



Playing with the picture plane, Karen Anne Klein composes imaginative arrangements of the natural world's precise patterns and dynamic abundance in watercolor and colored pencil.

# fantastic gardens

BY MEREDITH E. LEWIS

**B**UTTERFLIES HOVER inside a square green border, while a pink peony explodes in the center. A riot of sensory experience and kaleidoscopic color, *Butterflies*, by Michigan artist Karen Anne Klein, demonstrates a near scientific fidelity to the specimens portrayed. And yet the overall effect of the work is a far cry from science, realism or photographic mimicry.

## Framing and Composition

Klein explains that if you look carefully at her drawings, you'll find that the arrangement of the elements is improvised and that the structure doesn't adhere to reality. Because she uses

multiple perspectives and interior framing, objects aren't always in the same picture plane. "The works are carefully enough executed to have continuity

**LEFT:** In *Butterflies* (watercolor and colored pencil, 20½x20½), a large, linear green square acts as a boundary for the whole composition. "It's a structure," Klein says, "in contrast with a complex jumble of plants and butterflies that take time to sort out and understand."



**BELOW:** “Ravens have an undeniable presence,” says Klein. “Even if you know none of the tales and legends that concern them, you know such fables must exist. In *Raven* (watercolor and colored pencil, 12½x14¾), red leaves and fruit are equally dramatic and hold their own in concert with the bird.

in terms of lighting and shadows,” she says, “but they’re never completely realistic. People often think they’re looking at something that could conceivably be constructed, but it would always be impossible,” Klein says. “I love having things look real that can’t exist.”

The white of the paper also serves an important role in Klein’s joyful, vibrant compositions. Frequently using a bordered format suggestive of the illuminated book or Indian miniature, the artist creates an interior composition in the overall drawing, one that’s framed or encapsulated within a strong, bold color. The white of the paper, exterior to this color block, then serves as a secondary framing device around the interior composition. Remarques, or small drawings in the periphery or white space of the painting, often exist

in a different plane and relate to the interior composition, resulting in organic associations between the two. “If the negative space isn’t interesting,” Klein says, “the whole thing won’t work.”

### Telling Stories

Describing her works as “still life drawings that tell small stories,” Klein uses a unique combination of watercolor and colored pencil. She stresses that every work is “intuitive” and develops naturally across the paper. “I start with something that I find exciting,” she says. “Then a narrative develops.”

*Raven* (below) was inspired by a magnificent specimen Klein located at the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History, in Ann Arbor. Harking back to the



mythology surrounding the dark and clever bird, Klein worked to suggest a sense of power, as well as the ethereal glow of its feathers. Red leaves later allowed for a classical color combination to develop, and the artist eventually added berries and a vermillion background shape to augment the depth, mystery and connectedness of the natural ephemera surrounding the bird. The sharp contrast between the bright reds and the more somber, staid hues of the raven allows for balance in the composition as a whole, permitting the viewer to perceive the piece as much more than simply a natural history painting.

### Visual Taxonomy

Despite her inclination toward the fantastic, Klein admits to a strong affinity and apprecia-

**RIGHT:** “An oriental rug that had the initial impact of something abstract—an almost homogeneous field of red—was my inspiration for *Red Carpet* (watercolor and colored pencil, 20x26),” says Klein. Closer viewing revealed a geometric structure composed of many small images. “The drawing repeats that concept, using red subjects I found over the period of one summer.”

## Materials

**Brushes:** Winsor & Newton Series 7 brushes

**Watercolors:** Pelican pan watercolors (“because they have a flat finish and are more like gouache than other watercolors”)

**Paper:** Strathmore 3-ply with a medium surface or 4-ply matboard (“because they’re sturdy and don’t warp”)

**Pencils:** graphite 2H pencils (for the underdrawings); many different brands of colored pencils, but mostly Prismacolor and Sanford Berol Prismacolor Verithins, and a variety of palettes



**LEFT: *Quiet Water*** (watercolor and colored pencil, 21½x27) is part of a series involving flora and fauna specific to inland lakes in the Great Lakes region. “The pond featured is unusual,” says Klein, “for being off-center to accommodate the Solomon’s seal, dripping with blue fruit, that arches over the water.” The drawing was composed over a period of several months and includes materials from Wisconsin and Michigan.





**ABOVE: Table (Lunch for Julia Child)**

(watercolor and colored pencil, 22x28) has a "comforting symmetrical structure" with its two plates set on a rectangular white cloth. "After that," says Klein, "the meal goes wild with objects, representing members of the Klein family, spilling about. The center-piece is a spring garden still growing in a flower bed."

tion for the study of nature. "I love the way biologists train their eyes to see things that other people miss," she says. "Walk through the rain forest with my son Barrett, an entomologist, and he'll show you marvels that you'd never have seen on your own: soldier ants on a twig with their bodies raised and mandibles agape, looking fierce. And yet he won't see all the birds that an ornithologist has trained his or her eyes to see. I feel that my own eyes see things and combinations in nature that are unusual and worth observing."

