

Santa Barbara News Press

February 26, 2011

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"Gone" is the provocative but apt title for the exhibition of Penelope Gottlieb's paintings that begins today and continues through April 23 in the Pavilion at Ganna Walska Lotusland in Montecito.

"Each of the 25 botanical paintings is a visual eulogy for lost plant life because all of the plants I have depicted are extinct," said Ms. Gottlieb, a local artist who earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Art Center College for Design in Pasadena and a master of fine arts from UCSB.

A lover of nature, Ms. Gottlieb said she became "alarmed after reading that so many plants were becoming extinct."

Her concern increased after she discovered, through further research, that, according to botanists, "we are in the sixth extinction phase caused by the human species -- things like loss of habitat, climate change and invasive species. Other extinctions were caused by natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions or meteors falling to earth."

Ms. Gottlieb was eager to learn more but could find little information when she began her quest in 2000.

Dieter Wilken at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden was helpful. He manages the garden's conservation program, which focuses on rare plants of California's Central Coast region.

"I also contacted experts at Harvard University and the Smithsonian

Institution. My husband and I went to Berlin for a vacation, and I talked to experts there, too," said Ms. Gottlieb, who is married to Andy Gottlieb, a television producer for the Hallmark Hall of Fame series. The couple have lived in Santa Barbara for 13 years.

When the artist learned that all the botanists she interviewed agreed that in the next 100 years, 50 percent of all plants would become extinct, she decided her mission would be to paint the extinct species for posterity.

"It has become my life's work, because every year the list grows," said Ms. Gottlieb during an interview on a recent rainy afternoon at Lotusland.

She was confronted with one major problem when she attempted her project — many of the plants were never photographed or drawn.

"I had to rely on botanists' descriptions of them. I had to translate words into paintings. In the past, artists would pick a plant, take it to their studio and paint it. I could never do that," said Ms. Gottlieb, who soon realized that creating traditional botanical paintings wouldn't work either.

"They were calm, peaceful and pretty. I needed to invent a new way of painting nature. I wanted them to be active, explosive, command attention. I wanted to paint big, bold, in-your-face botanicals that shout out, 'Look at me!' "

And indeed the ones in this exhibit do with their brilliant colors and massive size. Some are more than 6 feet high and 5 feet wide.

"I saturated them with colors -- reds, yellows, burnt orange, which I love, vivid blues. I can't think of any color I haven't used," she said, adding that each painting has at least one extinct plant in it along with other flora.

Six of the smaller ones are framed prints of birds by the famous artist John James Audubon; Ms. Gottlieb has painted invasive plants around and over them so the birds are barely visible.

One large painting in shades of red with white has the botanist's field notes in black winding in a spiral throughout the plants.

"All of the pieces are done in oil, acrylic and ink or a combination of the three," Ms. Gottlieb said.

In the past, she has worked on other artwork of personal interest, including one series of drawings titled "Trans-Ethnic," which explored images from the films of early and mid-century Hollywood in which white actresses were cast in non-white roles.

Another drawing series, titled "No Money Down," looked at "wish fulfillment through real estate and how it takes on a darker turn with the recent subprime mortgage crisis," she said, adding, "I think that 'Gone' is the most

current and personally important series to date. I feel I will continue the subject of extinction through my paintings indefinitely. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem that I will run out of subject matter!"

Except for three, which are on loan from private collectors, the paintings are for sale, with prices ranging from \$1,500 to \$20,000. A portion of the proceeds will benefit Lotusland.

"I'm honored that this exhibit is the first of its kind at Lotusland because its collection includes many endangered plants -- even some that are extinct in the wild -- so the setting is appropriate," said Ms. Gottlieb, adding that she was invited to display her work by Gwen Stauffer, executive director at Lotusland.

Ms. Stauffer saw Ms. Gottlieb's paintings at an open studio tour sponsored by The Arts Fund last summer. During a conversation about extinct plants, she said the artist's mission was in keeping with the work done at Lotusland and invited Ms. Gottlieb to prepare an exhibit, not only the first for Lotusland but also the first in the Pavilion, which is next to the main house.

"Lotusland is a world-renowned repository for globally rare plants, including some species that are now extinct in the wild. We use our collections to help conserve plant species that are rare in their habitats," said Ms. Stauffer. "We hope that 'Gone' will provoke an emotional response that prompts an awareness of the current crisis of species extinction and instigates open discussions about the impact of species loss and the need for the conservation of plants and their habitats.