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Flower Power

by Michael O'Sullivan, March 26, 1999

OUR WEATHER has been so schizoid of late, it's enough to make Punxsutawney Phil's head spin.

Recently, like a horticultural Judge Judy, Mother Nature has stepped in to settle the seasonal debate, as all around us the first tulips and daffodils are beginning to shoulder their way upward through the softening soil.

Likewise, in the art world, spring has sprouted in the form of flower paintings: "From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art" is already in full bloom at the National Gallery of Art, while Manon Cleary's "Flowers" and Roberto Azank's floral "Still Lives" opened their blossoms earlier this month at Addison/Ripley Georgetown.

As the 61 Dutch and Flemish images from the 16th and 17th centuries at the National Gallery demonstrate, "say it with flowers" can mean different things to different artists: from the clinical studies of gardeners' "pet" flowers compiled in florilegia (the botanical equivalent of scrapbooks); to metaphors for mortality (Jan van Kessel the Elder's skull-haunted "Vanitas Still Life"); to the sublime indulgence of Jan van Huysum's riotous "Still Life with Fruit."

A rose is a rose is a rose, but in art it often symbolizes man's futile attempt to fix the ephemeral, to make the impermanent permanent, if only in the mind's eye. That yearning -- tempered with an awareness of life's brevity -- infuses these pretty pictures with a subtle sadness.

At Addison/Ripley Georgetown, Azank and Cleary reveal other polarities. Set against theatrically minimalist backdrops -- often a single blossom in a bud vase on a table top -- Azank's cold subjects are almost more architectural ornaments than living things.

Cleary pushes the other extreme. Her lush photographic realism -- close-ups of a torn leaf here, a trembling stamen there -- lends a sensuousness to her canvases that transforms petal into flesh.

The D.C. painter, recently honored with a Mayor's Art Award for Excellence in an Artistic Discipline, explains part of her inspiration. "In the early '60s as a college student, I remember a film on the sex life of orchids, filmed in slow motion over several days and then shown rapidly," says Cleary. "It was one of the sexiest films I had ever seen."

"Flowers" and "Still Lives," through April 24 at Addison/Ripley Georgetown, 1670 Wisconsin Ave. NW. 202/333-3335. Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11 to 6.

"From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art," through May 31 at the National Gallery of Art, Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue NW (Metro: Archives/Naval Memorial). 202/737-4215. Open 10 to 5 Monday through Saturday, Sunday from 11 to 6. Free admission. Web site: www.nga.gov.