



In Bloom

Donna Phipps Stout turns everyday flowers and plants into exquisite still lifes

By Gussie Fauntleroy

What happens when a landscape painter finds herself irresistibly drawn to the landscape's hidden parts? When she longs to zoom in on the lovely microcosm of tangled stems and blossoming wildflowers in countless shapes and colors, whose fascinating details are swallowed by the broader scene?

For a while, broad scenes of lush fields and meadows were enough for Donna Phipps Stout. For several years after earning a master's degree in fine art, the Kentucky-bred artist was happy spending time in grassy pastures, creating idyllic landscape paintings that often included Holstein cattle. Sometimes she placed a cow near the front of the picture plane, indulging her love of abstraction by focusing on the patterns of the animal's coat. But at some point-in about 1986-she realized none of this was enough.

I did landscapes because I just enjoyed the experience of being in nature. Yet what I discovered was that there were so many things out there that began to be problematic-the small, delicate things. I wanted to paint them, but I couldn't find a way to include them, given the need to generalize into masses of color in space when painting landscape, Stout recounts, her deep Southern roots and thoughtful manner revealed in a rich, quiet voice. I looked at 17th-century Dutch landscape drawings with flora up close in the foreground, and I tried doing that, but it was frustrating.

So she began bringing meadow flowers and roadside plants back home, to her studio. There she could observe them as closely as she liked. She could change and control the light. She could discover-and then paint-exquisite details and jewel-like colors from a blossoming world that offered up new varieties with each warm-weather month. Within a year she had relinquished the landscape in favor of these smaller components placed in vases and jars, arranged among each other and set against colorful folds of cloth.



All Year 'Round, 2005, Oil on Board, 36 x 48 inches

Stout's approach to still-life painting reflects her passionate interest in the formal elements of classical art, regardless of genre. She continues a personal study of work by masters throughout art history, always paying attention to what attracts her, what works well, and how it was achieved. These gleanings become absorbed and integrated into her own distinct style through unending exploration of the medium.

I even look at 16th-century painter Hieronymus Bosch, not for the popular reason of his early surrealism, but for his delicacy of touch and his edginess, Stout explains. And Goya. His still-life paintings look deceptively simple yet are so highly structured. I had the pleasure once of painting at the Prado Museum in Madrid from a Goya painting of a pile of dead chickens in the still-life tradition of 'bounty'-and I was astonished at both the directness of touch and the geometric complexity. To me that's just magical. It excites me so much to see that sort of work.

Stout has been excited by art, and by the world of plants, for as long as she can remember. Growing up in small Kentucky towns, there always seemed to be woods or fields nearby-as she puts it, *Places to be discovered all the time*. She recalls as a toddler being overwhelmed by the bright yellow of a meadow of wildflowers that towered almost as tall as her head. That image, indelibly impressed in her memory, is matched by one of being in first grade and pressing down with Crayolas as hard as she could-to bring out the boldest color possible. Stout's parents, both teachers, actively encouraged her love of drawing and painting, providing her with her first set of oil paints at an early age.



Single Peonies, 2002, Oil on Board, 24 x 30 inches

Stout's formal art education included summer study at the Maryland Art Institute in Baltimore, a degree in drawing and painting from Georgetown College in Georgetown, KY, and a master's degree in fine arts from Indiana University. More than 30 years of painting, along with constant experimentation and an irrepressible desire to further hone her skills, have brought international recognition of her work, including

participation in more than 60 solo and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Stout also has been honored with fellowships from the Arkansas Arts Council and the Mid-America Arts Alliance/National Endowment for the Arts.

Yet each painting she begins is a fresh challenge, at the core of which is a perpetual quest for clarity and luminescence. And the origin of these qualities, Stout believes, is color and light. *In the beginning stages of a painting, I try to find the atmospheric color in which the objects will exist, or even discover a very small area of the painting where the colors together finally 'glow' and suggest that unmistakable look of a new reality apart from the actual objects.* Once this glow and sense of presence is established, the artist incorporates the gracefulness of stems, shadows, and shapes to create a composition that is fluid yet strong.

Vibrant with energy and life, these arrangements are like ensemble theater, where no one character takes center stage, but where even the thinnest and most humble stalk has a presence and a role within the whole. Stout also steps away from the still-life tradition of symbolism and metaphor, in which fallen petals speak of human mortality and fine china suggests a refinement of culture. Instead she chooses



August Memory, 2005, Oil on Board, 16 x 20 inches

plain glass vases and bowls filled with flowers and plants that anyone could pick from the side of the road. *When you look at the work, it's not an image of wealth, not of things that represent status. It reflects the everyday living that most of us do, she suggests. The plants are common but become remarkable once you start painting them.*

The peculiar part about it is that when I occasionally buy spectacular flowers, such as calla lilies, they become ostentatious and vie for control of the painting. It's difficult to integrate them, she adds, laughing. But store-bought flowers are only necessary during the relatively short winters of northwestern Arkansas, where Stout settled in 1980 with her husband, Ken Stout, also a painter. When wildflower season is quiet she turns to fruits, vegetables, and the flower shop for tiny roses and small carnations. The rest of the year is an endless parade of blossoms from her hilly, rocky, tree-shaded property, or from roadsides, meadows, and fields.

The real pleasure is from things of everyday experience. The flowers mark the time of the year. You have that small window of time to work with different ones, and it's always a pleasure when they come. The narcissus season just ended, for example. The japonica is in full bloom and starting to shatter. Virginia bluebells, bridal wreath, pear trees are in full bloom, redbuds are

coming out, and the tulips are just coming out, she observes. Even Monet, who designed his garden for continuous bloom, experienced an inevitable, annual break when nothing was in flower. That happens here too. The iris and wild columbine will bloom and then there's a break, a wait period before the summer blossoms begin.

There's an excitement about seeing the flowers, smelling them, having all the senses heightened, she continues. They're always changing in front of your eyes, because you're engaged with something living. So you have to always be observing. You can't make the assumption that it's the same from day to day, and that provides an emotional dialogue.



Spring Red and White, 2004, Oil on Board, 12 x 12 inches

Stout considers rigorous observation both the responsibility and the joy of being an artist. Since bringing the first wildflower to her studio almost 20 years ago, she relishes the fact that painting gives her *permission to look, intently and intensely, and then to come up with a heightened sense of reality through the painting*. This translation into visual form involves the desire to share, as precisely and powerfully as possible, the visceral impact of her own experience. For that to happen the final image must transcend, in beauty and harmony, the actual scene from which it was painted, she believes.

I want the viewer to have a strong response, and I have to have that first. If my response to a painting is that it's 'OK' or 'all right'-that's not OK. It must be extreme, and to do that, all the parts have to come together and work together, she emphasizes.

Bringing together the glorious profusion of Southern plant life with the exacting challenge of artistic expression is an ongoing delight for Stout. Then there's the whimsy of the plant names themselves-like discovering that nigella, for example, is nicknamed both Devil-in-the-Hedge and Love-in-the-Mist. *The old names are poetic and fun, and sometimes biblical*, she points out. *And that pleasure is layered with the fact that you can set all that aside and just enjoy the play of colors and forms*.