



A Magical Garden (Chelsea Garden With Palm House) (watercolor on paper, 16x30)

The Language of *flowers*

by Tim Saunders

ENGLISH ARTIST **SUZY FASHT** DELVES INTO THE EXPRESSIVE PROPERTIES OF WATERCOLOR, EGG TEMPERA AND OIL FOR HER EXPRESSIVE GARDEN SCENES.

A garden is not a picture, but a language,” Henry Mitchell, noted American gardening author, once wrote. But for Suzy Fasht, a garden is both. Painting whimsical and ethereal floral still lifes and landscapes is the creative language she uses to address her surroundings and express herself. Her creative dialects of choice are

watercolor, egg tempera and oil in equal measure—each for its distinct effects and properties. “Watercolor is very immediate and fluid,” she says, while egg tempera offers a “stillness” to her works. “Oil, on the other hand, is very movable because it dries slowly, so there’s always the option of changing things on the go.”

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM
Summer's Offering (egg tempera
 on gessoed panel, 11¾x15¾)

Summer in the Garden (watercolor
 and India ink on paper, 22¾x22½)



Magnolia on a Sunny Windowsill (watercolor on paper, 14x18)

Although Fasht has been a painter and art instructor for years—she graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine art from Wimbledon School of Art in 1995 and earned a postgraduate diploma in painting at the Royal Academy Schools in 1998—she didn't initially paint florals. "I mainly painted imaginative landscapes based on drawings from visits to places around England," she says.

It was during the COVID lockdown in 2020 that the artist's floral paintings emerged and blossomed. "I had to shutter all of my in-person teaching, so I was free to paint every day," says Fasht, who lives and works in Dartmoor, in

Devon, in England's Southwest. "The man I rent my art studio from had planted a bank full of sunflowers, gladioli, verbena and alliums near the building. The summer weather was sunny and dry—unusually so for England—so I carried my easel outside and, under a garden umbrella, I started sketching and painting."

SKETCHING IT OUT

Fasht's hardcover sketchbook is often where her creativity begins, and from there she develops a plan based on her chosen painting media and desired results. She prefers to sketch outside using a B or HB pencil to

record her floral subjects "as a simple visual record for later use," she says. "The drawings are starting points, or springboards, in a way. The watercolors are the next stage."

Other times, Fasht prefers to paint directly in her own garden or from a still life setup. In these instances, she doesn't do an initial sketch. "I prefer instead to let the composition evolve," she says. "I'm attracted to the ephemeral nature of flowers, which reflects the whole of life. I'm attracted by their colors, shapes and lines to figure out how to use them to create unity and variety—a harmony of different elements."



WATERCOLOR AND BEYOND

Fasht relies on watercolor to translate her floral drawings into full color. "I use it to interpret my drawings in color," she says, "and then I edit and transform things into something more imagined. While interpreting, I try to make finished paintings rather than experiments. When I paint with watercolor outdoors, it's with the hope of making a finished work." The fact that watercolor paper doesn't require any preparation enhances its appeal for the artist, who finds that it's second to none when working en plein air thanks to its quick-drying property.

Fasht uses a limited palette, although she doesn't rely on just one overriding palette for all of her paintings. "I choose my colors for each painting prior to starting," she says. "The palette is determined by the mood, atmosphere, season and time of day I want to convey. Each palette is based on the three primary colors; I may just have one of each or a warm and cool of each, and then I mix greens, violets, oranges and neutrals from them."

The artist admits to being "fussy about paint and would rather have three of the best-quality primary colors than lots of poor-quality paint." She prefers single-pigment colors from Schminke, Sennelier and Michael Harding. "I was taught not to have more than three colors in a mix, or it turns muddy," she says. "If a tube of paint contains three colors, that won't work for me because it becomes too muddled. I like a tight palette for harmony; it's more important to me than truth to the subject in real life."

If Fasht becomes "particularly drawn" to a watercolor painting, she may decide to invest more time and use the concept for a larger oil painting. "The watercolor paintings serve many functions," Fasht says. "I find I need many interim stages between an initial idea, or drawing, and a resolved oil painting."

Royal Work

In 2018, Fasht was elected an Associate of the Royal Watercolour Society (RWS), becoming a full member just four years later. “I applied with a portfolio, sketchbooks and finished paintings, after having had work accepted into the open exhibitions,” she says. “It was really encouraging to be elected by my peers; it’s a very friendly society. Plus, there have been many opportunities and a more public platform for my work.” RWS holds two exhibitions each year, in the spring and fall, at Bankside Gallery, a stone’s throw from Tate Modern on the bank of the River Thames.

RWS recently invited Fasht to create work based on the offerings at Chelsea Physic Garden—London’s oldest botanic garden—which celebrates its 350th anniversary this year. “I made several visits during which I produced drawings in my sketchbook,” the artist says. “I referred to them back in my studio to create watercolors,” including *Gigantic Sunflowers in the Dicotyledon Beds (Chelsea Physic Garden)* (right) and *The Garden of Medicinal Plants (Chelsea Physic Garden)* (below). Fasht’s paintings, along with other RWS artists’ interpretations of the garden, were on display for the anniversary at Bankside Gallery in June.



