



Pressing matters

As a new show opens at Hidcote Manor, Gloucestershire, Juliet Roberts meets Rachel Dein, who is casting botanical art in a new light
Photographs by Daniel Gould

CAPTURING the ephemeral beauty of plants isn't an easy thing to do, whether in a drawing, a photograph or a sculpture. Yet artist Rachel Dein manages to do exactly that, rendering in exquisite detail the curve of a stem, the intricate filigree of veins on a leaf and the delicacy of petals via a simple plaster cast. Being three-dimensional, the casts are remarkably sculptural and there's an overwhelming urge to trace the impressions made into the smooth, flat surface with one's finger. Reminiscent of age-old fossils, yet also entirely contemporary, her pieces have a stillness about them that invites pause for thought on the transient nature of life itself.

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Rachel's work follows a long tradition of botanical artwork yet, despite extensive research, she hasn't found a direct precedent. 'Pressing things in clay is nothing new, but it seems that pressing plants just might be,' she reveals. 'The closest thing I've found is Nature printing.' This ancient technique—whereby natural subjects, such as plants, animals and rocks, are used to make a direct impression onto material that is then used for printing—is mentioned in Da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus* (1478–1519) and examples can be found in Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's correspondence to his patron Olof Celsius in the mid 1700s. ➤

Plaster artist: Rachel Dein, who admires the delicacy and tenacity of plants, harbours ambitions to cast an entire floor



Just as plants change over time, so do gardens. Two years ago, the National Trust invited the artist to create a series of casts to represent the plants through the seasons at Hidcote Manor in the Cotswolds, famed for its Arts-and-Crafts garden designed by plantsman Lawrence Johnston in the early to mid 1900s. After visiting Hidcote Manor numerous times over the past two years, Rachel has produced 22 artworks of various sizes (as well as illustrations identifying each of the plants), which have recently gone on show at the garden.

'It's not complicated,' says Rachel of the process she uses to create the casts and, indeed, it does appear to be pretty straightforward. First, she laboriously rolls a slab of clay until it is perfectly flat. Next, she gently presses her subject into the clay, then carefully removes it before pouring plaster into a frame set on top. She waits for this to set and, finally, peels back the clay to reveal the subject cast in the plaster. What makes Rachel's work stand out, however, is her choice of subject matter and her ability to place everything in such a poetic and entirely uncontrived way.

Rachel studied Fine Art at Middlesex University, where she explored her interests

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Top: The delicate part: removing leaves.
Above: A little extra: most of the casts are plain, but the artist will add colour, too

in photography, film and plants and became fascinated by how tough and tenacious Nature can be, particularly in the face of adversity. After a short glass-making course, in which she learned how to press shapes into wet sand to form moulds into which molten glass was poured, she began experimenting with clay and plaster, using a similar technique.

'It's magic what plaster can do and I'm fascinated by the detail it achieves,' she explains. 'I've always been drawn to relief, I like black-and-white photography and I admire artists who use plants, for instance Andy Goldsworthy, so, unsurprisingly, it was a process I fell in love with.'

After graduating, the budding artist began an apprenticeship as a prop maker for the English National Opera and went on to work at various theatres and museums, including the Royal Opera House, Madame Tussauds and the Globe Theatre. During her 15 years as a freelancer, she periodically found the time and space to develop her own art, but it wasn't until she and her family moved to their current home in north London that she was able to set up her own studio space in the attic. 'It's light and airy, and I can shut the hatch and make a mess away from my husband and three children.' ➤



Anti-clockwise from above: Plants are pressed into smooth clay, then painstakingly removed. Finally, liquid plaster is poured over the design and left to set

Rachel began by casting various objects (doll's dresses were some of the first) to make small tiles that she sold through a local gallery. She had missed the opportunity to cast the flowers from her wedding bouquet so decided to buy a similar bunch and cast those instead—and was smitten. So began her botanically inspired work.

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The majority of the casts are left plain. ‘Part of me thinks plain plaster is more truthful, but I also love colour so, occasionally, I can’t resist painting them. It’s my guilty pleasure.’

Rachel has also experimented with casting in concrete so that the tiles can be used outdoors, as well as with silicone moulds to make repeat castings. ‘Obviously, the designs in plaster are one-offs, but even when I use the silicone to cast multiple tiles, I find each one is ever so slightly different.’



Since exhibiting at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Rachel’s work has become much more widely known and her business is thriving. As well as casts she makes to sell at shows and through her website, she has completed a number of private commissions. Recently, she cast an entire ceiling and is wondering what it might be like to do a floor. Her greatest ambition? ‘I’d love to do more work at iconic gardens,’

she reveals. ‘I have always wanted to cast the water lilies at Giverny.’

Selling exhibition ‘Hidcote through the Seasons with Rachel Dein’ is at Hidcote Manor, Gloucestershire (01386 438333; www.nationaltrust.org.uk), until the end of March 2020, with a talk by the artist on September 14. Bespoke casts cost from £600 for 16in by 16in and £1,800 for 40in by 24in. Visit www.racheldein.com