



Maryfran Cardamone: left to right,
Juniper With Tissue, 2011, mixed media on paper, 14 x 20 inches
Sweetgum With Elvis, 2010, mixed media on paper, 14 x 20 inches
Ginkgo With Chinese Man, 2011, mixed media on paper, 14 x 20 inches
Sumac With Bust, 2010, mixed media on paper, 14 x 20 inches
Peyote, 2010, mixed media on paper, 14 x 20 inches

Get your chlorophyll

Michael Abatemarco ■ For The New Mexican

Botanical illustration has a long and rich history. Those who study nature have been fascinated with flora and fauna for thousands of years, and as early as the first century B.C., if not before, their detailed descriptions in words and imagery have added to our understanding of the natural world. The illustrated herbals of Krateuas, a physician to Mithridates VI of Pontus (circa 132-63 B.C.), influenced later generations of herbalists. Although his work was lost, it is known to us through the descriptions of others, such as Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.). But it wasn't until the early 1530s, with the publication of *Herbarum vivae eicones* by German botanist Otto Brunfels, that a more modern science of botanical description was born. Brunfels' *Herbarum* was illustrated by Hans Weiditz, a pupil of Albrecht Dürer. With the marriage of art and science and a goal of increasing understanding of the natural world, a Western artistic tradition of annotated illustration was born. It is alive in the present day.

Pennsylvania-based artist Maryfran Cardamone is a botanical illustrator who maintains an integrity for the tradition while investing her work with fresh, engaging imagery. "I had such a deep respect

and reverence for this knowledge that I didn't want to trivialize it by doing something really modern," Cardamone told *Pasatiempo*. "I was thinking of what kind of format I could present this knowledge in that would command the respect of the great traditions of the herbals and the great botanical illustrators throughout history. There's a real legacy here that I want people to know about. I'm a curious person, and I'm really serious about the science and the truth and the knowledge, but it's also put through the filter of my tongue-in-cheek, slightly warped personality. I still want to have fun with it and present it in a way that captures the imagination." *Flora Fantastica: The Botanical Art of MF Cardamone* is on exhibit at Selby Fleetwood Gallery. The show is co-presented by the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, and proceeds benefit the nonprofit, which operates the Ortiz Mountains Educational Preserve and the Leonora Curtin Wetland Preserve. The Santa Fe Botanical Garden is in the process of constructing a 13-acre garden on Museum Hill.

The mixed-media works on paper in *Flora Fantastica* reflect the common descriptive techniques naturalists used: the inclusion of the

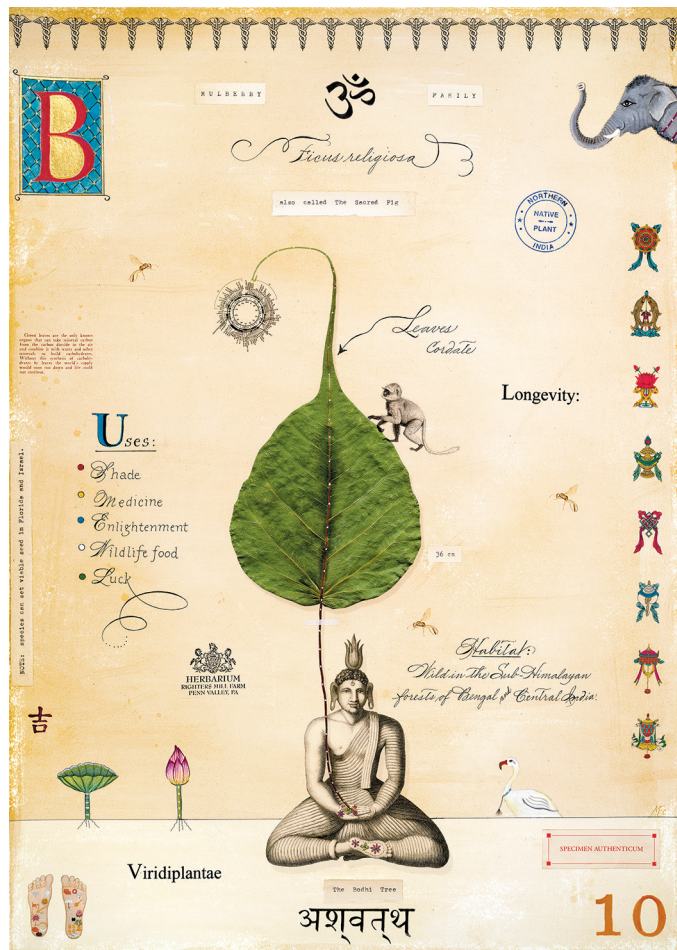
Latin or scientific name of a particular plant and notes made from observations of plants in their habitat, for instance. "For this show I really zeroed in on plants that I thought were important to either the culture of Santa Fe or that I liked visually. One such piece, *Juniper With Tissue*, makes a not-so-subtle reference to a plant whose pollen is a powerful allergen. "I can't come to Santa Fe from January to May, because I'm so allergic to that plant."

