

## **PORTFOLIO: Mary Ahern's Floral Portraits Entwine Nature, Art & Life Examined**

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by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

For Mary Ahern, her love of art and gardening have been entwined for decades. Both an artist and garden designer, her days have been spent in her own garden where thousands of species of plants and flowers can be found or while designing landscape delights for others. More recently, the Long Island artist decided to simplify and strip away whatever wasn't most important to her.

The decision had a profound impact on her art.

She gradually began moving away from the landscape paintings of gardens she designed to focus on a single flower. Becoming more introspective as her gaze and attention became focused on a single flower selected from thousands flourishing in nearby garden beds, Ahern began painting oversize portraits of flowers. By scaling up for these intimate examinations, each painting connects the existential workings of the natural world with the machinations of the human one. Finding a microcosm of life in a single flower, each oversize painting channels the big questions of life that Ahern finds are raised through the inner workings of flowers and their role in nature.

"The purpose of the flower is to create the next generation," Ahern said. "They attract pollinators and create seeds to continue their life for another day and for another season. There's an energy created by the flower than can be felt.... Flowers are part of a community: of flowers and of a species. They build community through food, through water and through relationships, like we do as human beings."

Through her process and compositional choices, Ahern aims to provide viewers with a lesser noticed view of flowers as a way to tap into the profound and share what's like to stop, allow appreciation to seep in and connect with nature in a way fast-paced living doesn't allow.

"By painting large than life, I'm asking the viewers to look in a different view at flowers and what are they trying to say," Ahern said. "By painting larger than life, it begs the questions: Why are we here? If the goal is to build community, what do you need to attract others and build a beneficial relationships?"



“Together Again – Peach Freckles Rhododendron” by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

The process of making each painting is also a slow and meditative one. Ahern connects with her Dutch heritage and classic art history by making use of the process of grisaille but adds brilliant and nuanced color through 15 to 20 layers of glaze per painting, she said. Colors are mixed directly on the canvas creating art that’s a mix of happenstance and purpose; control and accident. She also enjoys the contrast of the classic method of making paintings with a decidedly contemporary look.

“I love the process,” Ahern said. “It gives me a certain amount of control with the color but the painting takes on a life of its own.”

Ahern’s series of floral paintings is currently on view at Bayard Cutting Arboretum in the historic Manor House in Great River, NY in Eastern Suffolk County. “Floral Contemplations: The Duality of Vision” is on view through June 17, 2018. Ahern’s work will next be exhibited at [Art Market + Design](#) in Bridgehampton, NY with Art Blend when the art fair returns to The Hamptons from July 5 to 8, 2018.

On the occasion of Ahern’s solo show, Pat Rogers of Hamptons Art Hub spoke with Mary Ahern about the series to get a closer look at her art and process.

**PAT ROGERS:** What is your inspiration for your art?

**MARY AHERN:** As a passionate gardener, my art is as intricately entwined as the gardens surrounding my studio. Cultivating and tending these gardens is the first stage of creating the art that grows in my studio.



“Centering – Pink Peony” by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**PR:** Why painting versus another medium?

**MA:** My preferred medium is painting in oils with many layers of glazing since it presents many opportunities for experimentation. The act of painting is quite physical for me since I stand and move quite a bit while engaging in this tactile experience. This process feels to me like an interactive relationship with the painting itself as it seems to direct its outcome to a certain extent.



“We Are Sisters - Coral Roses” by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**PR:** How did the Series Begin?

**MA:** Many of the paintings in this series are square, floral centers bursting through the boundaries of their squared canvas. Circles in squares are shapes I’ve returned to over and over again since the mid-1970’s in a myriad of mediums. They represent to me the yin yang of the feminine and masculine. My garden houses a diverse collection of round things.



"I'm Not Hiding - Pink Amaryllis" by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 36 × 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

PR: How did this body of work impact you as an artist?

**MA:** This latest body of work explores many of my intellectual interests in art, science and philosophy. I chose the show title, "Contemplations - The Duality of Vision" since I was seeking to look beyond just the visual interpretation of the inside of a flower but to also look into my soul to ask what that center means beyond just the visual.



“Just Waiting - Free Spirit Rose Bud” by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**PR:** How does the work on view relate to the setting of the Bayard Cutting Arboretum?

**MA:** People come to the Bayard Cutting Arboretum for many reasons beyond just their beautiful gardens and wonderful café. They come to unwind, to feel different, to release stress which frees their mind up from the daily chores of living life. This slowing down and relaxation allows them to ponder ideas and questions they may not have in their bustling lives. My art intertwines perfectly with this concept of slowing down to savor the moment and to think grander thoughts.



“Yellow Tulip Squared” by Mary Ahern. Mixed media on canvas, 30 × 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**PR:** Do you have a favorite piece?

**MA:** My favorite pieces are the ones that were pushed in a direction that I hadn't necessarily intended but were there because the painting emerged into what it wanted to become.



“Pay Attention Here - Orange Hibiscus” by Mary Ahern. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 x 72. Courtesy of the artist.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Floral Contemplation: The Duality of Vision - New Work by Mary Ahern” is on view May 17 through June 17, 2018 at the historic Manor House at the Bayard Cutting Arboretum, 440 Montauk Highway, Great River NY 11739. The galleries are open on Thursdays through Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

To see more of Mary Ahern’s art, visit [her website](#) at or her Hamptons Art Hub Artist Directory by clicking [here](#). Ahern is based in Northport, NY on Long Island.

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