

flowers of resilience

FOR UKRAINIAN ARTIST **VERA KAVURA**, FLORALS SYMBOLIZE PERSISTENCE EVEN UNDER THE HARSHTEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

Fields of Ukraine (pastel on paper, 20x28)



There are some who believe that painting flowers isn't a serious artist's endeavor, says Vera Kavura, but she's not one of them. For her, flowers carry pure color, a richness of form and a hint of the divine. Her pastel paintings of flower arrangements and landscapes bursting from the picture plane have taken on even greater significance in a time of war and upheaval.

We caught up with Kavura earlier this year, in February. She has been living for nearly six months in Rimini, on the northern Adriatic coast of Italy, with her husband, mother and 16-year-old daughter—refugees of the war in Ukraine. Before that, they were internally displaced from their home to the western part of Ukraine. Throughout a difficult year, Kavura has steadfastly continued her practice of painting flowers.

NOT QUITE STILL LIFE

Although she has no formal training as an artist, Kavura remembers that in art classes offered as part of an after-school program, students would often paint still lifes featuring pots and lengths of fabric. Years later, Kavura decided to replicate the exercise, but elected to paint something more “alive”—vibrant flowers with character. For her, flowers became a way to master the new-to-her pastel medium. She has been painting florals in pastel for more than five years now.

Everything came together fairly quickly for Kavura. She got her first professional set of 72 pastels, selected her subject matter, began working and created an Instagram profile. To her surprise, people online responded positively to her paintings—“and it really encouraged me to work hard and regularly,” Kavura says.

THE WEIGHT OF A FLOWER

Kavura has observed and admired flowers longer than she has been painting them. Until the war started, she and her family would spend nearly the entire year at their summer home outside of Kyiv. There was an abundance of flowers in their home garden, as well as in the fields beyond. Seeds of wild poppies Kavura harvested would inadvertently take root on their land. “They grew by themselves, but also by my hands, because I brought them there,” she says.

Many of her viewers on social media also associate Kavura's flowers with places and sensations they know deeply, such as a grandmother's house or the fragrant wafting scents from childhood. “People forget that flowers are always in our lives,” the artist says. “They accompany us in a lot of events—you can instantly recognize flowers from your wedding bouquet, for instance.” Far from a light subject, Kavura's bouquets carry the weight of memory.

MAKING SENSE OF THE SUBJECT

When Kavura paints flowers, she works closely with them. The experience is as unmediated as possible; she never relies on photos and typically doesn't make sketches, either.

A new painting begins with the arrangement of the bouquet, which is typically comprised of store-bought flowers and the grasses, leaves and twigs Kavura gathers from outdoors. Touch is a key part of the artist's process. She gets to “know” the day's flowers with her hands.

After Kavura places the bouquet on her worktable, she positions the flowers within close proximity to take advantage of the response the flowers provoke in all of her senses. The artist is immersed in the flowers, feeling the vibrancy of their colors and getting to know each one individually. She describes it as diving into the flowers. “I feel their aroma close,” Kavura says. “It's like getting *inside* the flowers. I'm really close to them, so they can influence me, and then what I feel can influence the viewer.” Many of her followers share that the magnificently painted flowers evoke a sense of smell, so strong is their presence on the page.

PURE PIGMENT

Working flat, Kavura paints directly on the sheet sans underdrawing. “I start from color depiction right away,” she says. She only paints in natural light, so that the impression of the bouquet's colors on the page is as clear as possible. Pigment is placed on paper to indicate the massing of the biggest flower heads. She makes broad marks on the paper with the pastel stick, blends with her fingers and repeats. In this way, she builds the flower heads that serve as the main characters in her composition.

Kavura moves from the overall shape to individual petals and then to the finer details. In general, she starts with the foreground elements, and then moves to the background. From the flowers spring the crown of grasses, twigs and leaves surrounding the bouquet. Kavura may use a sponge to pull out these forms from the flowers. These auxiliary elements are depicted with less body and detail and serve to highlight the stars of the show—irises, chrysanthemums, peonies and sunflowers that burst forth from the neutral background, almost as if looking up and out at us. Kavura's approach is not unlike a portrait, in



After the Rain (pastel on paper, 28x20)

which an artist would start with the face. Similarly, the periphery of the flower arrangement is akin to a person's clothes framing their visage.

WORKING AGAINST TIME

"When I start painting, time disappears," Kavura says. She can easily spend five or six hours at her painting table without realizing it. Because live flowers change from day to day, Kavura works at a quick pace to convey their presence. Most of her paintings are completed in one day, or indeed in one go, as she aims to capture a moment in the life of her subject.

The nature of the flowers requires full immersion; light, touch, smell and color figure into capturing their glory. Some of the subjects Kavura works with are only available for a brief time each year. Lilacs, for example, bloom for about two weeks in late spring. "Flowers change, appear and disappear, and this challenge motivates me," she says. The seasonal cycles are a path to growth for her. "Each spring, I realize I'm a different person. I'm changing from a technical perspective and in my understanding of the flowers, so I get new ideas and try new materials."