Klein's careful arrangements of natural ephemera display the artist's interest in a kind of personal visual taxonomy. In her works she groups objects, flora or fauna according to a rule set of her own design. She has "classified" objects with stripes, with spots, by color, by season, and loosely by species or subject. "I've used my own kind of taxonomy," the artist says. "It isn't science, but it replicates research on a visual level." (See Cabinets of Curiosities, page 6.)

Klein borrows many of her featured

subjects and specimens from local museums and institutions, including the University of Michigan. "Since I use a lot of ephemeral subject matter and I prefer to draw from life," she says, "I have a very limited time to do the work. I use what I can find and what appeals to me. I may work on one drawing over several seasons, so there's no way to know in advance what will be contained in the drawing; I like the danger of this. I like determining the balance and the color and the density during the process. The result is always a surprise."

### Importance of Design

Klein began her artistic career with woodcuts and etchings, and her early training in woodcuts is apparent in the framing and compositional techniques the artist uses today. She began working in watercolor when the demands of young children made her anxious about using toxic materials in her home, and 20 years ago she began adding colored pencil to her pictures.

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## Cabinets of Curiosity

Many of Klein's paintings nod to an earlier (and older) enthrallment with natural ephemera and rare oddities. Beginning in the 16th century in continental Europe, objects of known and unknown origin were sometimes housed in magnificent "cabinets of curiosities" or "rooms of wonder," wherein they could be examined for the purpose of classification and for the pure enjoyment of viewing a bevy of riches in a small space.

Recently Klein has been decorating her own cabinets with panels painted to depict various phenomena—living, inert and cosmic alike. Her current project is assembling a series of cabinets in her dining room in such a way that the room itself will serve as the grandest cabinet of all—an homage to life and her life's work as an artist.

Adjacent doors on Klein's cabinets suggest taxonomic connections, both real and imagined, and yet the artist's desire to forge such meaning in her work—to suggest associations between seemingly disparate objects or living things—predates the physical construction of the cabinets themselves. "My son pointed out to me that when I started making actual cabinets of curiosities, I'd already been doing that in my drawing," she says. "Each piece is a small collection of objects that work together as a narrative."

"What has changed," Klein explains, "is that I'm now combining groups of drawings that need to work as a collection. But actually the project's even going beyond that to the point where I'm trying to make a whole room work as one piece of art. The outsides and the insides of the cabinets are filled with drawings and objects and books that I'm making. The entire undertaking is very challenging and exciting and might well occupy my thoughts and work for the rest of my life!"

In the images on the doors of the *Sky Cabinet* (right, top; wood with watercolor and colored pencil works, 58x28x11), Klein connects terrestrial subjects with their partners in the sky. "The Saturniidae moth hovers over the planet Saturn," she explains. "The emperor scorpion is paired with the constellation Scorpio, and the moon rises with a luna moth." The artist based the background for each drawing on a photo taken by the Hubble spacecraft.

*Mars* (right; watercolor and colored pencil, 10½x10½) features one of four planets represented on the face of the *Sky Cabinet*. "The planet Mars is paired with the elephant beetle *Megasoma mars*," says Klein. "The background is an impression of the globular star cluster Omega Centauri."



For a link to more of Klein's work go to [www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc)





# Dynamic Definition With Watercolor and Colored Pencil

BY KAREN ANNE KLEIN

A black flower is dramatic and, contrasted with a specimen that is fragile and pink, seems even more compelling. In *Black Tulip and Peony* (opposite page), the butterfly resting between the tulip and the peony is a swallowtail, which combines properties of both. The butterfly's dark color lends it some mystery, but its construction is delicate, and we know its life is brief.

1. When depicting a complex subject that's essentially one color, I lay in watercolor in small sections to keep the structure of the underdrawing visible, as those sections usually dry with at least slight differences in color. If the color doesn't demark areas well enough at this point, then I can add definition and retain the structure of the drawing using colored pencils. Keeping the watercolor simple makes adding the colored pencil on top easier and gives me more control over what the final image will look like.

2. I use paper with a nice tooth to catch the color of the pencil. But the tooth can be annoying when I want to create an area of dense color because I need to press very hard to fill in all the little white divits. Pressing hard can apply so much waxy color to the paper that it's difficult to work back over it. That's one reason I like to apply watercolor first. Only small amounts of colored pencil are required to construct the details of the subject when drawing over a surface that's already covered with watercolor.

3. Some colors look dead on a dark surface, but most colors are surprisingly effective. Light colors can be used to their greatest advantage as highlights when placed on a dark surface, as shown in the way I defined the individual tulip petals in this step. The overall depiction of a dark object can be very lively as a result.

