

THE SOURCE AND SOUL FOR PROMOTING THE ARTS SINCE 1994

MARCH 2022 

THE ARTFUL MIND



MICHAEL LALLY

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BOBBY MILLER

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MARCH 2022

The cycle goes on, strong and steady,
welcoming Spring soon ahead

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Allison Green, *Malia's Garden* (2020), Oil on canvas, 72 x 132 inches

MALIA'S GARDEN

ART BY ALLISON GREEN

Text by Liz Lorenz

Allison Green is a master of capturing the botanical. She constructs lush and mystical universes in her canvases, which range from monumental multi-panel pieces to intimately scaled studies. Relying on both horticultural research and personal observations, Green renders flora and fauna with personal attention and technical precision. Yet, her works are not mere imitations of scientific diagrams of plant life, nor do they fall prey to the tropes and nostalgia of traditional landscape painting. Instead, they are portraits: Poppies, Stargazer Lilies, Orchids, Adam's Needle Yucca. Each depiction of an individual plant or an interconnected ecosystem contains a language, a narrative. Green's colorful, atmospheric environments are deeply influenced by events in the artist's own life. This enables her compositions to manifest broader truths about nature and humanity: qualities of interdependence and healing, cycles of regeneration and rebirth.

On a bitter winter afternoon, I approach a
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massive complex of industrial buildings in Jersey City—rust-hued bricks and worn metals set against a frosty blue sky. This stark urban setting is home to Mana Contemporary: an expansive arts center that houses visual and performing artists in its studio spaces, residency programs and exhibition galleries. All are artists of a premier caliber who apply for their spaces in this former factory via Mana's prestigious curatorial directives. The functional, almost harsh exterior of Mana's main building, which greets me immediately, disappears upon entering the studio space of Allison Green. The contrast between the feelings is significant. Inside Green's studio, radiant sunlight streams through the windows. The shadows are pronounced yet lyrical, casting attractive patterns on her works-in-progress and creating striations upon their golden and violet backgrounds. An array of tubes of oil paints are displayed on Green's workbench: all of the colors she needs to craft her immersive natural scenes. Verdant and flowering plants—which are used for both enjoyment and study—line her studio. Leaves

soften the tiled walls; red and pink buds filter the light that radiates through the standardized factory windows. Appearances change with the weather and the time of day, as if in a poetic dance. Already, Green's studio invites me into the garden that she activates to produce her story, her vision.

Similar to her expansive studio at Mana, Green is vibrant and warm. She welcomes me into her realm with a quality of care and insight that mirrors the energy within her most recent pastoral mise-en-scène: *Malia's Garden*. The work is a sprawling three-panel oil painting of orchids and birds set against an ethereal yellow background. It was conceived of as an homage to Green's young daughter Malia. Also, the piece encompasses the artist's long-term aesthetic and conceptual concentration on the botanical universe: its potential to flourish abundantly—one day, beautifully, even after the struggles.

The painting *Malia's Garden* is the anchor of Green's upcoming show at Susan Eley Fine Art, a contemporary art gallery in downtown

Hudson, New York. In preparation for Green's solo exhibition—the first showcase of her work at the Gallery's Hudson location—I had the opportunity to visit her studio and conduct this interview to learn more about her practice and latest paintings. On view from April 21 to June 5, 2022, the exhibition at SEFA Hudson is also entitled *Malia's Garden*, recognizing the preeminence of this piece—its inspirations and intentions. As visitors enter the Gallery, the traditional white cube space is transformed into a veritable garden. Shown together at SEFA, Green's newest works highlight the aesthetic wonders of her subjects while simultaneously transcending their earthly roots to elicit potent internal experiences.

Liz Lorenz: I sense that there is a strong connection between your new painting for this exhibition *Malia's Garden* and your previous work *The Night Garden*. Both are monumental, multi-panel paintings that create a true “garden” for Gallery viewers, as described in your own words. *The Night Garden* was the centerpiece of your most recent exhibition with Susan Eley Fine Art, which took place in our NYC Gallery in 2018. The paintings are equally sublime, yet there is a darkness to *The Night Garden*. It focuses on the blooming of flowers during the night, specifically the luminous white lilies—blossoming at a time when most people would not be able to observe their beauty. To me, this painting and the sentiment within it feel like a

sort of contrast to the radiant glow of *Malia's Garden*. This piece is golden, bright, exuberant; the purple orchids seem to dance triumphantly against the sunny background. For you, is there a connection or a relationship between these two paintings?

