

ART REVIEW : Blossoming Art, Endangered Species - Artist Penelope Gottlieb's impressive, post-pop-arty botanical exhibition finds itself in an extra-ripe, and rare, setting

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'GONE, A VISUAL EULOGY FOR LOST PLANT LIFE'

When: through April 23

Where: Lotusland, Montecito

Tour schedule: 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday (gallery visits included with guided tours)

Information: 969-9999, lotusland.org

For those hopeless Lotusland aficionados who relish any opportunity to visit the extravagant and enchanted botanical wonderland, the new art exhibition by Penelope Gottlieb is a pleasure compounded. A great excuse to pay a visit, the show also invites visitors into the rarely publically seen interior quarters of the late Madame Ganna Walska's Pavilion building. Here, the artistic content itself aligns with the spirit of the property, a uniquely synchronistic marriage of mediums.



Lipochaeta degeneri
Courtesy photo

An artist who has investigated themes of cultural identity and displacement, environmental matters and other real-world issues (but with a sensuous flair), Gottlieb has lately been focusing on the imperiled life of plants. As seen in the impactful Lotusland show "GONE, A Visual Eulogy for Lost Plant Life," as well as with several pieces in the current group show at the Contemporary Arts Forum, the artist has been exploring expressive ways of dealing with the subject of endangered — or extinct — plant species, and in a hip, vibrant style belying yet also energizing the seriousness of her message.

Where better to see such work than at Lotusland? Over many years, the former opera star and husband-collector Ganna Walska established this now world-famous estate, where the vast and specialized plant collections and multiple-themed gardens celebrate flora from around the world, including some species now found only on this coveted Montecito property.

Upon first encounter with Gottlieb's show, however, we may ponder less the botanical aspect than the lifestyle vestiges. We enter the "pavilion" building, and the entrance to the three-room exhibition in Ganna Walska's former bedroom, where the ornate chandelier-festooned atmosphere contrasts with the post-pop-art cheekiness of Gottlieb's art strategizing.

Clearly, from the bottom up, this body of artwork has poetic sympathies with Ganna Walska, who channeled her creativity and passion into becoming a botanical bon vivant. Gottlieb's vivacious and sometimes explosive works, identified with deceptively calm and scientific

botanical titles, can be quasi-cartoonish at times, or else dense with color, blossoms and foliage to the point of claustrophobic excess: what they are not are wallflower paintings.

In the bedroom area, a calmer round painting, "*Amperea xiphoclada* var. *pedicellata*," is placed strategically over the fireplace mantel, across the room from the largest painting in the room, "*Phacelia cineria*." For added ironic effect, Gottlieb has painted and cut out entrails of the invasive non-native vine "*Dedirea Ocorata*," found in the Santa Barbara area, and wended it on the walls like an unwanted visitor.

In the larger entryway room to the Lotusland Pavilion, we find several of Gottlieb's smaller watercolor pieces, and her intriguing series of paintings on Audubon prints. Of course, there is something of a post-post-Modernist prankster impulse involved in artfully "defacing" existing prints, as if Banksy was here.

That said, though, the layer-upon-layer effect is both in keeping with Gottlieb's overall more-is-more approach to this art, and also relevant to the underlying theme of the destruction of indigenous plant and animal life by the introduction of non-natives (plants, people, industries, cultures, you name it). In a "reworked Audubon" work like "*Clerodendrum chinense*," bird life is seen in a tangled stranglehold with imp-osed stalks and succubus blossoms.

We find more explicitly explosive images, such as "*Ochrosia kilaueaensis*," in the same room. In this concentrically anarchic composition, it appears as if nature is imploding at the hands of science and environmental impacts.

In the back room of the structure (where Ganna Walska reportedly kept her beloved pet cockatiels), another large, loud picture, "*Otophora unilocularis*," is packed with kapowing, text-flecked visual energy, and "*Encepharlatos woodii*" veritably bulges with vegetative resplendency. In a lighter variation of the series theme, "*Mimulus whipplei*" (also known by the fizzy fine term "Whipple's monkeyflower") blends black drawings of wind-blown — or detonation-blown — leaves, pods and a stowaway spermatozoa, with warped color shapes, like shards from 1950s advertising campaigns. This deviation from the visual theme illustrates the possibilities of expressive range, within the artist's self-defined aesthetic statement.

As if a bit of a stage-setting in-joke beyond the art on the walls, this room's bookshelves are Gottlieb's own, from oversized art books to coffee table tomes on unusual plant life. We get a sense of the twin obsessions at work behind her current artistic output.

Context does matter, and sometimes more than less, in art exhibitions and their host environments. Walking out from Gottlieb's well-placed show, out into the exotic botanical landscape (or, more rightly, into a series of micro-landscapes), one feels more attuned to the feel and pull of nature, mystified by it, and also saddened by man's inhumanity to nature. This art sings and moans in its surroundings, circling back to implicitly comment on the lay of the landscaping.