

haberarts

John Haber
in New York City

8.21.17 — [THE SECRET GARDENS](#)

Topics: [Flora Fantastica!](#), [Freight + Volume](#), [Gardens on Orchard](#), [Lesley Heller](#), [Nik Christensen](#), [Pablo's Birthday](#), [summer group shows](#), [Wave Hill](#)

Do people leave town in summer to get closer to nature? On a Wednesday evening in July, several galleries on the Lower East Side joined together with much the same aim, as a way to get people back to the city—and I have added this to an earlier recap of 2017 [summer group shows](#), to fill out the picture. As you will see in a moment, I also take you to another chance to get back to the garden this summer, at Wave Hill.

In truth, not all the galleries in “[Gardens on Orchard](#)” stuck to its theme. I have already included McKenzie in that wrap-up of 2017 [summer group shows](#) for its abstraction. Visitors, though, reveled in summer’s lushness. I soon enough lost track of the number and even identity of the artists.

[Lesley Heller](#), through August 18, opens with a sly promise of a wider meadow in Astroturf, which [Jim Osman](#) sets in painted boxes reminiscent of modern design from the Bauhaus to Memphis. [Katherine Newbegin](#) hints at the promise betrayed, with her photo of an empty swimming pool. In between come strategies of painting, often on the verge of Op Art, sci-fi fantasy, or “[pattern and decoration](#),” but with the fiercer creatures of Judith Linhares invading the garden. KK Kozik leaves nature to the illusion of color postcards pinned to a bookcase in black and white, but all is well—even with nature pierced by a highway or seemingly on fire. Not quite on Orchard Street, [Freight + Volume](#) has a still greater abundance, through September 8, as “The Secret Life of Plants.” Its secrets range from the Postmodernism of [Neil Welliver](#) and [Ross Bleckner](#) to the dreamlike contemporary states of mind of JJ Manford, David Humphrey, Benjamin King, Alexis Rockman, Cristina de Miguel, H. Peik Larsen, and Emily Noelle Lambert.

Back on Orchard, [Pablo's Birthday](#) returned to nature by returning as well to its very last show. [Nik Christensen](#), through June 18, had not made nature easy to find. His canvases look almost like vintage TV screens on the fritz, only in a vertical format and on the scale of a wide screen today. On the gallery’s second floor, through July 30, they once again accumulate black, white, and gray in diamonds instead of pixels—and in an unexpected variety of scales. The pleasure comes in tracking them, as the image accumulates, clarifies, and once again dissolves. If I am not mistaken, they belong to forest scenes with people at their center but not altogether at home.

One of Heller’s artists, Elisabeth Condon, also helps bring nature to [Wave Hill](#), which amounts to overkill all by itself. A private park in Riverdale, in the Bronx, it offers carefully tended lawns and sometimes elusive, sometimes dramatic views of the Hudson and the cliffs of the Palisades beyond. At its heart, though, are gardens, flowering trees, and the [Glyndor Gallery](#) for art. This year all three collude on a mix of native and exotic species, through August 27, as “[Flora Fantastica!](#)” One can almost excuse the exclamation point, because the flora look less fantastical than running wild. In the tradition of Flemish and Dutch still-life, the artists also bring one close enough to touch.

Jill Parisi does so literally, although touching is *verboden*, with paper and tissue flowers. Her hand-colored intaglio and digital prints burst into color and three dimensions. Nancy Blum lets flowers grow larger than life in ink, colored pencil, gouache, and graphite. They bring a fine line out of old botanical studies and seductive fantasies. Like both artists, Amy Cheng combines species in a single flower, with patterning in oil that leaves the edge of the canvas to break its intricate symmetry. Condon does sketch what she sees on the spot, in black ink, but she also thrives on the contrast of flowing ink and more detailed acrylic.

Not part of the show, Jan Mun has a talking plant in the sun rooms, where the speaker expounds on the parallels between Western imperialism and invasive species. It could be the reincarnation of Mr. Ed as a politically correct vegetable. David Rios Ferreira has flowers, too, covering the window panes, but also images from children's books and housing projects. They invoke the actual environment for the Bronx kids with whom he collaborates. So is art about gardens in summer a natural, superfluous, or a confusion of the imagination and real life? The puzzle has a long history in representation, and it is not going away any summer soon.

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