

2015

## Figure and Flora

Caleigh Eveleth Goold  
*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Goold, C. E. (2015). *Figure and Flora*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3080>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

FIGURE AND FLORA

by

Caleigh Eveleth Goold

Bachelor of Arts  
College of Charleston, 2010

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Art Studio

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2015

Accepted by:

Pamela Bowers, Director of Thesis

Mary Robinson, Reader

Jaime Misenheimer, Reader

Frol Boundin, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

© Copyright by Caleigh Eveleth Goold, 2015  
All Rights Reserved.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis project to my mother and step-father, Anne and Scott Kennedy. This year of study, and the leap into my future it provides, would never have been possible without them.

## ABSTRACT

‘Figure and Flora’ is an exploration of the visual relationship between the human figure and various forms of plant life. It is an exercise in appreciation of the subtle nuances in color, shape and form of the human body which can bear a striking resemblance to vegetation that one would encounter in everyday life. Because we are such visual creatures, recognizing the aesthetic similarities can be an effective first step in realizing the inherent and biological similarities as well. This exhibit is meant to remind people that they are related to many more varied life forms than they may be aware of and therefore are all part of a universally connected flow of energy.

‘Figure and Flora’ will be comprised of this written work along with nine oil paintings presented in the Student Gallery at McMaster College at the University of South Carolina from April 25th until April 31st, 2015.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 DISCUSSION OF WORKS .....	3
CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION .....	17
ARTWORKS CITED .....	18
REFERENCES .....	19

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Succulent .....	10
Figure 2.2 Succulent (detail).....	10
Figure 2.3 Room to Grow .....	11
Figure 2.4 Tabletop Succulents.....	12
Figure 2.5 Golden Pothos .....	13
Figure 2.6 Green Pepper .....	14
Figure 2.7 Almond Eyes .....	15
Figure 2.8 Summer Squash .....	15
Figure 2.9 Looking Back (Part One).....	16
Figure 2.10 Looking Back (Part Two).....	16

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The human form has always been a huge source of inspiration for me. Years of drawing and painting the figure have greatly fueled my adoration of the slight nuances in shape, color, and volume which define each of us as individuals. We are all inherently created in the same way, but our variations are what make us so special and beautiful. The same can be said about plant life. There are many house plants, fruits, and vegetables that are somewhat mundane due to them being familiar to our everyday lives, but when one takes the time to visually explore these organic shapes, their true unique beauty comes alive.

About a year ago, I became fascinated with a few different kinds of succulent plants which were cheering up my studio. As I would sit and admire them during contemplative pauses, I started to notice more and more similarities between their forms and the forms on my canvas. A gentle curve or the slight reddish hue of a plump succulent would almost mirror a figurative image I was working with. Feeling inspired, I decided to portray these different combinations of complementary forms in my work, using human figures juxtaposed with succulents, vegetables, and other plants.

‘Figure and Flora’ is an exploration of the visual relationship between the human form and forms found in plant life. As a figurative artist, I have become very in tune with the subtle nuances in color, shape and form of the human body and have picked up on their striking resemblance to house plants and vegetables. By visually relating these forms in my paintings, I hope to show my audience just how connected to this earth and



the other creatures on it they truly are. Vast biological similarities between people and primates or other mammals is common knowledge, but we also share between 25% and 60% of our genetic make-up with plants (Woo; Zimmer). After all, all matter, including all life forms, are simply specific arrangements of molecules made up of atoms which are comprised of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which are forms of energy. This means that the entire known universe is simply made up of different configurations of energy, ourselves included.

This series is fully comprised of posed figures. Not one of these models are in an ordinary position nor in her natural environment. The plants aren't either; each vegetable has been cut and each plant is potted and indoors. People have become accustomed to having a multitude of steadily available vegetables which they may have whenever and wherever they please. Houseplants have also been delegated to home accessories. So many items in our modern lives are simply arranged for decoration or for our convenience, which prompted me to juxtapose the figures in such a way that their shapes are used as forms placed specifically in the setting for aesthetic purposes, turning the figure into the main element of a still life. This body of work is a celebration of beauty in form.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISCUSSION OF WORKS

The following is an explanation of each specific work within this collection. A copy of all works can be found at the end of this chapter.

