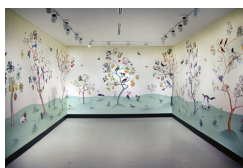
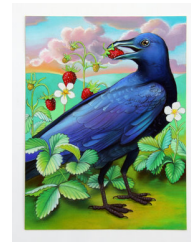
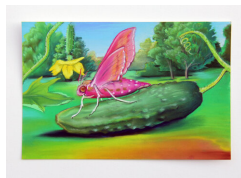




IMPOSSIBLE GARDEN

JULY 21, 2020 · OSGF

BY EMMA STEINKRAUS





'Impossible Garden' Wallpaper Scroll

Oak Spring Garden Foundation

Impossible Garden, 2020, digital scroll of wallpaper collaged from work by 131 women who worked at the intersection of art and science before 1900

Q&A WITH EMMA STEINKRAUS



WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN THE PAST FEW MONTHS?

For the past few months I've been holed up in Southside Virginia in a tiny town called - this is true! - Farmville. This is my second year in the area as a professor at a small liberal arts college. Before the pandemic hit, I had a number of artist residencies lined up. While I look forward to completing them in 2021, my consolation this summer has been working on a garden. My art projects often allude to gardens, which interest me as a space where art and science, the human and the non-human, collaborate and collide. But this is the first summer I've had the space and time to create one of my own.

HISTORICALLY, WHAT IDEAS, ISSUES, AND SUBJECT MATTER(S) HAVE INSPIRED YOUR WORK?

I often feel like an associative maximalist in terms of my interests and influences. This week, for example, I've been researching the Harlem Renaissance, paleolithic textile production, and bird behavior. All fascinating subjects, but hardly connected in any obvious way. But despite this omnivorousness, my work exhibits certain preoccupations. Most of my exhibitions are research-driven, image-dense, and concerned in some way with the relationship between humans and ecology.

Visually, I love detail, creamsicle colors, photo transfers, art historical references, and camp. Layering and juxtaposition are especially important to my work. I see

them as strategies for accommodating complexity and wild shifts in register, as my work moves between the fanciful and the somber, the ironic and the affective.

WHAT CREATIVE PROJECTS ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

Right now, I'm working on a project called *Impossible Garden* that explores the contributions women made to scientific art before the 20th century. I've created a mural wallpaper that is collaged together from thousands of public domain images created by 130 women who worked across the globe as scientific illustrators between the 15th and 19th centuries. I'm also creating a series of paintings loosely inspired by some of their individual stories.

For fun, I've been making pastel drawings of various creatures that pass through my actual garden. And the garden is, of course, another creative project in a way.

HOW HAS YOUR ARTISTIC PRACTICE CHANGED DURING THIS TIME?

My artistic practice under the pandemic has oscillated wildly. I've had weeks of intense focus, but also weeks where I've felt totally unmoored. Time has taken on strange new properties.

Perhaps the biggest shift - very much ongoing - has been the desire to make art that more clearly manifests my political commitments. The pandemic and protests have both motivated me to center thinking about how my work can contribute to the many fights for justice. To that end, I've spent a lot of my studio time reading and researching. Saidiya Hartman's book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* has been especially helpful to me as an artist who engages with archival and feminist research.

HAS COVID-19 SHIFTED HOW YOU THINK ABOUT THE NATURAL WORLD?

With fewer daily human interactions, I've found my relationships to other animals taking on new weight and meaning. My social circle is, for the first time, more bird than human. Spending so much of the day at home has also allowed me to observe other creatures in a more sustained way. I know the local heron and his evening rituals, and I suspect he knows me. I've been kept up at night by a mockingbird looking for a mate, and was very glad for the extra rest once he found one.

I've found it grounding to interact with creatures whose news and narratives are so different from my own. Earlier in the summer, I reared a cecropia moth. Stepping into the drama of metamorphosis, new wings that need to expand and harden, and the olfactory hunt for a mate, allowed me to temporarily set aside my own very human cares and anxieties.

Ursula Le Guin, in her essay "What if art is not communicative?," speculates about "weasel murder mysteries, Batrachian erotica," and "the tunnel sagas of the earthworm," before saying that any animal story leaves us without the techniques for understanding "the art of the redwood, or the zucchini." I love thinking about all these other kinds of stories that swirl around us, largely undetected.

[EMMA STEINKRAUS' WEBSITE](#)



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