

Serendipity: Botanical Artist a Natural at Painting Sustainability

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Patrick O'Hara, commissioned by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, promotes plant conservation.

The California grizzly bear went extinct before we invented poster species: those animals that engage our eyes, harness our hearts and pillage our pocketbooks in the hopes of saving them. The cuteness factor of pandas, tigers and even homely condors has served to focus attention on all endangered animals. Enter [Patrick O'Hara](#), a botanical artist commissioned by the [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden](#), who uses his art to highlight poster flora, using their cuteness factors to promote plant conservation.



Karen Telleen-Lawton (Don Matsumoto photo)

“The basis of conservation has to be plant life,” O'Hara says. “If not for them, the big creatures couldn't survive.” His projects support conservation around the world, most recently in Switzerland, Japan and across the United States. He visits the Botanic Garden a couple of times per year, an “artist in residence” creating watercolors of California wildflowers in their context.

Their context is the sustainable landscape. For example, his recent “A Fairy Lantern in a King's Canyon” features not only botanically correct Fairy Lantern wildflowers, but other flowers and insects that inhabit that community. Blue Dicks, Pretty Faces and Elegant Madias share the canvas with Rose Fairy Lanterns. A beautiful Pale Swallowtail butterfly

rests in center stage, gathering nectar from the precariously leaning Blue Dicks. O'Hara's still watercolors have so much action you want to run barefoot in them.

O'Hara found his muse in art by way of a failed pottery class, agricultural work performing autopsies on chickens and clay models of steam engines. His ceramics of bugs finally took off in 1969; the Irish artist soon was selling them in London stores. His first U.S. exhibition was at Cartier in New York in 1972, then farther west, to Beverly Hills, in 1973. That's when he dedicated his artistic success to plant conservation.

I asked O'Hara why botanical art typically shows plants in isolation. "I think the tradition of depicting individual plants was because the 17th century garden art patrons were interested in specimens," O'Hara says. "That carried to Victorian times, when everything was collected. Heads of stags or walruses were displayed as specimens."

To O'Hara, however, it's natural to paint plants in association. "I can't see a plant isolated," he said. "They don't grow on their own. They grow with soil, with other plants and insects."

The difficulty in native botanical art is the field drawings. O'Hara makes detailed pencil drawings in the wild, hauling a six-inch square box filled with 4,500 glazed tile colors which he developed himself to match the colors he encountered in nature. He codes his pencil drawings with the tile numbers and a few watercolor notes before bringing them back to his studio.

O'Hara's pieces are so loaded with detail that it's like inspecting a wildflower on a hike. "I'm just doing my own mad thing, trying to intrigue people to bend down, instead of looking from 5 or 6 feet away. They can even have a look at the underside. Like an idiot I even do the parts no one can see, like the veins underneath."

The artist's botanically correct drawings are aesthetically composed for painting. He wants people who know nothing of plants to enjoy them as much as a botany professor. "I want the professor to say, 'That fellow has it right. That butterfly is around that time of year.'" O'Hara tries to capture not just the personality but the feeling and atmosphere of a particular microhabitat or niche. "If I can provide a sense of place within habitat, that's my goal."

Artistic styles surely will come and go, but the artistic value of nature is immutable, and nature's sustainability will be preserved with the help of botanical artists such as O'Hara bringing flowers to the people.

[Click here](#) for upcoming Botanic Garden events with Patrick O'Hara.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at <http://www.CanyonVoices.com>.