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STRANGE BLOSSOMS

PHOENIX CERAMICIST SUSAN BEINER CREATES EXOTIC BOTANICAL
SCULPTURES THAT DRAW ON ELEMENTS OF THE SURREAL.

WRITTEN BY JORGE S. ARANGO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JILL RICHARDS

In the Phoenix studio of ceramicist Susan Beiner, small porcelain sculptures and a drawing in progress share space with a notebook where she works out ideas.



white
to
draw
on

draw
historical
wall paper

Beiner (right) manipulates a piece in her studio, where multiple works are on display, including a part of *Unintended Consequences* (far right) and a part of *Hive Expanded* (below), a piece for an upcoming show that combines two- and three-dimensional elements. For *Flower Geometry* (opposite), a work in progress, Beiner is crafting smaller pieces that will eventually merge into what she describes as a "a wall of floral flowing patterns."



Susan Beiner remembers watching her chemist father grafting roses in the front yard of their New Jersey home when she was a child. Today, says the Phoenix ceramicist, "I'm creating floral hybrids of what I imagine are the artificial forms we'll be growing in the future." Hers is a strange and exotic botanical world preternaturally fertile with specimens that might be reminiscent of familiar flowers, fungi and other plant life, yet oddly alien at the same time.

Beiner's creative spirit blossomed in college, when she attended Rutgers University to study to be a painter. During her last year of school, she enrolled in a ceramics class and was immediately transfixed by the medium. "It was this magical material you could shape into anything you want," she says. It was enough to motivate her, and Beiner eventually went on to continue her ceramic studies at the University of Michigan. Initially, her work was inspired by 18th-century European porcelains—Meissen, Sèvres, Capodimonte—which, she observes, "were about a sculptural attitude on a functional form." This led her to conceive densely intricate, Baroque-style encrustations of plant motifs on vessels, from which she moved on to wall art, freestanding sculptures and installations.

Beiner's labor-intensive process remains largely the same today as it was at the beginning of her career. She sculpts prototypes from clay in her 1,000-square-foot studio, then creates drain-cast

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Carts in the artist's studio hold works in various stages of the process. For commissioned pieces, "I always make more than what is needed," Beiner says, "In case something unexpected happens in the kiln or the client wants something different."





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molds of them, which she uses to make multiple porcelain pieces. While those multiples stay hydrated in a cooler, she hand-builds sculptures, adhering the cast pieces to each other in a wet-clay condition with a special glue she developed. When dry, these pieces are bisque-fired, then sprayed with different glazes. Beiner uses a mid-range porcelain, which she fires in a gas kiln to better mix the melting glaze colors.

Over the past few years, Beiner has added to these fired pieces decorative bits of industrially produced materials such as rubber, Plexiglas and foam. “I’m interested in this tension between what is artificial and what is real,” she says, pointing to food, flowers and other plants as examples. “Even what was once natural has been made artificially. I want people to question that relationship.”

Beiner’s forms are inspired by the landscape as well—Arizona’s and those of other travel destinations such as Israel, Ireland and Korea, where she obsessively photographs plant life. Lately, she’s started grafting plants in her own garden like her father once did, and her work is evolving into a new kind of hybrid. For a show called “Hive Expanded,” which runs through



January 14 at Artlab, an experimental space at the Krasl Art Center in St. Joseph, Michigan, Beiner created hexagonal tiles covered in layered washes of color and renderings she seals with beeswax. As clusters of these proceed around the exhibition space, some will begin “sprouting” from their drawn forms, eventually erupting into full-scale sculptural encrustations. “I’m merging two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms in an organic way,” she says. And just as in nature, art offers its own surprises. “Everything always turns out differently than I expected,” Beiner says. ■

Layers of colors merge with black glaze to form a unique surface on each leaf of a recent piece (top, left). Clay molds crowd shelves and a yellow cart in the back of Beiner’s studio (above).