



STORY TELLER

More than pretty pictures

BY ROBIN L. FLANIGAN

While at an artist's residency in northern Vermont, about an hour away from where she grew up, Emily Glass struck up a deal with one of the gardeners. He would leave outside her door any dandelion greens and other weeds he had to remove from the property.

Glass tells this story as she points to one of her oil paintings, *I Discard*, a rectangular homage to the unwanted, to plant matter that provides insight into indifference, indulgence and privilege.

"I don't just find a plant, think it's pretty, then paint it," she explains. "I paint a plant because there's something about it, or our culture, or the everyday experience of how we relate with each other that I feel needs to be talked about."

Glass, a visiting assistant professor at Rochester Institute of Technology's College of Imaging Arts and Sciences, has shifted the focus of her artwork recently from animals, inspired by the farms she used to visit for inspiration, to plants.

Also tapping into themes of social identity and self-image, her work reflects and communicates that what people grow in their front yards, and what they put on their tables, is influenced by social status or economy.



Gabrielle Plucknette

"You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength." —Marcus Aurelius 89



“Whether you have iceberg lettuce or arugula in your salad can be a commentary on your culture and background,” she says. “Where you live affects, in a way, what you believe in and value.”

For example, arugula is much more likely to be seen in metropolitan cities than rural areas, notes Glass, an observation she made after much research that led her to title a piece dedicated to the tender plant, “The Liberal Arugula of Our Current Culture”.

Now 33, Glass was a college freshman with an undeclared major when she told a friend over lunch that she was inspired and challenged by her art classes but that art wasn’t a practical career choice.

“He said, ‘If it’s something you’re interested in, you’ll find a way to make it practical.’ I needed somebody else to say that,” she recalls, “to allow me to start exploring that as an option.”

Within months she became a fine arts studio major, later earning her diploma with a concentration in painting.

Her pieces, on the larger side, can take a couple of years to finish, which is why she tends to work on two to eight at a time.

“I like this scale I’m working at, because I stand when I work and I can use my whole body,” she says. “It’s a little like dancing.”

In the studio she converted from the master bedroom in her Chili home, she studies books on art, ecology, biology and gardening, and continually learns while teaching three studio classes each semester.

“When someone starts teaching something, that’s when they have to fill in any gaps they have in their understanding,” she says. “I want to always be adding to what I know. That’s rewarding to me.”

Most of her work gets done in the summer. Glass prefers to rise with the sun, have breakfast, then paint for three to four hours before giving herself a break for lunch. Then she works another three to four hours, at which point, she says, she is completely exhausted.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from feeling like I’ve worked hard,” she adds. “If I haven’t gotten to that point, I feel like I’ve missed something, that I haven’t put in what I can.”

