

EXUBERANCE & ROT

An Interview with Pareesa Pourian

First there was the field: wildflowers filling the periphery, dense and repetitious, in the open air. And then there came textile: the floral wallpaper of waiting rooms, floral tissue boxes and bed sheets. It's easy to think that one could not be farther from the other. Yet, in her paintings, Pareesa Pourian manages to inhabit both of these worlds. Referential to both the wild, dirty beauty of the natural landscape and to the domesticated one, her work makes a claim for the sublimity of the doodle. Intimate and mesmerizing, the flowers of Pourian's paintings multiply and grow against a field that is so much more human than soil or plaster. And just as the viewer might feel both consumed and confronted by these, so too do the flowers seem saturated in their surroundings—a bloom that is always inseparable from its decay.

In the interview that follows, conducted via email in February 2015, I talked with painter Pareesa Pourian about art, wallpaper, doodles, language, and a few other things in between.

Marc Paltrineri: I love the richness of this series of paintings. They are both meticulous in their detail and wild in their nature, and by way of this tension they are very evocative and powerful to me. To see them together, they seem to be clearly from the same family. Would you mind talking a bit about how they fit together and relate to one another from your perspective? Were there certain ideas, moods, or intentions that you had when making these?

Pareesa Pourian: I start all of these paintings with a drawing of flowers that cover the entire surface. The drawing serves as a conceptual premise and a boundary for me to work the rest of the painting. The process of covering a large canvas with slow, delicate lines is meditative and the handmade line becomes a conduit for emotion. They are meant to encapsulate a range of moods, and to overwhelm the viewer. The lines are expressionistic, but they are also referencing ornamental design and pattern. I hope to evoke exuberance as well as excess and rot, which are feelings I get when looking at plants as they bloom and decay simultaneously.

MP: That's a great way of putting it—"the exuberance and rot"—and I think that can definitely be felt in these paintings. I had guessed at there being references to design and patterning, such as textiles or even wallpapering, and I'm glad to hear I wasn't that far off. What interests you about you these things?

PP: I'm interested in domestic patterns, like wallpaper and bed sheets, because they are rich visual fields that exist with our bodies. We look at them and let our minds wander, and they absorb our stains. I'm also interested in the dazzling effects of ornamental design found in mosques

and Persian carpets. My paintings, though, are not exactly pattern. The flower I draw is like a doodle; I'm making something serious with something normally dismissed as 'girly.'

MP: You grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but have lived in numerous places—in Vermont, where I met you, and in New York City, most recently. I wonder how these places have influenced your work. Do you respond in any ways to the landscape around you, even if it's not in a representational sense? Or are there other factors, beside landscape/ cityscape that come more into play?

PP: There are other factors but the Louisiana landscape had a huge impact on me. I have a love/hate relationship with the south and the suburbs that I grew up in, a place so disturbing and beautiful. The heat and humidity is so pervasive and constant that when it doesn't feel dirty and suffocating it feels intimate and comforting. Trees obscure the skyline from any vantage point, and sometimes swallow up in the sky completely like a canopy. For me landscape is psychological, as if it becomes analogous for how thoughts are structured.

MP: Unfortunately, one thing that cannot be replicated in these pages is the size of these paintings—four and a half feet by four and a half feet—and their ability to overwhelm and flood the viewer. Still, even on a smaller scale, these paintings have such depth to them. There seem to be many layers to them—there's the doodles of flowers that seem to float along the surface, but then, as in a painting like "Snake on My Face," there's something much murkier and more threatening lurking below, consuming and blackening the flowers in some places. What was the physical process of painting these like? Would you begin with an idea, a mood, and plan it out?

Or would you find it along the way? Did any surprise you in how they came out?

PP: I began each painting with an idea of the colors in relation to some kind of association. For *Bedweather*, I was thinking about the colors of a floral bed sheet, and the stains that might live alongside the flowers. *Hunt & Smother* began with garish and acidic colors that later became tempered. Because the process of making them is slow and cumulative, the mood develops along the way, and I really can't foresee how they will turn out.

MP: That is really interesting because one of the things I was wanting to ask you was about how you chose the titles for these paintings. As a poet, I absolutely adore your title choices as they're so much more dynamic and evocative than how a lot of abstract painters approach it ("Composition #34" or "Blue and Orange 5," for example.) By what you're saying here, it sounds like the title and the painting evolved together. Is that true? And in other paintings of yours (not the ones here) you've even integrated text into the composition itself. To me, it makes for an interesting relationship—the language and the paint—but I wonder what you think of it. I know many poets who secretly wish they were painters (Frank O'Hara being the most famous example, with his poem "Why I am Not a Painter"; and then there is myself as well.) Are you a painter who secretly wants to be a poet? Or are such categorizations not important in the first place?

PP: Sometimes a phrase will pop into my head while I'm painting, but I don't always keep it as the title. I spend time writing about the experience of making the painting and then decide on what to call it once it's hanging on the wall for a little while. Language is interesting to me because it's abstract but it also has explicit content. I secretly want to be everything, including a poet, though I think that calling yourself something (artist, poet) requires taking into consideration a lot of historical baggage, so I respect the poet as something I'm not. And by that I don't mean to suggest that to be a real artist/writer one must be learned in the canon; I just consider the position of artist or writer an entire lifestyle choice that involves a lot of questioning. Many of my close friends are poets, and they definitely influence my attention to language. I totally fantasize about the painter, poet, dancer, composer relationships of 1950s New York, where everyone was influencing each other.

MP: Lastly, and speaking of influence, can you think of a specific painting or painter that totally changed the way you think about painting? I know there must be many, but can you pinpoint one or two that made

you feel that feeling that Emily Dickinson talked of in relation to poetry: to feel as if the top of your head were taken off.

PP: Yes, there are many, though I would say I had that feeling when seeing a room of Joan Mitchell's paintings—her mark is so direct that I felt like I could watch her thinking and feeling just by looking at the paintings. Her color relationships feel both intellectual and emotional; I felt like you could have it all.



Pareesa Pourian was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She attended Louisiana State University and earned a Bachelor's in Fine Art for Painting and Drawing in 2010. Currently, she is an MFA candidate in Painting at the Mason Gross School of the Arts in New Brunswick, New Jersey.



“BEDWEATHER,” Oil on Canvas, 54 in x 54 in., 2014



“HUNT & SMOTHER,” Oil on Canvas, 54 in x 54 in., 2015



“SNAKE ON MY FACE,” Oil on Canvas, 54 in x 54 in., 2015