

Art scene blooms continuously at Denver Botanic Gardens

Artists' exhibits include María and Jacobo Ángeles, Alexandra Kehayoglou

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The art scene continues to grow indoors and out at Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) as the institution cultivates its reputation as one of Colorado's finest exhibition venues. As if thousands of blooming tulips, a small forest of blossoming crab apple trees and scores of fragrant peonies unfurling fragrant flowers weren't enough to lure visitors to the York Street location, DBG installs art throughout the gardens and in a trio of newish indoor galleries. DBG shows have spotlighted heavy hitters such as Alexander Calder, Henry Moore and Salvador Dali.

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Throughout the gardens, "Spirit Guides" dazzles with densely patterned, nearly fluorescent colors traditionally crafted from plants and traditionally derived from plants and animals such as indigo, pomegranate and cochineal beetles. The site-specific sculptures drew inspiration from the high desert gardens, said Jacobo Ángeles in an email interview with the artists.

“The spirit guides were especially inspired by the nature of the botanic garden, the colors, trees, bark and soils of Colorado,” he said. “The decision-making for these fantastic animals was to be attractive to the Denver audience, for example the coyote with a fish tail, which represents in Zapotec culture visual power and respect.”

María Ángeles added: “We noticed what type of visitors attend the garden, and we realized that many children attend. The monkey is a very friendly animal with children, and that's where we started from to choose the animals.”

For María, the compelling sculptures lead visitors to a deeper appreciation of the plant and animal kingdoms.

“They are special and important because as humans they bring us closer to nature and the place where we come from and above all respect for animals,” she said.

The couple works with a team to create the acrylic-painted sculptures, yet they continue hands-on involvement in the process.

“For the Zapotecs and those who know which is their protector animal they serve us to make a link between the earthly and spiritual and to keep our culture present in the rest of life. They are guides for good living,” Jocoba said.



For Alexandra Kehayoglou, good living insists upon good stewardship of the natural environment. The artist divides her time between Greece and Argentina, where she was born near the Paraná de las Palmas River estuary. The wetlands of her homeland inspired her extraordinary exhibit titled “River’s Voice.” Kehayoglou’s lush,

textural, hand-tufted wool carpets lend a visual voice to advocacy of river and wetlands conservation.

“These rivers’ currents are so powerful, the speed and intensity. All the rivers are connected. All the waters are connected,” Kehayoglou said. “And even when they’re not connected, they’re connected down under the earth, even when we cannot see.”

Kehayoglou’s grandmother engaged in traditional weaving, and the family business of industrial carpet-making also influenced the artist’s sculptural textiles.

“It was my universe: Huge factories full of carpets and wool and my whole house was covered in carpet,” Kehayoglou said. “This got into my cells, I think, but I didn’t want to continue the industrial side of it.”

Instead, she studied art and found a way to weave her carpetmaker lineage into her oeuvre.

“When I started working, textiles had disappeared from the artistic scene, from homes, everywhere. I am happy textiles are strong again because the information carried in threads is powerful,” she said. “With carpets, I am creating not only a work of art, but a place.”

The place depicted in her large-scale topographical carpet at the center of the exhibit is the river and wetlands near her birthplace where she and her husband purchased land. The carpet provides an aerial view to scale, juxtaposing the natural wetlands and the developed wetlands. The artist invites guests to walk upon the work to gain a sense of the endangered landscape.

“The change of perspective, changing the scale, changing the way a spectator positions their body — that’s why I make interactive works,” Kehayoglou said. “The body gains information unconsciously.”

Children, in particular, delight in the interactive experience, but the artist noted that adults, too, become childlike when engaging with the work.

“My children were just running around on this,” she said, indicating her large carpet, her mini landscape. “The idea is to bring this message to our mind that is open to receive it, this connection we have with land and with the Earth. To awaken the inner child is beautiful for me,” she said. “I always like to think about children and indigenous communities. Indigenous never stopped connecting with land.”

Kehayoglou works closely with indigenous communities in South America.

“The land is there to use it, as well, it’s a relationship. It’s not ‘I am land. You don’t touch me.’ No. You give and she gives and it’s so enriching and powerful. This connection has to be repaired,” Kehayoglou said. “Land is not there to be transformed totally. It’s not about violence.”

Her artful carpets uncover a deeper story of the river and the violence thrust upon the wetlands. Kehayoglou explained that ecosystem contains millions of organisms, as well as medicinal plants and minerals. Once home to tigers hunted to extinction, the wetlands’ deer currently have been hunted nearly to extinction. The artist said that developers burn the grasses of the wetlands, contaminating the environment with smoke. Developers have replaced critical wetlands with tree nurseries, introducing an invasive species and applying glyphosate — a controversial herbicide. Additionally, large swaths of wetlands were developed for lavish housing.

Kehayoglou has faced censorship of and political opposition to her voicing concern for rivers and wetlands.

“It’s a mission. I was born with this. I have genetics of indigenous people, and I feel that calling,” she said. “It’s a calling I answer for rivers and communities.”

For the artist, her mission is both pragmatic and poetic; both public and personal.

“I think inside myself, the flowing of the blood, the rivers inside me. It’s running inside me,” she said.

“River Voices” also spotlights the artist’s series of thick, textural, wall-mounted carpets inspired by the wetlands and prayer rugs.

“I’m not religious,” Kehayoglou said. “I just pray to the land, for the land.”

Kehayoglou also has a work at Denver Art Museum (DAM) in the exhibit titled “Biophilia.”

Darrin Alfred, the DAM’s curator of architecture and design, wrote in an exhibit summary: “By re-creating ephemeral native landscapes, Kehayoglou manifests her family’s history and the concept of topophilia, ‘the affective bond between people and place or setting.’ Her work invites us to blur the boundaries between our homes and the natural world, urging us to treat the Earth with the same care and affection we reserve for our most cherished spaces.”