ABOVE
Gigantic Sunflowers in the Dicotyledon Beds (Chelsea Physic Garden) (watercolor on paper, 00x00)

LEFT
The Garden of Medicinal Plants (Chelsea Physic Garden) (watercolor and gouache on paper, 13½x22)



EXPLORING EGG TEMPERA

Egg tempera serves as a fresh media dialect, providing an exciting contrast in Fasht’s works. In western art, the medium was used before oil painting and was a popular technique of the early Italian Renaissance. It was championed by artists such as Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), who painted *Madonna and Child*, and Raphael Sanzio da Urbino (1483–1520), known for his *Madonna in the Meadow*. The medium is durable, generally unaffected by humidity and temperature, and dries quickly to form a tough film that acts as a protective skin.

“I like using egg tempera because it creates a stillness in my work,” Fasht says. “It’s a very particular technique, in which the painting is created from tiny overlapping brushstrokes layered over time. The procedure is very calming, and the paint dries beautifully matte.” The artist says she turns to the medium in the winter months “when I’m

based in the studio, as it’s too cold to paint outside.”

Fasht often makes the paint herself by mixing egg yolk with pure pigment, distilled water and a drop of Oil of Spike Lavender. Fasht learned the technique at The Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, in London. “Making the egg tempera is much easier than you’d think, although it’s quite time-consuming, so I don’t use it quite as often,” she says. “I like the fact that it’s probably a more environmentally sympathetic paint, and I like its connection to the Renaissance. I enjoy the whole craft aspect of it; it gets me into the zone for painting rather than diving straight in.”

Fasht works on boards layered and sanded with gesso made using gypsum and rabbit skin glue. “If I were working with egg tempera more frequently,” she says, “I’d look to making my own boards. I’d like to research a less expensive option—and plant-based alternative—to the glue.”



A Veritable Tangle (watercolor on paper, 30x22½)



Where Are the Bees? (egg tempera on gessoed panel, 19½x39½)



Meet the Artist

Suzy Fasht (suzyfasht.com; Instagram @suzyfasht) is an award-winning artist who works in watercolor, egg tempera and oil. She earned a bachelor's degree (with honors) in fine art from the Wimbledon School of Art in 1995 and a post-graduate diploma in painting from the Royal Academy Schools in 1998. She was Artist-in-Residence at the London Business School in 1998. She was elected an associate of The Royal Watercolour Society in 2018 and a full member in 2022. Her watercolors are available through Bankside Gallery, in London, and her egg tempera and oil paintings are available through Catto Gallery, also in London.

Bits and Bobs

Fasht currently teaches water-color painting two mornings a week at Arthouse, in South Brent, Devon. "There's an art to achieving a balance between teaching and studio time," she says. Here she shares six tips and pieces of advice for watercolorists.

- **Use quality paper, the heavier the better.** "I use Saunders Waterford paper in A1 sheets in 200- and 300-lb. weights," she says. "I fold and tear them to the needed shape and size. I can get a few paintings from one sheet, although sometimes I'll join them together to make a large watercolor surface."
- **Limit your colors and choose your palette before beginning a painting.** Use artist-quality paint in either tubes or pans. "I find that full pans are easier to use than half," Fasht says, "and it's better to have three primary colors of high-quality paint than 20 or so colors of poor-quality paint. Start with ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson and cadmium lemon."
- **Buy single-pigment paints and make your own mixes.** Pigments are listed on tubes so you can see if there's more than one color included.
- **If you're going to use black, consider vine black.** "It's soft and semitransparent, so it's not too overpowering," the artist notes.
- **Use white paint when you need to.** Fasht says, "You can use it to correct mistakes or to make an area slightly opaque, such as in skies."
- **Try synthetic sable brush alternatives,** "They're more humane," she says. "I use my synthetic mop for most things."



Medieval Tower in a Garden (Dartington) (watercolor on paper, 15¼x11¼)



Summer's Offering (egg tempera on gessoed panel, 11¼x15¼)



Sunflowers, Gladioli and Verbena (watercolor on paper, 24x15¼)

WHAT'S ON DECK

Fasht is currently turning to her own garden as fodder for exploring all three media—watercolor, egg tempera and oil—to create works for galleries and exhibitions. (See "Royal Work," on page 00.) "I plant with an eye to what I'd like to paint later in the season," the artist says. "Because I use my garden as a subject, I'm influenced by the seasons and what's growing."

When it comes to watercolor, Fasht is experimenting with smooth surfaces. In oil, she's addressing more narrative themes by introducing figures into her oil paintings. "I'm not sure about them yet; it's very early days," the artist says. And, finally, for egg tempera, "I'm working on my garden drawings, with a view to creating a series of small works based on drawings of my garden bed," she concludes.

"Your garden will reveal yourself," Mitchell once noted; Fasht's ongoing explorations are a testament to her continued growth. **WA**

Tim Saunders (tasaunders.weebly.com) contributes to publications in Great Britain and the United States. He's publisher and editor of Contemporary Artist and hosts the In Conversation podcast.