

# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Beauty is entry point to visions, ideas

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Susan Danko, Aqua, Acrylic on Canvas 28"x 30"

The tendency to emphasize pattern and decoration is a trend that has ebbed and flowed through the world of contemporary painting for decades.

Cleveland artist Susan Danko makes it easy to see the appeal of accentuating such visually pleasing aspects of art-making in her small but beautiful of 12 works, currently on view at the Cleveland Botanical Garden's Guren Gallery.

For Danko, beauty functions as an entry point to works that delve into a variety of subjects, including sharp contrasts between recognizable and abstract forms. Though each of her paintings features diverse elements that mysteriously float against richly colored backgrounds, they are full of references to landscapes or botanical subjects, including images such as trees, fern fronds and seed pods.

Adding to their magnetism is Danko's diverse use of various painting styles, which extend from intricate, carefully rendered images to loose, painterly sections, as well as thick impasto and watery, transparent areas.

An acrylic on canvas, simply titled "Aqua," shows off Danko's ability to juggle hugely varied images and, at the same time, create a work that feels perfectly complete. This is accomplished largely by her skillful use of color, which is mostly harmonic but also peppered with occasional surprises of discordant hues.

A nearby canvas titled "Grassland" leans more toward a traditional landscape in which patches of grass can be seen as if they are receding in space, with a row of leafless trees in the background.

What makes it interesting is the way Danko reduces each form to a silhouetted shape, painted in a solid high-pitch hue that jars the viewer out of the realm of realism and into a fantasy world.

Within this world, paint is as much a subject as nature, reminding us that the artist is, above all else, a creator who guides viewers through her own visions and ideas.

According to Danko's artist's statement, she recently became interested in the contrast between natural and technological subjects. This is scarcely apparent and might be of little consequence, since what makes her painting most appealing at this point is not so much her sources but the way she effectively fuses disparate elements and styles.

A 1998 graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Art, Danko used to visit the Cleveland Botanical Garden as a student and make sketches of the plants she saw both in the gardens and in books she found in the facility's library.

Her exhibition, in a sense, takes her back to her beginnings. It also shows how far she's come.

While students often grapple with subjects to which they are intuitively drawn, Danko incorporates her interests into sophisticated works that feed off the tradition of what literally has been called, by critics and recent art historians, Pattern and Decoration painting.

The trend was especially popular in the 1970's, when artists began reacting against the cold, reductive canvases of the Minimalists and started incorporating motifs from sources such as wallpaper and fabric design.

Danko does this more blatantly in some canvases. "Patterned Nocturne" includes a wallpaperlike background of interlocking violet lines against a solid field of red. In "Paisley Bloom," a highly ornate paisley pattern, like one you'd see on a blouse or scarf, appears to grow out of the corner of the canvas in the same way that her abstracted plant forms emerge from the landscape.

Pattern and Decoration paintings saw a resurgence in the 1990's, a spike that continues today as many artists see the approach as a way of merging tendencies associated with high art with those associated with crafts or aspects of popular culture.

In the past few years, two major group shows, cleverly titled: "NYPD: New York Pattern & Decoration" and "LAPD: Los Angeles Pattern & Decoration" have been held on the East and West coasts, each spotlighting more than 30 contemporary artists.

What's nice about Danko's work is that, much as it coincides with a current art-world trend, it isn't about jumping onto a band-wagon. Instead, it appears to have been cultivated organically from the artist's varied interests and talents, which continue to thrive and grow in new directions.

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