

COMING INTO BLOOM

OLENA DUCHÈNE DRAWS ON HER BACKGROUND AS BOTH ENGINEER AND FINE ARTIST TO CREATE STILL LIFE FLORALS THAT EXPRESS A SENSE OF HER STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

Olena Duchêne is experienced in reinventing herself. In 2012, she moved to France from her native Ukraine and settled in Melun, a small community of approximately 40,000 people, located not far from Paris. In 2013, after giving birth to her second child, she started spending much of her time at home, observing nature in her garden. There, throughout the seasons, she grows Japanese quince, roses, irises, tulips, peonies, dahlias and daffodils.

Back in Ukraine, Duchêne had worked as a designer in an architecture studio. In France, as her life began unfolding on a more domestic scale, she started painting still lifes of flowers, using her light-filled home as her studio. "I was always an artist at heart," she says, "but previously, painting was something I did outside of work. I used to give away my paintings to family and friends. Now that I have the opportunity to spend more time working with tactile media rather than on a screen, I can finally express my inner vision."



Première Floraison (pastel on Pastelmat, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4")



FORGING CHARACTER

The move to France wasn't the first time Duchêne's life changed and she had to adapt, honing her creative skills along the way. In her early childhood, her family moved across the country to western Ukraine, only to return east to her native city after a few years. She kept painting throughout kindergarten and primary school, and later in group studio lessons taught by a professional artist. Eventually, she secured a place in a high school focused on fine art, which gave her a strong

foundation in the fundamentals.

Duchêne worked hard in art school, but it wasn't long before she had to scrap her plans and adapt to a new situation once again. The Soviet Union, of which Ukraine was part, collapsed in 1991, and the predictability of education, careers and everyday life was rattled. Duchêne coped, in part, by learning the newest computer design programs at the time, such as Adobe Photoshop and 3D architectural modeling software. Gradually, she acquired a degree as a construction engineer and, with it, technical

and analytical skills that would later serve her in art-making, too.

All these experiences have contributed to the person and artist Duchêne is today. "The challenges and difficulties I've faced help me even now," she says, "because they shaped my character, approach to life and creativity, and solidified my strong personality." Speaking in Ukrainian through a translator, Duchêne uses the word *zakalka*, which, translated literally, means the hardening of metal via rapid temperature changes.

"My creativity has been shaped



"My emotions begin the painting, then the engineer joins in."

— OLENA DUCHÈNE

ABOVE
Iris (pastel on gessoed paper, 11½x9½)
OPPOSITE
Roses de Jardin I (pastel on gessoed paper, 13¾x13¾)



LEFT
Pivoine (pastel on gessoed paper, 17½x11½)

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM
Roses (pastel on pastel card, 11¾x11¾)

Roses in Verre (pastel on paper, 11¾x11¾)

by my search for alternative solutions to various issues," she continues. "As both an engineer and an artist, I'm always looking for ways to experiment and innovate."

ARTIST AND ENGINEER

Duchêne's art is a sometimes uneasy union of her emotional response to visual phenomena and her more analytical, technical mind looking for ways to convey that emotion on the paper. "I don't look at a flower like it's just a flower," she says. "I'm not drawn to flowers as subject matter simply because I like them. I'm only interested in painting flowers

that create a strong emotional response in me."

For Duchêne, all art arises from spontaneous feeling, and that must be the driving force. "I'm interested in complex objects that have different components, and the process of painting helps me to break down the large structure into small pieces and get to know what everything is made of," she says, putting on her engineer hat. "My emotions begin the painting, then the engineer joins in."

When starting a piece, the artist first breaks down the composition into masses on the page via a charcoal or graphite sketch. Then, while painting, she evaluates how certain shapes appear as part of



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the composition, making adjustments as necessary. Sometimes the creative and analytical parts of her mind work in unison—she often creates very quick and emotional works in just a few hours. Other times, the path from inspiration to realization isn't so straightforward. "There are some works for which I don't achieve a solution for years," she says.

Duchêne's work is marked by an ongoing struggle between her artistic and analytical sides. She strives to capture authentic emotion, and she stops working on a painting when she feels the engineer in her taking too much control. Her goal is to use her technical expertise only in the service of conveying what her artistic side is experiencing. Yet, she recognizes the need to strike a balance between the two sides. "It's always difficult to stop reasoning and reflect only emotion," she says. "I'm always working on that."

This inner reckoning results in the artist rejecting much of her output. "The end result viewers see is just 'the tip of the iceberg' of the amount of work that was done," she says.



LEFT
Bouquet de Pivoines
(pastel on Pastelmat,
19¾x13¾)

OPPOSITE
Roses de Jardin II
(pastel on paper,
15¾x11¾)

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NOT-SO-STILL LIFE

The paintings that do survive Duchêne’s rigorous pruning present a striking encounter with flowers. The artist finds economical means to show how complex surfaces curve and fold in on themselves to make up an iris, the way roses bow under their own weight and the tender-yet-precise edges of their petals.

Duchêne’s flowers may look frail and delicate—almost transparent—as in *Premiere Floraison* (page 60–61), or tangible and forcefully present with a rougher finish, as in *Roses de Jardin I* (page 62). You can see the artist’s restraint at work

and the powerful dynamism created in her paintings. The flowers don’t exactly look pinned-down, but rather captured in motion or a state of becoming.

Duchêne sometimes enjoys the challenge of painting flowers over multiple days, in different light with shifting weather, or as blooming or wilting causes subtle changes in their form. She doesn’t use reference photos because she feels they impede her from getting to the essence of her subject. “It’s my job as an artist to capture the changing nature of my subjects,” she says. “My cat, who often seems more static than flowers, is much easier for me to paint.”

INTO THE UNKNOWN

When asked if she has any advice for aspiring artists, Duchêne shared a message that’s as much an encouragement as it is a warning. “It’s not easy,” she says. “Making art is a lot of work, and most of that work is visible only to the maker. There are many failures, and you may face personal criticism for what you put out there. The field is unpredictable, and there’s no blueprint for a successful art career—just like there’s no blueprint for a successful painting. As an aspiring artist, you must always be ready to experiment, learn and change.”

Duchêne is quick to note that she doesn’t want to discourage aspiring artists; she simply wants to be honest about what the life is like and offer advice she believes can help them advance. “The key,” she says, “is not to rely on external validation or look for ready-made solutions. It’s a challenging field, but that’s precisely why you have to find the spirit and determination to keep going. Find things that inspire you and motivate you to work. If you heed your inner voice, it will show you how to move forward.”

One has to compromise and adapt, of course. Duchêne recognizes that her own work, in part, may change based on market demands, but she also stresses the importance of finding a balance between meeting the needs of the market and expressing creativity. “Without giving voice to your own feelings and motivation, you cannot make art,” she says. “The analytical, technical mind can’t be allowed to take over. Keeping that under control will allow the artist you already are to come through and find wonder and creative opportunity wherever you find yourself.”

One thing is clear: Duchêne’s resilience, which she’s acquired through her lived and professional experience, has been foundational to her success as an artist. “Everything I’ve done in my life has had a creative basis, and I’ve developed a special way of looking at ordinary things,” she says. “It was never my life’s goal to *become* an artist, because I’ve always been one.” **PJ**

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Ukraine-born **Olena Duchêne** (olenaduchene.com) works in pastel, watercolor and gouache. A sought-after workshop instructor, the artist is known for her vibrant and expressive style, which often incorporates a blend of techniques across multiple media. She lives and works in Melun, France.