#### 2.1 SUCCULENT

In the painting ‘Succulent’ the visual relationship between the plump, slightly drooping leaves of a small potted succulent and the density of two round breasts is explored. Neither are sagging per se, but each is full of the water weight which comprises all living things. It is their solid suppleness that encapsulates their respective masses which makes them so full, luscious, and welcoming to touch. The weight of the leaves and the weight of the breasts are echoed by the figure holding the small potted plant which can be perceived as a shared experience by the viewer. The viewer can mentally feel the weight of the pot, and thus the weight of the leaves and of the breasts.

This is one of the works in which I made the canvas specifically for this piece. I have been experimenting with controlling the way a figure is viewed in a composition. Normally, the human form can be most simply summed up with a vertical plane. However, by cropping the form in this way and elongating the canvas, I have turned a vertical form into a horizontal form without having to lay the figure down (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

## 2.2 ROOM TO GROW

‘Room to Grow’ is a painting of a tiny succulent planted in a wine bottle cork being held high by outstretched fingertips. It is another painting in which I constructed the canvas specifically for the image. My succulent subject is a tiny little upstart with its whole life before it so I want the composition to allow the viewer to imagine just how tall and proud that little plant will one day be. By elongating the canvas and portraying the fingers as reaching high towards the sky, I have mimicked not only the perceived reach of the plant as it is now, but the expected reach as a result of a long time of healthy growth.

Hans Holbein has been a major influence during the painting of this piece in particular. The polished and greatly detailed hands of his portrait subjects show a degree of strength and certainty that I aim to portray in not only the execution of this work, but in the feeling of it too. It is a work in which the brightness of a new day provides the sustenance for vitality forged from strength (Figure 2.3).

## 2.3 TABLETOP SUCCULENTS

‘Tabletop Succulents’ is a painting in which a figure is centrally placed on a tabletop between three potted succulents. In this painting, the number three is used three times; there are three succulents included, there are three bands of light moving across the model’s back, and there are three sides to the triangle shape that the figure creates. I am also exploring the feeling of space in this image. Unlike most of my paintings in which the figure is directly in the forefront of the space, the table pushes the model back and allows for more room between the viewer and the figure. I have been looking at Phillip Pearlstein’s paintings while planning and executing this piece and felt inspired by

the way he arranges objects with his figures. Even though his figures and their corresponding objects are usually juxtaposed in a more dynamic way than in this particular work, I do like how each item is in its own place. The lines are exact and the contours are sharp and there are no soft edges to blur the planes together.

The hourglass shape of the figure is mimicked in the shape of the middle succulent's pot, as well as in the general form of the far left succulent within its pot. However, the main form that I am interested in expressing is the similar roundness in the two bottom cheeks of the model with the bottom contour lines of the left and right succulents. Their fleshy leaves are heavy and create a double tear shape right above the rim of their pots, just as the buttocks of the figure form a heavy double tear shaped mass on the table (Figure 2.4).

## 2.4 GOLDEN POTHOS

The painting 'Golden Pothos' is an image of two posed female feet with an undulating strand of golden pothos ivy between them. This luscious tendril curls nicely against itself as it descends down the shins of the figure until it reaches the top of the feet and stops just before the toes. The heart-shaped leaves reverse mimic the slightly triangular shape of the feet, and the delicate nature of the toes are heightened by the tender way that the tendril rests lightly atop the right foot. These are graceful feet adorned with an elegant houseplant and the bottom contour lines of the toes are repeated in the ivy's gentle curve.

I have drawn strong inspiration from Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera" for this piece (Botticelli). When I had visited the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy a few years

ago, I was struck by the long, sinewy appendages on all of Botticelli's figures, but especially in 'Primavera.' I felt that his method of painting thin, lengthy toes helped to elongate and enforce the delicate nature of his subjects, which I decided to emulate for the exquisite, almost ballerina-like toes of my model. This piece has been an experiment in creating flesh tone; the model was especially fair skinned, so I have heightened the perceived fragility of my subject by exaggerating her pearlescent, almost translucent skin (Figure 2.5).

