

The Language of Flowers

Reyes Finn

Curated by Phillip March Jones

February 19 – April 16, 2021

So begins the preface to Madame Charlotte de Latour's* *Le Langage des Fleurs*, a volume dedicated to floral symbolism, published in Paris circa 1819. Organized by seasons that are further divided into months, de Latour's volume attempted to make plain the hidden meanings of flowers, formerly the purview of artists, writers, and poets. De Latour hired Pancrace Bessa, a student of Pierre-Joseph Redouté, to illustrate the book, pairing his engravings with descriptions of each plant's allegorical meaning. The effect is satisfying as the author provides simple definitions for concepts that are both culturally specific and personal—and constantly evolving. Taking inspiration from the book, *The Language of Flowers* at Reyes Finn gathers together floral-themed works by Hayley Barker, Thornton Dial, Kevin Ford, Mike Goodlett, Lonnie Holley, Claudia Keep, Charles Steffen, Emily Ludwig Shaffer, and Aaron Michael Skolnick, presented alongside wall text derived from Latour's original dictionary of floral language.

The nine artists featured in this exhibition have a deep relationship to the subject of flowers. Indeed, when the collector and scholar Bill Arnett arrived at Thornton Dial's studio in 1987, a single flower was painted on the door, a symbol of the room as a place where creativity and ideas were free to exist without judgement. It is in this spirit that we have invited the participating artists to create works specifically for the exhibition which includes multiple renderings of roses in various states of being by Claudia Keep, oil-based snapshots of plant life emerging from Houston's sidewalks by Aaron Michael Skolnick, and somewhat formal plant portraits by Kevin Ford. Using plants and flowers as tools, Lonnie Holley has created spray-painted bouquets while Mike Goodlett has grown his own version of floral statuary in concrete and Hydrostone. Emily Ludwig Shaffer and Hayley Barker have painted variations of the rose that both affirm and question their conventional beauty. The exhibition also looks back at the artist Charles Steffen's obsession with Sunflower Nudes, anthropomorphic drawings of his own creation featuring human-like plants based on Redon's paintings that he had seen during visits to the Art Institute of Chicago.

De Latour's definitions are occasionally conventional but mostly surprising to the modern reader. An open rose signifies beauty. A thistle evokes austerity. Peonies carry shame. Basil is tinged with hate but olive branches maintain peace. Cypress carries news of death. And the lotus flower retains her eloquence. At the time of publication, de Latour's book represented a roadmap to navigating around strict Victorian-era etiquette by providing agreed-upon definitions for the meaning of flowers that were given to communicate emotions that could not be expressed freely in words. Today, we are, of course, openly encouraged to communicate our feelings, perhaps to a fault, but the need for subtle communication still

exists, and artists may be the ones again laying claim to the allegorical, metaphorical, and spiritual nature of flowers.

*Charlotte de Latour is believed to be the *non de plume* of Louise Cortambert.