4. The fragile pink peony, which I added as the second element in the composition, was available for only one day before a strong rain. Working on the butterfly next would have been logical, but I had no specimen at hand, so I reserved the space. Keeping the flower delicate and light was far more challenging than working on the black tulip. I worked over the defining colors with white pencil, which blended the colors and made them smooth and soft.



"If the negative space isn't interesting, the whole thing won't work." Karen Anne Klein



5. At this point the structure of the drawing took on greater definition as I constructed in graphite a rectangle divided into two parts behind the peony and tulip and extending below them. I've made the lines darker in this image so you can see the two boxes. After establishing the central focus of the drawing, I selected the pink and black petunias as anchors for the top and bottom of the composition. My idea was to create a solid color in the top half of the rectangle and a more loosely delineated bottom half, composed of stems and leaves.

6. Adding black to the top, square portion of the rectangle immediately made the pink peony glow more strongly. The tulip and black petunia seemed to gain even more strength and mystery. And the lower section of the drawing immediately looked looser and more delicate compared to the solidity of the top.

7. After I finished a few areas in the bottom of the composition and refined others overall, my drawing *Black Tulip and Peony* (watercolor and colored pencil, 19½x13½) was complete.





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Working slightly larger than the actual size of her subjects, she begins each picture with a drawing in graphite. She then covers the drawing with watercolor. As the base color, the watercolor keeps her later application of colored pencil from becoming too heavy or overlabored and eases the transition between the white of the paper and the bright hues of the colored pencil. When the watercolor is dry, she enters into the painting with a combination of waxy and hard-lead colored pencils. “The waxy pencils can depict smooth surfaces so nicely, as well as dense color,” she explains. “The hard leads can pick out detail and can also make things look very crisp.”

The combination of watercolor and colored pencil on the paper confuses some viewers

**ABOVE:** Hovering over a 17th-century Dutch sky map, Sphingidae hawk moths fly in the early night in *Celestial Moths* (watercolor and colored pencil, 20½x20½). “In the corners of the composition are four phases of the moon,” says Klein. “The new moon is represented by a black hollyhock, linking earth to sky. This piece is an example of how I work on black, but here I kept white paper underneath the moths so they glow more strongly than if they had black underneath them.”

who can’t determine the artist’s medium. “The watercolor under the pencil enhances the color intensely and makes colors livelier than what most people achieve with the pencils alone,” Klein explains. “On the other hand, the use of colored pencils can make the image appear far more detailed than it would normally look

in watercolor alone. It takes practice to make the combination cohere and not look like two things happening in the same piece. But once the applications have been successfully combined, the result can be vibrant.”

### Real and Imaginary

Working in a scale close to actual size allows Klein to position real objects on top of her compositions to see what might fit and where. Placement of the objects is critical and usually takes her a long time. “Choosing the objects is challenging,” she says, “and I often wind up surrounded by heaps of things that have potential. Forcing an object into a drawing is always a huge mistake. I’ve learned to be very circumspect and not to fall in love with a candidate-object.” Many drawings get to a point where they have to wait for the right element to turn up. Some drawings wait a long time. Others fall together easily, but that’s rare. “When the drawing is finished,” Klein says, “I want it to look inevitable or easy—the way a dancer doesn’t let you know she sweats and hurts.”

She prefers for her works to exhibit a natural simplicity or organic harmony—qualities that can’t be forced and usually take time to develop long before making their way to paper. Success in a composition is hard to describe or pinpoint, she admits, and harder still to achieve. “I suppose there has to be something original about the work and maybe

something that’s surprising, but having both those qualities doesn’t guarantee success,” she says. “Explaining why a work is successful is like trying to explain why you fall in love.” ■

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## Meet Karen Anne Klein

Michigan artist Karen Anne Klein holds a master’s degree from Wayne State University, in Detroit. Her work can be found in collections across the country, including those of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh; the Museum of Modern Art, in New York; and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, in Ann Arbor. Klein has released a number of limited-edition books with private presses, and her paintings have been exhibited at such venues as the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History, in Ann Arbor; the Chicago Botanic Garden, in Glencoe, Illinois; and the Salmagundi Club, in New York. For more information, visit the artist’s website, [www.kaklein.com](http://www.kaklein.com).



Photo by Barrett Klein



**LEFT:** Corn, or field, poppies live as weeds in Europe, but here we buy seeds to grow them. Brilliant red and sometimes wrinkled or ruffled, the poppies fill the composition of *The Red Meadow* (watercolor and colored pencil, 15½x21½) and are placed in contrast with a large variety of cool blue flowers in the background. I chose the flicker woodpecker for the foreground because of the red—reminiscent of a fallen petal—on the back of its head.