## 2.5 GREEN PEPPER

'Green Pepper' has turned out to be my favorite painting in this series because of its powerful shapes yet delicate essence. The canvas is a solid square form which is complemented by the strong inverse triangle whose apex meets at the center of the canvas. These bold shapes create a dynamic central pull which directs the viewers' eyes toward the middle of the image and then rewards the viewer with the lovely and voluptuous roundness of the buttocks mimicking the curves of the bottom contour of the green pepper. The gentle, slender fingers cradling the green pepper serve to remind my audience of the fragility of not only this specific vegetable, but of all living, or once living, things.

After enjoying the interesting effect of the pale skin in 'Golden Pothos,' I have decided to take it a little further with this piece by adding even stronger blue tones in with the flesh which mixed into greenish tones. This gave the model an ethereal and almost otherworldly persona and enhanced her appearance of fragility. People naturally associate a lack of pinkness in skin to be a lack of strength or vigor so the grey-greenness of the

model promotes a feeling of frailty; a feeling of someone who requires tender care and a delicate touch, just like the thin skin of the vegetable she is holding.

I was introduced to the painter Bouguereau when I began this work and have been greatly inspired by the heavenly beauty of his female forms, not only by their angelic pearlescent colors, but by the mass of his subjects in space. His subjects are delicate but definite. As a result of that inspiration, I feel that this painting is very successful in terms of the unblemished smoothness of the model's skin and because of her solid volume in space (Figure 2.6).

## 2.6 ALMOND EYES

This small piece is an illustration of something my mother used to say. When I was younger, she would complement me on my "big, brown, almond eyes." Recently, I was snacking on some almonds and I happened to look in the mirror and realized that she was right about the similar shape and color so I felt that it would make a perfect little addition to the series (Figure 2.7).

## 2.7 SUMMER SQUASH

I am excited to have added a new element to my oeuvre with 'Summer Squash' by including the patterned scarf on the table in this painting. I have been interested in adding a patterned or geometric motif to an artwork, so this was a fun experiment for me. I am thrilled with the result of the crisp lines surrounding the flowers and stripes in the cloth because it really makes that element pop out at the viewer. This causes the squash to sit slightly behind the folds of the fabric which in turn pushes the model even farther

back. This piece gives a similar feeling of depth in space to “Tabletop Succulents” and helps me realize how interesting props can be when creating settings for my models. I have also been experimenting with creating more of an atmosphere rather than simply a background in this piece. I have allowed the surrounding blue-grey area to stay painterly and built it up using multiple layers to add a feeling of depth. I want the color of the atmosphere to be a repeated hue of some of the shadow areas, just as the shape and color of the squash match the model’s healthy plump shoulder.

During the beginning stages of composing this piece I recalled one of my favorite works at the Uffizi Gallery, Fra Filippo Lippi’s ‘Madonna and Child and Two Angels’ (Lippi). Lippi’s Madonna is oriented in a similar three quarter direction as my model and the work is lightly adorned with a patterned piece of furniture. I have attempted to reproduce some of the exquisitely delicate methods of representing the features of her lovely face. I also enjoy the similarities between ‘Summer Squash’ and ‘Madonna and Child and Two Angels’ regarding Lippi’s experimentation with spatial mass in his artwork by placing his subjects in front of the frame and cascading the Christ and angels around the Virgin (Figure 2.8).

## 2.8 LOOKING BACK

‘Looking Back’ is a two panel piece comprised of a portrait of a model looking back over her left shoulder in a three quarter view and a still life of a succulent reaching around the back left area of the pitcher it’s planted in. I felt that the similarities between the two forms would be best illustrated on corresponding panels rather than together on one surface because the orientation of each form would not allow for a smooth transition

from one to the other. I do like that the square shape of the panel helped to reinforce the similar shapes within the work, namely the lovely curve of her twisted neck coupled with the curve of the lip of the pitcher and the placement of the face of the model and the face of the plant within the square. There is a strong perkiness in each form that expresses a narrative of looking forward, even while looking back.