Allison Green: Yes, there is absolutely a connection between these two paintings. I see it as a progression. As you know, I do not shy away from the autobiographical elements of my work—while also, I do not like my work defined completely by my autobiography; there is a fine balance. To provide a degree of context, I made *The Night Garden* while I was experiencing challenges with my fertility. Eventually, I had accepted and made peace with the prospect of not becoming a biological mother. Suddenly, I received the news that I was able to adopt a baby girl—Malia. Thus, *Malia's Garden* is an exploration into light and lightness. For me, it is the overwhelming flourishing of life and nature. In conversation with *The Night Garden*—*Malia's Garden* is the “other side of the coin,” the opposite. Indeed, they are like two sides of a coin: finding light in the darkness, and then having found that light, being actively saturated by the joy and love that accompany it. So while they are both fully flowering gardens, these paintings are different—yet intimately connected.

LL: Thank you so much for sharing that personal context. Additionally, I would love to

further dive into the origins of the name “Malia.” I went on a bit of an entomology tangent earlier, and I have found that “Malia” is from Hawaiian origins. Its meaning is essentially peaceful, calm, beloved. Also, the sources I looked at have compared its pronunciation, or sound, to a “lyrical, breezy flower.” May I ask how you came upon the name Malia and decided on this name for your daughter? Did her name come first, or did the title of the painting come first?

AG: Her name came first, and I made the painting for her. In terms of the entomology of the name, when I researched it further after selecting it—Malia is indeed peaceful and calm, but it also carries the meanings of rebellious, brave, beloved and “wished for child.” The multiplicity of its connotations are very important to me since I have looked into its various origins. The magical part is that we can uncover these nuanced and complex meanings as time progresses in order to enrich our understanding. Especially at this current moment in my life, I want to focus on the duality of “Malia,” both the calm and the brave.

LL: Thinking of your response here—I would love to use *Malia's Garden* as the title for your upcoming show at SEFA Hudson. Conceptually, we are weaving in this difference between the night and the darkness, and what challenges *The Night Garden* embodies for you; versus what *Continued on next page...*



Allison Green, *The Night Garden* (2018), Oil on canvas, 72 x 144 inches



Allison Green, *Queen Anne's Lace* (2011), Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



Allison Green, *String Theory (Blue)* (2014), Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

Malia's Garden represents to you now based on your recent experiences: welcoming your daughter into your life and the associated celebratory, flourishing aspects. Also, there is the beautiful fact that you created an “epic garden” for us at the Gallery in New York City and next will create one for us in Hudson. What do you think of this proposal for *Malia's Garden* as the exhibition title?

AG: Wow, that’s awesome. I was actually just thinking about proposing *Malia's Garden* as the exhibition title to you before our conversation today. The piece is fundamental to my newest bodies of work, which also include the “Safe Haven” and the “Pollination” series. Often, I am working on more than one series at a time, which you can see in my studio. There is a mix of themes and a variety of essential “figures” or “characters” that I focus on at the same time—specific botanical groups and related species, or larger symbiotic ecosystems. Then, I move between the series as I am inspired by the plant life around me in my studio.

LL: Yes, I would be eager to learn more about the new “Pollination” series, which will also be featured in your exhibition at SEFA Hudson.

AG: I have been reading a lot about orchids and how resilient they are, and that is what drew me to making these plants the “main character” in this most recent work. Soon after, I became fascinated with the interactions between flowers: how do they reproduce within the same species?

This led me to the “Pollination” series. Similar to my previous series like “String Theory” and “Thicket”—the factors of interdependence and regeneration were primary in my decision to depict these plants. So today in my studio, you can see the vibrant red Poppies and the deep purple Adam’s Needle Yucca. Both of these plants are visually stunning, and if the viewer chooses to engage with further study, they realize that the pollination practices are equally impressive. How such plants share these life-giving elements, along with pollinators like insects and birds, is my current focus. My research has revealed the importance of biology, but I also uncover the stories within.

LL: The plant life in your work is so precise and well-studied. Even though I do not possess the horticultural knowledge to judge the accuracy of the species that you render—there seems to be a true expertise in your paintings and drawings. How do you approach creating these renderings? What are your sources?

AG: I use everything! Direct observations from plants that I bring into my studio, or simply the plants that grow around the urban landscapes where I live in New Jersey. I am able to study these directly, and after careful reflection, then I can delineate the essentials. I do use more scientific manuals as well, such as books on horticulture. These images and diagrams are the basis for my renderings so that I achieve a high level of visual accuracy. However, I privilege

artistic vision over a “perfect” reproduction. As you can see in my work, I often abstract or flatten the backgrounds. To me, this creates a more mystical, ideal space while also allowing viewers to concentrate on the essence—the feeling, the sentiment—of how I interpret the plants that I am depicting. For my series that includes birds, I have used Audubon’s renowned studies. For my flowers, I sometimes visit the botanical gardens around New York.

LL: Indeed, your depictions of plants feel more like portraits. They are not scientific diagrams or traditional landscape paintings. Each flower or plant becomes a character it seems.

