

## flower power

Fantasy enriches reality in magical paintings by Inka Essenhigh

By Lilly Wei

**Inka Essenhigh has always been a wizard with line.** The whiplash fluidity and finesse of her draftsmanship made her an artist to be reckoned with ever since the 1990s, when she was starting out. And what she achieved with it was unique, her own take on the (then pervasive) manga-inspired fantasies that were part technological, part sci-fi, part decorative: pop with symbolist, surrealist, art nouveau, ukiyo-e intimations—and much more. Those strange—and strangely beguiling—early works dazzled, depending as they did upon glossy enamel paint, which had become her signature medium, their flawlessly lacquered, monochromatic surfaces providing a backdrop of futuristic beauty.

By the early 2000s, she became more introspective, searching within herself for her subjects, changing her process from a kind of doodling or automatism to more meditative practices in which she first pictured what she wanted to make. Post-9/11, she was trying to

find a way “to talk to my subconscious and to the Zeitgeist, my ear to the ground, finding a way to use myself as a channel for something else, so it wasn’t just about me,” she said in a recent conversation.

Two events in her life during that period were pivotal. One was that her husband, the artist Steve Mumford, began traveling back and forth to Iraq and Afghanistan, embedding with U.S. troops to capture war in its immediacy, in real time. To counter the anxiety, she realized that she had to “think more positively and be a happier person,” so that what she created, what she put out there would not be negative but “make the world a better place.” The other was building a studio in Maine, where she would spend much of her time from then on, sheltered among verdant woods and steeped in the sights, smells, and sounds of nature. Her content shifted from dystopian scenes to those centered on the sensuous perennial abundance of her surroundings, her color sense increasingly nuanced and enriched, unlike her earlier palette of militaristic olive-drab, although, that, too, had its allure.

These paintings evoke childhood, our most formative years, a time when enchantment and the mundane existed hand in hand, when folk tales, fairy tales, and myths were interchangeable with reality, explaining and validating it. The paintings became a kind of magical thinking that transformed her Maine retreat into a secret garden and inviolable sanctuary on canvas; by picturing it, she offered us a refuge, a talisman.



*The Last Party*, 2020, enamel on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



*Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017, enamel on canvas, 32 x 80 in.

Essenhig gave herself permission some time ago to go her own way, to focus on pleasure, on beauty, on her own responses and feelings, her own dreams. While her paintings have been enthusiastically embraced for those very reasons, they have also been criticized for sentimentality and other (perceived) feminine/feminist failings. But if there is a line between sentimentality and sentiment, who gets to draw it? Such judgments are too frequently useless, blinkered by their subjectivity, their cultural, social, and gender biases. In any event, surely a little pixie dust would be welcome, especially when we consider the alternatives.

Essenhig noted that she also returned to oils in the early 2000s to heighten the emotional impact of her work. But after more than a decade, she found it too burdened in its materiality and associations. She wanted to make something that “had heart and could sing,” unlike the art in museums that can often feel distant, even cold. Her earlier paintings suddenly looked more original to her than the recent work. She felt she had lost something. Because of that, she began to paint in enamel again around 2015, but there was a noticeable difference. She applied enamel as if it were oil to precise, astonishing effect. Layering it to fashion a deeper space, her forms, more modulated, gained dimension, and her chromatic range became increasingly sophisticated and subtle, her painterly expertise polished by her many years working in oil. Enamel is also adaptable, easy to erase and paint over, which matters to her since she constantly revises in pursuit of the vision in her head, what she is feeling. But most important, she found her pictures to be psychologically more buoyant, playful, free.

The paintings that she has made since her return to enamel have been some of her most sumptuous to date; her landscapes and still lifes, familiar genres, are, once again, unlike anyone else's. *Midsummer Night's Dream* (2017) is one instance. A tribute to Shakespeare's comedy of love's mischiefs and errors, it also summons to mind Matisse's *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-06) in format, composition, and feeling. The recumbent couples, her “flower people,” are strewn about a grassy knoll like petals. Two rose heads, proportionately immense relative to the scale of the figures, balance the composition, which, gently cleft in the center, is sexually sublimated, its eroticism a murmur, but insistent. Here, the colors are understated, the whole, far from natural, is nonetheless a hymn to the fecundity of nature. Whereas the *Party of the Flames and Flowers* (2017) is visually louder, more sexually assertive, more phallic, its ambiguous figurations vertical, flickering rapturously upward against a vivid teal ground in contrast to the languid *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

