

Third Place Winner **Leslie Montana**

A mindful process of observation, exploration and meditation formed the foundation of Leslie Montana's prizewinning painting.

BY CHRISTINE PROSKOW

Leslie Montana's stunning floral, *Peony Holy Fire, Phoenix Rising*, pervades the entire picture plane with lustrous color, exceptional vitality and dynamic movement. Presented is a veritable rhapsody of swirling, curling, luminescent petals that gyrate stirringly around the center's wildly-charged stamens. Beautifully designed, exquisitely detailed and flawlessly executed, the piece radiates with rapturous exuberance and fiery zeal.

"There's a lot of imagination in this painting," the Colorado-based artist points out. "The glowing, iridescent-like colors are a bit otherworldly." This otherworldliness and imagination can be found throughout all of Montana's florals—in works such as *Mandala Rose* and *Pink Rose Blossom* (page 19). The artist attributes her ability to produce such singular painting effects to her unique practice of 'art as meditation' approach, which she employed to create her award-winning piece. Above all, she values her meditation-oriented approach as a means to explore and experience "nature, reality and creativity, and their role in everyday life," she says. "These flowers capture my attention, bringing me into their world of vast and inexhaustible beauty."

Juror Jean Haines' enthusiasm for the painting was evident. "The light in this watercolor is stunningly captured in a way that almost detracts from the subject, due to its beauty," she remarked. "Every petal, every detail is perfectly painted. The intricacy of the center begs to be admired."

ATTENTION PLUS INTENTION

With its infusion of high-keyed light and a soul-stirring title, *Peony Holy Fire, Phoenix Rising* seems to elicit limitless, transcendent potentials—yet certainly other meanings are possible. Montana created the piece using her meditation-oriented approach, which is a methodology she's used and taught for several decades. "It's where the practical, the magical and the fun meet," she says. "Meditation and states of consciousness are central in my work. A powerfully grounded attention allows for the flow of creative energy. Attention plus intention. It's a process of letting go and allowing nature to come through, which reorganizes my interior self."

Observation, exploration, imagination and meditation—in conjunction with her photographic reference, used as a point-of-departure—are fundamental to Montana's methodology. Imagination also plays a big role, but her definition is somewhat unorthodox. "For me, imagination is the meeting of the mind with greater reality," she says. "This isn't a willful process, but one that receives and respects the intelligence of Mother Nature as I allow my gaze to penetrate a deeper level of the flower."



Leslie Montana (lesliemontana.com), a native of Brooklyn, New York, always knew she would become an artist. Her series, "Exquisite Paintings on the Nature of Flowers," which she began more than 20 years ago and is now in its second phase, was founded on her art-as-meditation approach. Having worked in oil for many years, she now paints exclusively in watercolor, capturing the beauty of her floral close-ups with the natural luminous qualities of the medium. She attended High School of Art and Design in New York City, took extracurricular classes at the Art Students League of New York and, subsequently, earned her BFA from Parsons School of Design, in New York City.



PEONY HOLY FIRE, PHOENIX RISING
(watercolor on cold-pressed paper, 19x19½)



YELLOW ROSE SUPERNOVA
(watercolor on hot-pressed paper, 30x22)



PINK ROSE BLOSSOM
(watercolor on hot-pressed paper, 18x19)



PURPLE IRIS, SPIRIT RUSHING
(watercolor on cold-pressed paper, 22x18)



MANDALA ROSE
(watercolor on cold-pressed paper, 16x17)

The initial inspiration for *Peony Holy Fire, Phoenix Rising*—like any of Montana’s paintings—began with a connection to the flower’s energy. “It’s a multidimensional pull-and-push for me as inspiration comes through on different levels. It’s exciting and enlivening,” she says. At the height of the pandemic, however, the energy surged especially strongly—and even increased later as she painted. “I had to brace myself and get ready,” she says. Next, looking through her library of flower photos, she found her match in the peony. “It was calling to me quite loudly,” says the artist.

PROCESS OF REVELATION

A new work starts with a detailed line drawing. Then, the artist builds multiple watercolor layers, applying thousands of delicate brushstrokes over time. “That juncture where the paintbrush touches the paper is a magical, liminal space where the dream becomes real,” she says. “It becomes a physical creation with its roots clearly still visible in an imagined world.”

A larger painting can take from 3 to 6 months to complete, though Montana works on several paintings at once. “I work in all areas of the painting, starting in one general spot and radiating out from there,” she says, “but I never focus on one thing at a time, nor do I try to ‘finish it.’ It’s not about finishing

the painting. That would be counter to my process and how things develop.”

Experienced in oil painting (though no longer working in the medium), she’ll selectively use watercolor in an oil-like manner. For instance, to get a glow, she adds more gum arabic. To create depth, she can use her modified egg tempera technique with egg yolk. Montana loves watercolor for its fluidity, freedom and transparency, and feels it’s a superlative medium for her florals.

Throughout her painting process, of course, the artist maintains her meditation-centered connection with the flower, while utilizing her reference. “I’m not trying to get an accurate depiction,” she says. “This is an exploration; I’m looking at the movement. I’m very lightly looking, touching upon that reference material.”

As Montana develops a painting, she says its energy begins to reveal more of itself to her. The inspiration for her award-winning piece arrived during the pandemic, and its energy grew increasingly stronger. “Early on, I heard the words ‘Holy Fire,’ and, later, ‘Phoenix Rising.’ It was fitting. Flowers by their very nature transmute negative energies, and this peony was working with me. Its invisible fire-like qualities translated into the colors you see in the painting. This watercolor embodies the energy of a powerful purifying spiritual fire.”

VISUAL PRAYERS

With each flower painting, Montana experiences a similar process: She receives what the flower reveals and then distills this energy into a visual expression. She uses the term “visual prayer,” or alternatively “prayers-in-physical-form,” to describe her floral watercolors. Her painting, *Purple Iris, Spirit Rushing* (above), for instance, of a deep purple bearded iris, is imbued with themes of faith in action and trust in the unseen. Montana doesn’t expect everyone to gravitate to her work. However, she’s noticed that more and more individuals are visiting her website, watching her painting videos on YouTube and signing up for her online workshops to learn more about making art as a practical form of meditation.

Since her earliest days growing up in Brooklyn, and cherishing spending time in her grandfather’s beautiful garden, Montana has held close to the beauty and wonder of nature and flowers. And she’s brought together her passions for flora, painting and meditation. “My entire being is touched as I paint, conceive new ideas, learn and discover more about the nature of reality,” says the artist. “There’s a tremendous amount of wisdom, learning and healing in flowers. They’re a gateway for true understanding.”

Christine Proskow is a California-based freelance writer and editor.