FLOWERS IN EXILE

Kavura says all she needs to make her art is "natural light, different flowers and a lot of pastel." In her apartment in Italy, these basic conditions are readily available. She purchases flowers familiar to her from her homeland and combines them with foraged plants, such as olive twigs, from her morning walks along the seaside promenade.

Much like the flower arrangements she paints from life, Kavura's painting practice is growing in a new direction. She's now painting landscapes—expansive fields bathed in golden light that feature individual wildflowers in the foreground and a distant horizon (see *Demonstration: Cosmos, Stars on the Earth* (pages 40–41). The viewpoint is low and close to the ground, as if the field is portrayed from the plants' perspective. There's a timeless, tranquil quality to the images.

Kavura paints these landscapes using few references. She says she's not consciously resorting to her imagination, either. These places, she says, are simply "a part of me," imprinted on her memory. Kavura is thinking of her summer house near Kyiv, but also of Ukraine more generally, as in *Fields of Ukraine* (page 34). "For me, now, it's more valuable to show the places where those flowers grew—or have grown," she says.

ART AT A TIME OF WAR

Life has changed dramatically for Kavura and her family over the past year. While she, her husband, her mother and her teenage daughter have fled, other loved ones still remain in Ukraine. Kavura's son, a 23-year-old student at the Kyiv Architecture Academy, is unable to leave the country because of the draft. To explain her feelings of leaving him behind, Kavura references 13th-century Persian poet Rumi, whom she quotes as saying, "You shall die before your death."

"When you're dying, you're not able to take anything with you to the grave," Kavura says—and she

Gifts of Spring (pastel on paper, 20x28)





Lilacs (pastel on paper, 20x28)

compares this to leaving family, friends, home and belongings behind. In another sense, she says that the experience resembles death in that “you cannot protect your loved ones, your children.”

In this realm, Kavura’s art has taken on a new significance. She shares that, initially, she had doubts about her role as an artist in this historic moment. Kavura wondered if flowers were “appropriate to draw at this time,” but she has embraced her practice as a means of overcoming hardship.

The artist remembers spring bursting forth shortly after the war began in February 2022—and the stark contrast of bloom and destruction. Nature was still moving forward, in spite of everything. One may die before one’s death, but one may recover and go on, too.

Kavura notes that her viewers didn’t think that painting flowers in a time of war was inappropriate. “I realized that people really want and need to feel that life continues,” she says, “and my experience is that the best symbol of life’s persistence are flowers—live flowers.” After the war began, many of Kavura’s paintings were purchased by Ukrainians. “It was really strange for me, because there was bombing all around, but people wanted these feelings,” she says. Kavura realized that her paintings were pictures of surviving adversity—of hope—and people needed that now more than ever.

“Of course, all my thoughts are with Ukraine,” she continues. “They’re with my relatives who are there. But when I draw flowers—when I really dive into this practice—I switch from fear to light.” Happy to be identified as a flower artist, Kavura shows that the unassuming genre delivers so much more than what’s seen on the surface. **PJ**

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Peony Season (pastel on paper, 16x20)



Vera Kavura (kavura-art.com; Instagram @verakavura), of Kyiv, Ukraine, is a self-taught pastelist who came to the medium in 2017. She’s an Associate Artist with Unison Colour.

demonstration Cosmos, Stars on the Earth

By Vera Kavura

I wanted to depict the cosmos from my garden in Ukraine in the setting sun—a scene I've witnessed hundreds of times—but am currently missing while I reside in Italy during the war. In what is a rare instance, I fortuitously had a reference sketch on hand.



Step 1: Unlike my usual approach, I lay in the background first on a 28x20-inch sheet of Art Spectrum Colourfix paper in Leaf Green Dark. I use warm golden tones to convey the sunset.



Step 2: I place grasses and a cosmo across the sky plane. At this stage, my touches are delicate to prevent destroying the harmony and purity of the background.



Step 3: I carefully select tones to convey the setting sun shining through the additional thin petals.



Step 4: I focus on the field and outline the flower buds. I create visual harmony by preserving the balance of form, size and color by means of color spots.



Step 5: I use charcoal to make vertical strokes that convey the depth, direction and growth pattern of the grasses while shaping the primary flowers.



Step 6: The focus is on details and flowers, accomplished by distributing color brightness and intensity from the sunlit petals to those in the shadows.



Step 7: Varying the size and color of the flower heads creates perspective and depth.



Close-up: Flowers in the shadows are in focus. It's important to remember that secondary elements shouldn't distract from the leading ones.



Step 8: It's the little tweaks that ensure the composition and tones are balanced. I intensify the final sunbeams in some areas and soften them in others.



Final Thoughts: Like many artists, I'm driven by my intuition and the feelings a painting produces. If I don't feel the need to amend something or change an angle, it means that I've achieved harmony in *Cosmos, Stars on the Earth* (pastel on paper, 28x20).