

Peter Gerakaris

Post-Pop Botanic Tondos

—Duncan Del Alderson

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Spring, 2009. A thicket of MFA thesis shows. One artist at Hunter College catches my eye. Peter Gerakaris. Circular paintings that set the mind spinning with brilliant colors and fantastic forms. Op mixes with Pop. Poison mixes with perfume. Surreal dreams are here painted with academic perfection. Even the titles intrigue: "Polinator and Muse," "Toxiganic Garden," and a contraction of Portal and Vortex that comes out as "Portex."

Here is a bumblebee, there a black toxic flower that, upon closer examination, morphs into Anita Ekberg rising from the fountain in Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita*. I had to find out more about the artist who created these contemporary kaleidoscopes . . . just who was Peter Gerakaris?

A "free-range" child born in 1981 in rural New Hampshire to 'back to the land' parents—his father a Dartmouth educated artist- blacksmith forging sculptural and architectural flowing metalwork. A mother who patiently gardens and teaches. A childhood spent in the woods surrounded by seductive, toxic plants. Nettles and nightshades. Milkweed and Angels' Trumpets. Plants he would later paint to capture their mix of beauty and danger.

An allergy to bees. The great pollinators. The makers of honey. With a sting that can kill.

The soundtrack to this idyllic yet precarious life is jazz, the moody blues, a collection of vinyl flashing psychedelic art on its covers, inspiring a nighttime of dreams. This was Peter's magical theatre of the mind: Fellini films, the blacksmith's forge, a mother's garden, Nova nature shows on public television, trips to Giverny in France.

The child is raised. The artist's hand is trained. A BFA from Cornell's College of Architecture, Art and Planning. The study of "paint science" in Rome with William Stanley Taft. Frescoes. Baroque flower paintings. Techniques from the French Academy. An exploration of color with Sandy Wurmfeld. Its science and psychology. The retina expands.

MFA studies at Hunter College in the center of the city. The whole art world wheeling around him. Peter stakes out his studio in the "shanty town" of student cubicles. The work begins. An Asian aesthetic is formed.

Myriad influences come into play. Tanka paintings from Tibet, ikons painted on cloth that encompass the kala-chakra mandala, the wheel of life. The whole macrocosm in a circular format. A gift from the Buddha.

The Southern Song school of Chinese painting, from 1121 to 1279 A. D., focusing on smaller scenes visually closer than the sweeping landscapes of the Northern Song period. The compression of space. A landscape of the mind.

The principles of Chinese painting from the Fifth Century A. D. Especially the concept of "spirit resonance," or vitality. The energy of a work of art. Without "spirit resonance," a work is not worth looking at.

Japanese woodblock prints, especially the Utagawa School from 1770 to 1900 A. D. "Pictures of the Floating World." Scenes of urban life and leisure in Kyoto and Tokyo. The kabuki actors, the samurai warriors. Colorful, technically innovative, the pop culture of the day. Peter imbibes the flatness of their picture planes, the textures and colors. Tries his hand at print-making. "I'm attracted to the centered, harmonious sensibility in Asian artwork," Peter says. "I think it's quite sophisticated."

Pop artist James Rosenquist with his sweeping canvases and sign-painter's technique. From Pop artists, Peter learns to appropriate the images of popular culture and film, layering them with his love of gardening, thus creating his own unique genre: Post-Pop Botanic.

Mix this with album covers from Peter's parent's collection of vintage vinyl circa the same decade. A heady blend of Beardsley, Neo Nouveau, Op Art and psychedelic Magic Realism. Unheralded artists such as Mati Klarwein and Victor Moscoso, with their visionary brushwork and surreal subjects.

Klarwein has been called "the most famous unknown artist" of the Twentieth Century because most baby boomers remember his painting *Annuciation* (1961), that was used on the cover of Santana's celebrated album *Abraxas*. The "black magic woman" featured there has entered the popular imagination of many music lovers over the last forty years.

Moscoso designed many of the psychedelic posters advertising the new acid rock bands in San Francisco circa 1967. A disciple of Josef Albers and his color theories, Moscoso was also influenced by the curling designs of Art Nouveau and the visual pyrotechnics of Perceptual Abstraction or Op Art, a popular movement in the same period.

Under the sway of these artists, but armed with his own talent, Peter does a stint designing for Milton Glaser Inc., another survivor of the '60's.

Peter begins his cycle of tondo, or circular, paintings. Commissions come along with awards. His work is featured in many group shows from New York to California, from Beijing to London. Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts honors him with a solo show in Chelsea in 2007. His work is acquired by such esteemed collectors as Beth Rudin de Woody and Citibank of New York. Prices climb: works on paper go for around \$1,500.00, the large paintings between \$7,000.00 and \$15,000.00. His accordion fold-out Dream Diaries are snapped up by collectors. Peter is able to support himself with his painting.

Working in a variety of media, from ink to oil, Peter creates a wide range of exuberant pieces. Works on paper can be modest in size, whereas some of the more spectacular tondos measure eight feet in diameter. He likes the circular format because it helps "to reduce visual hierarchy, offering a lens-like perspective into a meticulously detailed 'graphic-botanical' cosmos." However, he's equally at ease in a rectangular format, as seen in his masterful gouache and ink paintings on paper. His work has a decided ecological slant, his depiction of honey bees and hives timely in light of their diminishing numbers. Only one symptom of how detached we are from nature in modern society. Peter's paintings are refreshing reminders of our natural roots.

How does the artist describe his own work? In an interview last year with Brian Sherwin of Art Space, Peter said: "Technically and conceptually, I admire many types of painting, but personally gravitate toward making crisp pictures with a seductive surface. I realized a while ago that I have a steady hand and a detail-oriented sensibility, so I allow myself to get swept away in the process. My aesthetic relies on the human touch, so everything's done by hand from the linear minutia to

the 'sprayed' effects. I like how oil paint is infinitely malleable and can also quote other paint-based media. Ultimately, I strive to make artwork that has intensity."

The intensity certainly comes through in a recent canvas from his Pollinator series, *Pollinator(s) and Muse II* of 2008. This entrancing tondo measures five feet in diameter and is executed in oil and gold paint on an acrylic ground and canvas. Here is a virtual roadmap of Gerakaris geography: the honeybees forming a mandala in the middle, circling like skydivers in free fall before a glowing nimbus of golden light. Lush blue morning glories form a dark border around them and, behind, the muse rises: Anita Ekberg's ghostly form emerges eternally out of the Trevi fountain both top and bottom, destroying the visual hierarchy of the piece.

One can enter this painting from any angle, a cosmoslogy orbiting with glowing circles and golden triangles right out of Op Art. Lines, honeycombs and dots spread over surfaces and tend to flatten dimensional effects, turning the work into what Peter calls "an optical and conceptual construction." The phallic shapes of the bees hovering over the voluptuous breasts of Ekberg bring out the erotic undertone of the title "Pollinators." On the other hand, the dark flowers and broken wings remind us of our tenuous relationship with nature, the urgent need to heal the earth.

Peter Gerakaris is a highly collectible emerging artist. His work is ravishing to the eye, painted with a masterly hand and fascinating to study. Viewers have described it as having "a radiant, timeless energy," "a profound genius." "He is one of those artists that reminds me that painting lives and breathes still." In this age of often-vapid video installations, Peter Gerakaris' Post-Pop Botanic Tondos stand out as rare achievements in a complicated mix of post-modern experiments.

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