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The Playful *and the* Personal

In Rachel Campbell's vibrant and joyful paintings, plants tell the story of the people who tend them.

BY Tamera Lenz Munte



Roybell

When *Artists Magazine* asked North Carolina-based artist Rachel Campbell to be part of its garden issue, she admits she was skeptical. “I never considered myself a painter of gardens,” says the New Zealand-born artist, laughing. “But, once I started thinking about it, I realized my paintings are full of gardens and objects that relate to nature and growth.”

Botanical imagery abounds in Campbell’s work, from interiors teeming with floral patterns to front porches replete with potted plants. Towering trees and lush lawns set scenes in suburban America, while twisting vines and colorful blossoms reveal beauty in unexpected places. “Plants are often an integral part of the stories I wish to tell,” she says.

Gardens are cultivated by people, and when seen uninhabited, they bear the presence of their creators. In Campbell’s paintings, these traces of humanity are palpable and central to her intent.

Environment as Portrait

Plants are often viewed as inanimate still life objects, but in reality, they’re living things that require care, attention and even love to survive. This makes

them potent symbols in Campbell’s paintings, where they frequently represent people. In *Lorna Just Always Wanted a Water Feature* (pages 56–57), for example, Campbell painted a “portrait” of her mother, Lorna, by focusing on her garden. “My mother’s garden was her sanctuary,” the artist says. The painting vibrates with life. Begonias and geraniums spring from pots, while flowering shrubs surround the verdant space. It’s as if Lorna has just stepped away from lovingly tending her flowers.

The artist visited her mother shortly after earthquakes leveled Christchurch, New Zealand, where Campbell grew up. Her mother had talked often about wanting a decorative fountain, and there in her garden—





LEFT
Melinda
oil on canvas, 48x36

OPPOSITE
Lydia's
oil on linen, 30x40

PAGES 56–57
**Lorna Just Always
Wanted a Water
Feature**
oil on canvas, 36x48

MATERIALS

Surfaces: “I prefer a fine linen surface on stretchers.

I also like to paint on unstretched linen attached to the wall and then stretch it afterward.”

Oils: Utrecht and Gamblin

Mediums: Liquin and linseed oil

Brushes: “I don’t have a preferred brand of brushes. I tend to buy more inexpensive brushes and switch them out often.”

which was spared from destruction—Campbell noticed a pile of plastic rocks and a garden hose, which her mother described as her water feature. When the artist tells the story, she points to the hilarity of the moment, but also says, “This was a profound and moving painting for me to do.”

Now, with her mother in a more fragile state in an assisted living facility, Campbell is happy the painting didn’t sell. “I think my children will enjoy having it someday,” she says.

For other paintings, Campbell literally knocked on people’s doors to find willing subjects. *Lydia’s* (opposite), came about when she spotted a cozy yellow cottage on North Carolina’s Ocracoke Island and approached its owner. “Lydia is 88 years old and has lived on the island her entire life.” The painting portrays the woman’s front porch, where she soaks up the sun every afternoon. “You can sense her there,” says Campbell, “with her Crocs kicked off nearby, tomato vines growing on the front of the house and other small collections of potted plants of which she was proud.”



Recently, Lydia's daughter wrote to Campbell to tell her that the home was destroyed by a hurricane. "She sent me a photograph of the house, which is down to the timbers and being rebuilt." Campbell made a large canvas print of *Lydia's*, which she sent to Lydia's daughter so it can be hung once the volunteers finish rebuilding the home.

Campbell's "environment as portrait" approach leads her into the lives of people she may otherwise have never met, with plants providing the personal connection. "In the case of *Melinda* [page 59], I had a studio near Melinda's home and was enthralled by her front porch, which was overflowing with greenery," Campbell says. "I was dying to meet her. Melinda turned out to be such an amazing person that I asked her to be in the painting."

She agreed and posed with Lady, the beloved dog that she'd rescued from a recycling bin. Melinda is surrounded

by her plants, which she refers to as her "babies," each named for the person who gave it to her. "She told me all their stories," Campbell joyfully recounts. "They're more than plants; they're symbols of all of her current and past friends and family."

The painting received interest from the producers of "The Carmichaels," a sitcom about an African-American family that Melinda watched daily. "She ended up as part of the set," the artist says.

Campbell gave Melinda half of the profits from the television show royalties she received and made almost

CLOCKWISE
FROM ABOVE
Plant the Future
oil on canvas, 48x48

**The Frangipani
Tree II**
oil on linen, 36x36

Yoder's Girls
oil on canvas, 30x40



one dozen prints of the painting so that Melinda could share them with family and friends. “It’s lovely to share your gifts with people who take you outside your everyday life,” the artist says.