I had visited the National Gallery just before starting these works and John Singer Sargent's 'Miss Beatrice Townsend' wound up being one of my favorite pieces in the collection (Sargent). I tried to simplify and relax my brush strokes to a certain degree like Sargent, and I also attempted to emulate his soft skin tones bathed in a relatively even light. Even though my model is oriented in a different direction, I feel that I captured a similar slight smile and, with it, a sense of internal happiness. I have also been inspired to create a much softer edge between my subject's face and her surroundings, and began to push myself into developing a more atmospheric approach to the background, rather than the stark backdrops of many of my previous paintings. I look forward to creating more works in this same vein in the future (Figures 2.9 and 2.10).





Figure 2.1 *Succulent*, Oil on Canvas, 12 x 52 inches



Figure 2.2 *Succulent* (detail)

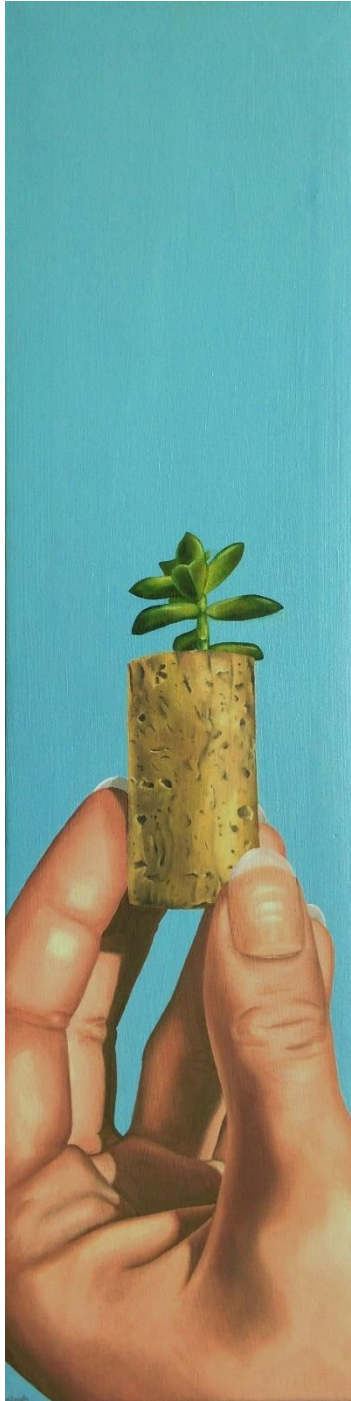


Figure 2.3 *Room to Grow*, Oil on Canvas, 38 x 10 inches



Figure 2.4 *Tabletop Succulents*, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50 inches



Figure 2.5 *Golden Pothos*, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 20 inches





Figure 2.6 *Green Pepper*, Oil on Canvas, 20 x 20 inches



Figure 2.7 *Almond Eyes*, Oil on Canvas, 4 x 12 inches



Figure 2.8 *Summer Squash*, Oil on Canvas, 20 x 12 inches



Figure 2.9 *Looking Back (Part One)*, Oil on Wood Panel, 18 x 18 inches



Figure 2.10 *Looking Back (Part Two)*, Oil on Wood Panel, 12 x 12 inches

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION

My wish is that viewers of my exhibit will leave with a feeling of connectedness. Not simply between themselves and their houseplants, but a connection with the hum of all energy flowing throughout the universe. I hope that my audience will begin to notice similarities not only in shape, but in unspoken expression, between themselves and other life forms. There are high frequency ties that bind us all, and getting a finger on the pulse of universal life can have a very humbling and sublime effect. It reminds us that we are never really alone in this world, but are instead each just a tiny part of the matter constituting our entire universe.



## ARTWORKS CITED

Botticelli, Sandro. *Primavera*. 1482. Grease tempura on wood. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Lippi, Fra Fillipo. *Madonna with Child and Two Angels*. 1465. Tempura on wood. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Sargent, John Singer. *Miss Beatrice Townsend*. 1882. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

## REFERENCES

Woo, Sandy. "How Similar is Human DNA to Plant DNA?" *National Human Genome Research Institute*. np, April 2010. Web. 23 March 2015.

Zimmer, Carl. "Genes Are Us. And Them." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, July 2013. Web. 23 March 2015.