, in a mountain laurel, a five-pointed star and a five-fingered hand.

To Irons, "Plants communicate with each other … through processes that are invisible to us. What they do offer us is shelter, medicine, nourishment, beauty, ugliness, poison and resistance. … Through enveloping ourselves in those specific non-animal shapes, we can sometimes start to hear the message that the plants are broadcasting."

The notion that plants have lives and a language of their own – that they, like everything in the universe, are part of an eternal mystery our human minds cannot grasp – is a pantheistic one that extends back to the world's ancient religions. It's one way of understanding that God, or spirit, pervades everything, whether animate or inanimate, and that our denial of this cosmic reality, as manifested in the human insistence that we are somehow separate from spirit, is the source of our suffering.

So, it wasn't surprising to me that I returned, again and again, to the Judeo-Christian concept of Eden and our expulsion from the Garden as I made the rounds of the gallery. This, of course, is the specific spiritual orientation in which I was raised, but the same concepts reverberate, in some form or another, through Vedanta Hinduism, some interpretations of the Kabbalah and Sufi mysticism.

Irons may not have set out with this specific intention, but the implication in many of the paintings is that human life is ephemeral and that plants (and, by extension, the universe) continue on without us. Take a work like "Our Sum of Life." The bottom third of the painting depicts the detritus of human existence – a spoon, perfume vials, a kitschy rhinestone-studded charm of intertwined hearts. They are buried underground, a kind of archeological dig of human aspirations (food, seductive potions, love, material possessions).

Above this is a latched gate set into a dense bed of plants and flowers and, beyond it, what looks like the edge of a majestic forest. Our human existence and its remnants are gone, nonessentials that are locked out of the Garden. The allusion to gates of a “pearly” variety seems inescapable.

Hilary Irons, “Marsh Marigolds,” 2020, oil and acrylic on panel 20″ x 20″ *Photo by Luc Demers*

In the gorgeous, lushly painted “Marsh Marigolds,” a band across the lower sixth of the frame resembles either black marble or a night sky. At its center is the number “16” and what appears to be a doorbell. Above it, the title plant floats in a swampy body of water swarming with fecund life and bubbles on one side like a spring. There are, of course, many ways to read the multiple references in this initially inscrutable work, but here’s one stab at it.

In numerology, the number 16 is associated with beings who are both analytical and spiritual, and who acquire wisdom and self-knowledge so they can help others. Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist tradition are such beings. They are enlightened enough to reach nirvana, but delay their journey in order to help less fortunate, suffering beings on Earth before ushering them into transcendence. In Tarot, 16 is the tower card and symbolizes great change. Could this band represent the doorway to transcendence (and, so, the return to the Garden)?

Transformation is required to enter a higher plane (nirvana, heaven, paradise), a transformation that involves the shedding of our identities – in essence, the death of the self. In this context, the black marble might be the material of a tombstone, or the night sky a stand-in for the journey through darkness into the light. The bubbling spring carries intimations of the source of life. And the dense vegetation, the tangle of which threatens to overwhelm the upper part of the frame, could be the teeming expression of life.

Interestingly, the friend with whom I visited the exhibition was unsettled by Irons's paintings because the vegetation felt constricting, almost suffocating. I completely understand. This is a natural response of our underlying human frailty to the untamed, primeval power of the Garden.

These works function very much like vanitas paintings did during the Renaissance. Primarily still life images (the French term "nature morte" feels especially appropriate here), they were packed with symbols of transience and death – a skull, an unfinished glass of wine or water, a just-extinguished candle. Irons's works are much more subtle, closer to the tradition of the great Dutch landscape painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1629-82), whose canvases often pitted human endeavor against the more powerful forces of nature. In his paintings, evidence of humans and our striving – a cemetery, ruined castles, windmills struggling futilely to keep The Netherlands above water – consistently lose out to nature, which he often represented with expansive skies filled with brooding cumulonimbus clouds.

Hilary Irons, “Geminids,” 2021, oil, acrylic and marble dust on panel 16″ x 12″ *Photo courtesy of Dowling Walsh Gallery*

Several works mine this vein. “Geminids” refers to a kind of meteor shower. We see the meteor in the instant before it crashes to Earth, yet the thistles in the foreground, which are brown and dried, already seem to have accepted their scorched fate. “Advent” appears to be a kind of aftermath of the Geminids, where the meteor has crashed through the icy surface of a pond or lake. Yet Irons underlines the persistence of nature with a new generation of plant life ready to arise from beneath the fractured surface.

It seems beyond question which maternal force Irons is referring to in “Mother’s Work,” a painting in which a prodigiously flowering tree and a sky spectacularly exploding with stars almost overtake the clapboard house beneath them. This ratio of natural to manmade is what creates the essential tension that makes the painting work. Not so with “Meeting House 1792,” in which the ratio is almost equal, making it more of a straight, picture postcard-like representation of a historical building.

And a note on Irons’s technique. All the works are painted with a mixture of oil, acrylic and marble dust. The considerable dilution of the pigments, however, makes them look like watercolor, a more transparent, fluid medium that serves their sense of chimerical otherworldliness. The marble dust, while adding corporeal substance to the paint, also conjures Genesis 3:19 – “for dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return.” Perhaps, too, the fact that Irons paints on panel (the preferred surface of medieval religious painting) is no coincidence.

Then again, perhaps this is all in my very little (human) head.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at:

Hilary Irons, “Mother’s Work,” 2020, oil and acrylic on panel 12″ x 12″ *Photo by Luc Demers*

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