

Memory of Nature

RACHEL DEIN *London, England*





IN THE LIGHT-FILLED ATTIC STUDIO AT HER NORTH LONDON HOME, the artist Rachel Dein gently peels back a clay mold to reveal a plaster cast of flowers in amazing details and extraordinary beauty. The representation of nature has been the province of artists since the late Minoan painters and potters decorated palace walls and pottery with lilies, saffron, and other flowers thousands of years ago. Rachel's work evolved from the old tradition of nature printing, the technique of using the surface of a natural object to make a print. Leonardo da Vinci described the process in his *Codice Atlantico* of 1508, illustrating with a singular print of a sage leaf, its stem, mid-rib, veins, and curved edge standing out in vivid details. Early botanists used nature printing to record the plants they collected and to share information about new discoveries in faraway places. In the nineteenth century a young British printer named Henry Bradbury, borrowing techniques developed by the Austrian printer Alois Auer, published his most famous book, *The Ferns of Great Britain and Ireland*. Auer's innovative technique involved pressing the plants onto a thin, soft lead plate to make an *intaglio* impression. The fine grooves in the lead hold the ink, which is then transferred onto paper through a press. In the resulting images, fine botanical details are meticulously rendered with a slightly raised texture, bringing them alive on the page.

In a similar vein, Rachel Dein makes plaster casts of plants and flowers that record all their texture, pattern, and delicacy in exquisite details. Her composition can be as simple as a single stem or as complex as a field of wildflowers, leaves, and grasses. Pendulous bleeding hearts, curly fiddleheads of ferns, and wispy poppies are some of her favorite flowers to cast. There is a memorial as well as a celebratory quality to these simple tiles and panels, for they preserve a fleeting moment of glory long after the plants have faded and died. They reflect Rachel's interest in nature, its transience and tenacity. At art school, Rachel found her voice when she drew on a childhood memory of throwing a handful of melon seeds down the bathroom sink, only to discover, some weeks later, plants growing up through the overflow. "It seemed to encapsulate everything I wanted to express. It showed me how tough and tenacious nature is, which I found comforting," she says. It was a lesson that she applied to her life as well as her art, helping her cope with the serious illness of a loved one.

Combining her fascination with plants and sculpture—the works of Rodin and Andy Goldsworthy are her favorites—Rachel's floral castings are tactile and sculptural. Her method, adapted from a glass-casting technique learned in college, is deceptively simple. Flowers and foliage are arranged and pressed onto wet clay. A wooden frame is then placed on the clay and the plaster is poured in and allowed to set. The magical moment comes when Rachel lifts the clay mold to reveal the plants in their plaster incarnation. It is as if the real plants are enfolded within the plaster casting. The movement of a stem, the fragile fold of a petal, the veins on a leaf—every detail is caught and held in poetic suspension. The physicality of the plants is transferred onto the plaster, every graceful line of a stem or curve of a petal inviting the impulse to touch as much as to look at them.

Whether in small tiles with a single flower portrait or large panels that suggest an entire garden full of blooms, Rachel's botanical castings reflect her desire to capture the ephemeral. They track the progress of the seasons, marking the plants at the moment when they are most alive. Leached of all colors and their flesh rendered in white plaster, the flowers are transformed, lending their gracefulness to something entirely new, at once a faithful imprint and an abstraction of themselves. With a tinge of sepia, the castings recall the slightly out-of-this-world look of platinum photographic prints brought into the third dimension. As light casts shadows on the relief, the plants take on an ethereal form, a haunting memory of their natural selves that have withered and vanished. Like a fossil of long forgotten plants, each plaque is a ghostly vestige of time, an act of remembering: a summer day in the garden, a perfect magnolia at its peak, or the first daffodils in spring. Relieved of their perishable forms and given permanence in white plaster, the floral castings carry with them forever the emotional impact of beauty. It is as if Rachel has distilled the flowers' essence into her tiles, each one the memory of nature itself.

