

3 Denver Botanic Gardens shows are transforming the ordinary

They're all impressive and each makes that special connection between nature and the human experience



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Denver Botanic Gardens sets a fine example for its cultural peers by including space for art shows at its main headquarters on York Street. It's one of the best things about a visit there.

Visitors can walk around the hanging sculpture and get a 360-degree view. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

In all, the facility has three indoor galleries, with a considerable 4,000 square feet of exhibition space between them, and the rooms are loaded with rotating displays by a global lineup of artists that add layers of both entertainment and understanding to a garden trip.

The artwork incorporates a human touch into a place dedicated mainly to the superpowers of nature, and invites visitors to see the surrounding flora on a more emotional and spiritual level. The art builds bridges between people and plants.



It would be easy to see similar efforts at the city's other major institutions accomplishing the same feat — shaking up the routines for repeat customers and offering them richer ways to think about science or animals or history. Surely, they have the resources, if not the wisdom.

The three shows at DBG right now show what this setup can accomplish when programmed thoughtfully. They are all impressive and each makes that special connection between nature and the human experience. They just do it differently.

The latest exhibition is just a single piece of art, Patrick Marold's show-stopping installation titled **"Shadow and Light."** It takes up the entire space in the garden's smallest gallery, an oval-shaped room in the Freyer Newman Center.

The site-specific piece conforms to the gallery — it's kind of an oval too, though a fat one, more in the shape of a whale's body, minus the head and fins. Marold has fashioned it out of dozens of steel rings, maybe an inch wide, lined up in a row. Each dangles from a rod that is itself suspended from the ceiling. Viewers can walk around the work, getting a 3-D view.

The outer sides of the rings have a matte finish and the interiors — lined with copper foil — are polished and shiny. Because of that, the two sides absorb and reflect light differently, and the piece gives off different "light and shadows" as viewers circle it.

The piece is also very sensitive to the amount of light in the room. As sunshine comes and goes through the surrounding windows, the work appears to change shape, and it casts off different — and exquisite — shadow patterns that fall below it on the gallery floor.



Elliot Ross's photos capture scenes from Utah's Glen Canyon, which have become visible due to the drought in the American West. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

"Shadow and Light" appears complicated but it is actually quite simple, just like Marold's better-known public art project, "Shadow Array," the massive work made from 236, full-size, beetle kill timbers that is installed along either side of the tracks at the Denver international Airport station of RTD's A-line train. Both projects aim to help viewers think about how physical perspective changes the way we see things.

There is no direct correlation between the artwork and the plants at the garden, but it indirectly helps us appreciate the way trees, leaves and flower petals take on different personalities depending on the time of day. The piece will be on display through Jan. 5.

The second exhibit has a more straightforward relationship. **"Geography of Hope"** is a collection of images taken by photographer Elliot Ross in Utah's Glen Canyon. Large areas of this canyon were long submerged in water but have recently been exposed due to the endless drought impacting the American West.

The photos show two interesting things. First, they give us a view of what was under all that water. Second, we see how nature has adjusted and now uses the area as a place for new plant life to

grow. Climate change has taken away one thing — an aquatic ecosystem that thrived for ages — but it has given us another. The exposed terrain is teeming with fresh life that shoots up from the dirt and rocks and breathes the same air that humans do.

Ross's shots are spectacular in the way they capture the natural shapes and colors of this land. He takes humble viewpoints — in some ways, the images look like snapshots an adventurous tourist might take while walking about the canyon.

But they are most impressive in the way they offer a new perspective on the fact that our planet is in a state of flux, and that is not always a bad thing. Climate change is devastating ... and yet, our world finds a way to survive and adapt. Environmental scientists call it rewilding, and these photos document it in action. The show runs through Feb. 2.



Visitors can take off their shoes and walk across this piece of textile art. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

The third exhibit, **“River’s Voice: Textiles by Alexandra Kehayoglou,”** has actually been on the walls at DBG since April and many garden visitors have already seen it. If not, it is worth a special trip before it closes on Dec. 8.

Kehayoglou makes rugs of various shapes and sizes, some for wall hanging, others for walking upon. She clips and sews and tufts her materials so that they resemble topographic maps of various parts of the world. They are abstract, but there is a clear representation of forests, rivers and hills.

The works are as much functional furniture as they are fine art. They feel like technical renderings of actual places but they also have a warm, hand-made aura.

The exhibit’s centerpiece is the largest work, which occupies the back half of the garden’s main gallery, running up one wall and spilling down onto the floor in front of it. It is sprawling and meant to capture a portion of a river valley in the artist’s native Argentina. One side shows virgin land and the other depicts how farming and industrialization have reduced large parts of the region to battered, over-developed terrain. It’s a soft piece with a hard edge.

The most interesting aspect is that visitors are allowed to walk right on top of it — shoes off, of course. It’s an effective gimmick that transforms an artwork that might feel distant and intimidating into a place to lounge, and reflect on both the good and bad things happening on our planet.

For more info on the exhibitions at DBG, go to botanicgardens.org.

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