AG: Agreed. I am very happy you picked up on that “portrait” quality within my practice. The actual power of a name and the study of language is very important to me: the subtleties of botanical nomenclature and the power of their meaning. I find my subjects through these needs, and everything is connected for me. Then, I weave these narratives together. For example, with *The Night Garden*, it is like finding the story of the king and the queen of the garden, then medling them into a fairytale of sorts. There is always an idea initially based on zooming in on the plants themselves (their names, their functions, their physical attributes) and then weaving them together to mirror the connections that I find within nature.

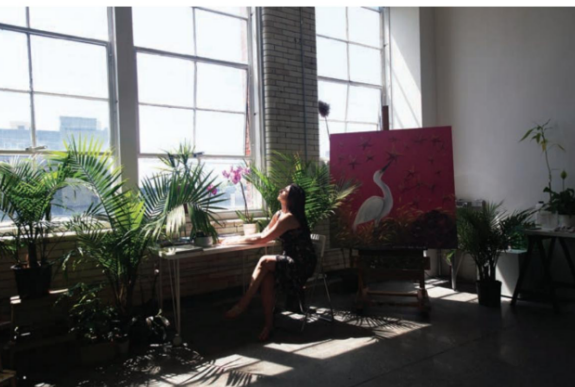
LL: Finally, I see in your biography that your

work is included in the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth Sackler Feminist Art Base. That is a massive honor to receive from one of the premier libraries and collections of feminist art. Based on my own research and curatorial interests in contemporary feminisms—I would love to speak more about your work in this context.

AG: Yes, I think that the “Arboreal Portraits” series is one of the best illustrations of my work within this context. This is a series of individual trees, such as birch, conifer and palm. Conceptually, each tree is a portrait of a strong woman that has shaped my own life, experience and point of view as a female—for example, my grandmother Henrietta. I express the powerful and resilient relationship between individuals and the universe through this venerable symbol of the tree—detailing their unique branches and trunks. In my paintings, the trees stand isolated yet strong, reflecting their history within their physicality.

LL: And to ask that basic question—what artists are inspirations for you? In reference to your work, I would imagine that the Georgia O’Keeffe association comes up often—since she also painted such elegant and highly-studied images of flowers and plants. How do you feel about that comparison?

AG: Oh I am flattered by the comparisons to Georgia. She is certainly one of my inspirations. Also, Frida Kahlo. Her recent exhibition at the New York Botanical Garden was incredible. I went there to observe and to study the flowers, which made their way into my own paintings. And certainly Judy Chicago! She is such an influence for me, especially considering her work *The Dinner Party*. The flower-like plates lining the table are both clearly female-centric



Allison Green in Studio, Photo by Enga Purevjav

or “feminist” work; but they also are important as just being amazing works of art. It can be read within this female context, or beyond it—and it’s still an undeniably important artwork. Then, with my own inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum’s Feminist Art Base, it feels very special to think about this piece in relation to my work.

LL: So one day you will have your plate at *The Dinner Party* too...!

Green laughs in agreement, and our interview concludes as we continue to produce—to pollinate—our work and our efforts for her upcoming show in Hudson: the triumphant flourishing of *Malia's Garden* this spring.

Indeed, I believe that one day Green will rightfully earn her place at *The Dinner Party*. This artwork is a large-scale installation by Judy Chicago created in 1979. It is a cornerstone of the Brooklyn Museum’s collection, occupying an entire room in the wing housing the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Essentially, *The Dinner Party* is a three-sided table in the form of a triangle. The top of the table is adorned with elaborate place settings—whose imagery recalls both the botanical and the female form. These dinner plates were designed by Judy Chicago to honor thirty-nine of the most influential women in history—from Sappho to Margaret Sanger, from Elizabeth I to Virginia Woolf—and of course O’Keeffe. Green’s practice merits recognition of this sort, and her oeuvre will continue to resonate with broad audiences through its sublime beauty, while communicating her unique story and creative vision.

Information

Allison Green: *Malia's Garden*

Exhibition On View: April 21—June 5, 2022
Opening Reception: Saturday, April 23rd

Susan Eley Fine Art

433 Warren Street
Hudson, NY, 12534
susaneleyfineart.com

Allison Green was born in Philadelphia, PA and raised in a nearby rural suburb. Throughout her childhood, Green lived on the periphery of a lush forest—an experience that has greatly impacted the art she is best known for today. Currently, Green lives and works in downtown Jersey City, New Jersey. In her studio at Mana Contemporary, she creates large-scale oil paintings that intertwine themes from nature: flowers, trees, thickets, birds that populate this foliage. The artist’s first major solo exhibition entitled *Deeply Rooted* opened in March 2011 at Susan Eley Fine Art, NYC. Green’s work is now included in the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth Sackler Feminist Art Base. She holds a BA from the University of Maryland with a concentration in Fine Art and Women’s Studies. Green also studied at Studio Art Centers International (SACI) in Florence, Italy in 1995. allisongreen.net

Liz Lorenz is a curator and writer based in Upstate New York. She received an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College in 2020. Currently, Lorenz is the Assistant Director of Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson and has worked at the Gallery since its establishment in June 2020.

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