*Birdsongs* (2017) is also lively, its ambience of another order, the emphatic black calligraphic squiggles (only one or two are clearly avians) gracefully, if also menacingly, confront each other like two combat squadrons in mid-air. It made me think of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, one of the most terrifying films of all time, a reminder that Essenhig's

view of nature is not saccharine. Her works are not escapist but about other possibilities, accompanied, at times, with a quiver of disquiet, as if she knows how fragile all this is, how fleeting. Even in Neverland, evil is present, to be outwitted, vanquished.

*Purple Pods* (2019) is more reassuringly upbeat, and gorgeous—or is it the other way around? A flower painting, its fanciful central character is bursting with imperious operatic presence, the rich couture purple of its petaled garb red-carpet worthy. She (I say “she” because of the curves and womb-like shape the diva-like bloom possesses) is waited on by a “florine” (what you might call a lady-in-waiting to a flower) dressed in blue sprinkled with gold, its little hands and arms waving joyously, echoing her mistress’s gestures. A Barbie Pink pod dances below, at the diva’s side, and in the background are a cohort of pale attendant mushrooms.

I also say “she” because there is a *Flower King* (2022), and it is even more resplendent. The flowing white petals, either a robe or perhaps a peruke, look ravishingly soft, supple, the purple dashes turning them into ermine, the circlet of pussywillow buds a royal diadem (that might also evoke a crown of thorns), the woodland bower flush with flowers, depicted with an art nouveau flourish, a number placed at the edge of the pool as if before an altar while some lovely streaked red parrot tulips add a pop of warmth to the cool color scheme.



*Flower King*, 2022, enamel on canvas, 76 x 62 in.

Essenhigh said that she begins with a sense of the experience she wants to express. “For *Flower King*, it was Easter, a sense of rebirth, something that comes from the earth, that was royal. In my head, it was an Easter painting. I think about what that feels like and from there, an image comes to me, then one significant thing appears after another. That’s all I know; an image comes to me and when I make the painting, it fleshes itself out. It’s the feeling that I refer to, not what it looks like. I have to discover what it looks like, then sharpen it into form, almost like a sculpture. It takes a long time.”

Essenhigh also talks about magic places. “Look at the forces of nature, look at a tree, look at a forest; if this forest has a deity, what would it look like?” she asked. While I’m not sure I can answer that, for me, one of the most enchanted of her recent paintings is *Forest with Dappled Light* (2022). It acts as a direct conduit to a time when pictures were portals that led directly into mythic kingdoms that you leaped into without hesitation, like the illustrations that led you through the wardrobe into Narnia, or down the rabbit hole and through the looking glass with Alice, or skipping down the yellow brick road with Dorothy. Essenhigh’s shadowy green glade is ringed by cone flowers, wild grasses, delicately tendrilled trees, a leafy stage for a precocious bush that seems about to dance. But the most magical thing about the painting is the patch of yellow on the left that creates an inexpressibly beautiful consecrating glow that seems to emanate from the earth itself, lighting up all that is near it. We are on sacred ground. And, if we look hard enough, perhaps we can also find Oberon, Titania, and their fairy attendants reveling in this other version of a nocturnal midsummer dream.

While most of the recent paintings are peopled by a few semblances of humans, or anthropomorphic forms, *Rave Scene* (2022) is mobbed. It is the violet hour, and the deep crepuscular blue of the sky plays off the electric pink

of the crowd, the bright turquoise green of those in the foreground, observing. The subjects are once again Essenhigh's flower people, this time in an urban setting that is both contemporary and not. They stress our interdependence and mutuality as sentient beings, part of a whole earth animistic community.

Essenhigh said: "I propose fantastical paintings, but I am affecting the real world. When I make a painting of a flower or tree or spirit of the forest, that makes it a little bit easier to see the forest as a living thing. I'm not looking for escape, I accept the world but I want to make it even more beautiful, a place to be enjoyed. Nature is a living organism that we are part of and must live in balance with."

And, if only, to live in happily ever after.



*Rave Scene*, 2022, enamel on canvas, 46 x 68 in.