Bittersweet Beauty

A generosity of spirit is evident in Campbell’s buoyant, playful paintings, and it finds its roots in a lifelong search for joy. As a child in a family affected by alcoholism, she made things from whatever she could get her hands on—cellophane tape, cardboard, fabric, mud. “I remember this great day when our driveway was dug up, and I discovered this viscous red clay. I was 5 years old,” she recalls. “I escaped into a world of creativity. It was my salvation, my self-soothing and special time. I’d get lost in my ideas, driving my mother mad with my mess.

“This has become an important part of my life to tap into and be honest about, because it so informs my need and desire to find beauty, play and joy, even in dark places,” Campbell says.

Growing out of that philosophy, Campbell sometimes paints beauty that springs from unexpected sources. In *Plant the Future* (opposite), palm trees in Miami’s Winwood District thrive between concrete warehouse buildings. Hemmed in by a metal fence, a graffiti-covered mailbox, telephone poles, power lines and barbed wire, the trees seem animated with life, almost a metaphor for this revitalized warehouse district. “Palm trees have personality,” she says. “They’re resilient and will grow in any little space you give them. It’s like they’re saying, ‘We’ll shine despite the ugliness all around us.’”

In *The Frangipani Tree II* (above), which Campbell painted on Key West during an artist residency, a frangipani tree blossoms in front of a small, neglected house. “The house just looked sort of sad, and then there was this fantastic tree,” she remembers. “It made my heart sing. It was an explosion of happiness, as if it were incredibly proud of itself.”



“There are usually three levels to a story. First, there’s playfulness. Then there’s a level that can be very poignant, and if you go further, there’s usually something deeply personal that draws me to my subjects.”

— RACHEL CAMPBELL

Campbell avoids painting a subject simply because it's pretty, reserving beauty as a narrative element, sometimes with a bittersweet edge. "There are usually three levels to a story," she says. "First, there's playfulness. Then there's a level that can be very poignant, and if you go further, there's usually something deeply personal that draws me to my subjects." Take, for example, *The Places I Have Traveled, The Plants I Have Met* (below). A variety of potted plants seem to have individual personalities and appear to interact with one another, some reaching out their leaves, others shying away. It's a playful scene filled with twisting stems and simplified forms of foliage sprawling before

a lavender background. "These are my sister's plants," Campbell reveals. "I adore her. We're very close, but we haven't lived on the same continent since I was 14 years old.

"On the surface, this is a painting about plants, but it's really about my connection to memory, nostalgia and separation," she says. "This is how I express my feelings of grief and longing. These feelings are probably in most of my work on some level."

OPPOSITE
**Frida and I on
a Summer's Day**
oil on linen, 48x50

BELOW
**The Places I Have
Traveled, The
Plants I Have Met**
oil on linen, 36x36





Joyful Details

In *Frida and I on a Summer's Day* (above), Campbell celebrates her own home with a cacophony of plants and almost obsessively painted botanical patterns and textures. “I love to put in the broad gestural parts of a painting, and then get to the nitty-gritty of showing every detail, in this case down to Frida Kahlo’s eyebrows on the curtain and the wood grain on the table. The details are all part of the fun.”

Outside, potted plants decorate the deck and greenery suffuses the backyard. Campbell, an avid gardener herself, says, “My garden isn’t typical of North Carolina. I’ve planted the most subtropical plants I can get that will survive our winters, including figs and native magnolia with 3-foot leaves, all wonderful, large, structural forms.” She has filled the scene with the presence of her family. On the deck are potted geraniums that remind her of her mother, as well as a large vase her daughter made. The painting on the wall refers to her sister-in-law, and in the corner leans a ball-throwing toy for her new puppy. “I’ve put in all of these sweet things that remind me of family and of home.”

These kinds of personal associations are the catalyst for Campbell’s work. They inspire her paintings, but viewers don’t necessarily need to be aware of them to understand and appreciate her work. By presenting ordinary places and objects—including plants—that people can associate with their own lives, she draws out her audience’s own stories, a process she finds incredibly rewarding.

“I love it when people come to my shows and start bubbling about their childhoods or people they know, sparked by my paintings,” she says. “I find that so profound. It’s such a gift that what I’m doing, puttering away privately in my studio, can make a connection with people. Talking about one of my paintings with someone and hearing their own reflections and memories means so much to me.”

Tamera Lenz Muenta is associate curator for the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati.

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