More than 30 of Cardamone's botanical illustrations are included in *Flora Fantastica*. A lot of her plant depictions appear, in *trompe l'oeil* fashion, to jump off the page. Like her depiction of juniper, her images of ivy, white pine, spruce, and goldenseal, among others, look real enough to touch — right down to the tape that appears to affix them to the paper, making them seem like actual collected specimens. But in a way, that is exactly what they are. "Botanical illustrators try to record a plant as accurately as possible, to help further our understanding of it. I always keep that in the back of my mind. What a botanical illustrator does is, he breaks down the anatomical parts of a plant. But I'm breaking it down to include not just the anatomy of the plant but the mythology, the spiritual, the ecological, the medicinal."

By way of example, Cardamone's *Tree of Life*, an amalgam of parts from different New Mexico plants, including prickly pear, aspen, and cannabis leaves, also contains the iconic image of a hummingbird. A snake and rabbit in the stylized manner of traditional Navajo art — like images you might see in a sand painting — are also featured, alluding to the symbiotic relationship between plants and animals.

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Flora Fantastica, continued from Page 47

Although Cardamone was trained as an artist at Rosemont College in Pennsylvania in the late 1970s and at Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia in the early 1980s, her interest in botanical art developed later, while she was pursuing studies in horticulture in the Barnes Foundation's Arboretum program, also in Philadelphia.

Cardamone's visuals, some cultural and some botanical, take on an ethnographic aura, as she records not only plant life but the customs and beliefs associated with them as well. "I am not an ethnobotanist by trade or profession, but it's what I'm interested in and inspired by. People's relationships with plants fascinate me. My work is like botanical social commentary. It's funny what plants were, historically — people's lives depended on them for food and medicine. Now, they're a lot more about decoration and less about medicine, but that knowledge is coming back." In her *Ginkgo With Chinese Man*, Cardamone depicts an Asian figure in period dress holding the stem of the ginkgo leaf, with a large brain resting on his head — a reference to the widely held belief in the plant's properties as a memory enhancer. The phrase "a living fossil" appears at the upper right of the piece and is a reference to the ginkgo's astounding longevity as a species (variations of it have existed for more than 200 million years).

Other associations between pop culture or literary references and the plants in Cardamone's herbarium are less explicit. In *Ivy With Humpty Dumpty*, for instance, it takes a small intuitive leap to make the association between ivy, often seen growing along walls, and the literary character. "As ivy grows, it changes form from its juvenile stage to its adult stage. I guess I'm just a little crazy. A wall? Juvenile?



Of course you would have to use Humpty Dumpty. A scientist would never mount ivy with Humpty Dumpty, but I just think it's so appropriate for that plant. Ivy is native to Great Britain and Western Europe, and the nursery rhymes came from that area."

What elevates Cardamone's work from straightforward botanical description is the inclusion of the world outside the immediate habitat of the specimens depicted, creating a larger, more well-rounded understanding of these plants in our lives and, perhaps, of our lives in theirs. ◀

details

- ▼ *Flora Fantastica: The Botanical Art of MF Cardamone*
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 14; artist talks 4 p.m. Friday, Oct. 14 & 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 15; exhibit through Thursday, Oct. 20
- ▼ Selby Fleetwood Gallery, 600 Canyon Road, 992-8877

Top left, *Bohdi With Buddah*, 2010, mixed media on paper, 18 x 24 inches

Above, *Seed Head*, 2010, mixed media, 14 x 20 inches