

THE DENVER POST

THINGS TO DO ARTS Review

Mysterious, hybrid animals lurk among the flora at Denver Botanic Gardens

The giant and colorful sculptures are part of the summer show, “Spirit Guides”



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PUBLISHED: June 3, 2024 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: June 3, 2024 at 11:25 a.m.



This summer’s special exhibition at the Denver Botanic Gardens, “Spirit Guides,” dutifully fulfills the primary mission of placing art objects in the city’s treasured urban oasis: It shakes up the routine.

The exhibit’s giant and colorful hybrid animal sculptures provide new vistas for garden regulars who have seen the tulips and water lilies a hundred times over and yearn for something fresh. Each of the works is a pleasant surprise to encounter.

They are also engaging and hyper-photogenic, perfect fodder for social media posts, which will allow this show to market itself to the public and accomplish every summer exhibition's secondary purpose: pumping up the number of paid visitors who pass through the garden's front gate.



DBG has a long record of using art that way during the high season, and it has over the past few decades brought work by global superstars, like Henry Moore and Alexander Calder, to Denver. Those were landmark moments in the city's visual art history. The garden set the bar high for itself in those days.

This exhibit is not that sort of attention-getter. I w it last week, just as the garden's brilliant beds of irises were blooming, and it was a treat — kids, especially, seemed to like it. But it is not a superstar moment. The artists who dreamed up the work, Jacobo and

María Ángeles, who live in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, are well-respected, though many garden visitors in Denver probably never heard of them.

The husband-and-wife creative team works in a region that is known for its wood-carving, and their workshop has a reputation for turning out highly-crafted objects that embrace folk art traditions. These works in this show are inspired by the Zapotec calendar, developed by the Mesoamerican civilization that flourished before the Spanish conquest of Latin America.

They are not made of wood, and they are not covered in paints derived from local plants and trees, as is a custom in Oaxaca. Rather, they are formed out of fiberglass and decorated with acrylic paint, a contemporary twist on old-school craft that makes the works durable in an outdoor setting like the botanic garden. Some folks will see that materials transformation as a necessary update; others may think it turns revered objects into elaborate lawn ornaments designed for mass consumption.

Art practices change over the ages, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

For viewers, they come across as puzzles to be solved. Each piece combines the characteristics of two separate animals into one new, imaginary creature.

Garden visitors, for example, are greeted by the work “Armadillo-Insect,” which adds to the long ears and pointy snout of an armadillo, a set of wings that might be found on a dragonfly or beetle.

There is also “Monkey-Iguana,” which has the head of a primate and the tail of the lizard that inhabits the tropical world. Or, there is “Rabbit-Deer,” a rather large bunny crowned with an impressive set of antlers.

There is some fun in figuring out where the qualities of one animal stop and the other begins. Also, there is an educational opportunity in the exhibition’s signage, which explains the significance of different colors and talks about the idea of how each person has a specific animal that serves as a guide throughout their life.

Just as intriguing are the colors and patterns that Jacobo and María Ángeles use to cover their animals. Brilliant oranges, blues, reds and yellows crash up against each other. Every creature is coated in a mix of intriguing lines and shapes that are applied with precision.



The objects may be based on real beings that live in the wild, but the final products have a distinct, human touch. These are not patterns that appear in nature; they are complex, intellectual codes that can only come from a human mind.

The pieces are also labor-intensive and made possible by the fact that Jacobo and María Ángeles operate an art factory in the town of San Martín Tilcajete, where they employ more than 100 workers. According to the garden, the workshop doubles as a school where artisans can hone their craft-making skills.

The pieces on display feel factory-made in that way. They are a bit perfect, a little polished. They have the look of traditional craft but the personality of something mass-produced. They are slick.

Still, it is an adventure to come across them at DBG, where it is always difficult to curate art that complements the wondrous flowers and trees and does not overwhelm them. These animals hide among the flora, waiting to be discovered and understood.

They do disrupt the usual garden visit, and they might be just enough to rattle the box office.