

Compass

Art: Leon Graham

In the Midst of Life . . . The Effects of Dying

August Flowers, the stunning new show at James Barron Art in Kent, CT, is about the beauty and power of flowers both as subjects and inspirations for artists. The earliest work was made in 1957 by Jan Muller; the most recent, this year, by Duncan Hannah and Vera Illiatova.

The Muller is typical of what Barron looks for. Muller was a German who finally escaped Nazi Europe in 1941, studied with Hans Hoffman in New York City and died at just 36. While he was known for his abstract figurative painting, he also made gorgeous non-figurative pictures like “Communal Flowers,” a small work of double-sided wax crayon and colored pencil on paper-board. Five blossoms, probably carnations, are painted like round holiday ornaments on long stems no longer standing tall but bending from a glowing blue vase in their slow process of dying.

So are Robert Kulicke’s daisies and roses in oil on wood about to go past, hugging each other in a glass jar. The light and texture are luscious. The seven, beyond-their-peak carnations emerging from an ordinary, small-mouthed tall jar in Wolfgang Tillmans’ masterful photograph are subdued against a hazy, out-of-focus background of pastels.

Andy Warhol used to make screen prints of poinsettias, in both red and black, and give them as Christmas presents. Barron has an example of each color. He also shows two of Warhol’s “Flower, 1970,” four

large, five-petaled flowers, each a different color, against a tangle of grass. Typical and expensive.

Among the truly unusual pieces in the show is Richard Diebenkorn’s “Untitled, 1980,” a departure from the almost 135 abstract, semi-color field paintings in the Ocean Park series that made him famous. Here Barron has found a strange, obviously Matisse influenced — seeing Matisse’s paintings in the U.S.S.R. in 1965 had changed Diebenkorn’s style forever — gouache and charcoal on paper. The image might well have come from Matisse’s incomparable chapel at Vence, France. An abstracted cross stretches out charcoaled arms above the skinny, red vertical stipes. It well could be a greatly abstracted flower.

Sally Mann is famous for her large black-and-white photographs of people and decaying landscapes, and infamous, in some circles, for a stunning book of 65 photos of her three children nude. While Pat Robertson denounced the pictures, critics hailed them as among the most beautiful and natural ever made of children. In Kent Barron is showing what he considers Mann’s finest picture: two wilted and dying night blooming cereus blossoms — the plant blooms only once a year, at night, and the flowers begin to die at dawn — hang around a child’s neck. We don’t see the full face or body, yet we know the person is young and may die young, too, like the flower.

Death is on display also in three photographs by Peter



“Daffodils and Pear Tree,” Fairfield Porter; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, NYC

Hujar, one of Warhol’s “Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys,” who became a fine black-and-white photographer of life and death.

“Lilies from Ray Martin (Still Life: Flowers) is deeply sad and haunting, a rebuttal of the sensual, erotic flowers photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe. A mass of near-dead small lily blossoms hang on to long stems in a clear glass, beaker-like vase. The lighting is subtle and gray. Two of Hujar’s friends, Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis, Warhol denizens, are shown in their coffins with straightforward directness and sympathy.

The riches of this show are total. A Cy Twombly hangs near

an amazing Fairfield Porter; two Ray Johnson collages memorialize the great box collagist Joseph Cornell.

Two Alex Katz oils of flat, pink flowers on green backgrounds remind of that old Franciscan Ware pattern, Desert Rose.

Donald Sultan’s picture made of flocked enamel and spackle on tile will steal your eye from everything around it.

And Dawn Clements’ delicate watercolor of dying tulips says everything possible about the effects of time.

August Flowers continues at James Barron Art at least through mid September.