

## INTIMATE IMAGES OF FLORA AND SURVIVAL

I've heard more than one artist during the last two months question what they are doing, wonder about the validity of making art in a world so troubled. Apart from the poignant photos and videos of the Twin Towers tragedy, which besides their aesthetic values are a therapeutic aspect, people are questioning what good art is and how it is relevant. The questions are asked particularly of art that portrays beauty or is called pretty, like the work of Valentina Dubasky, now on display at Cheryl Pelavin Fine Art.

My short answer comes from personal experience – during the 70s I gave up art to go “back to the land” because organic farming seemed more likely than artist to save the world. Several years later I understood that I was not a farmer or even an artistic one – I was a painter, and in trying to save the world I was losing myself. I have since come to think that the best thing our country has to offer is not just freedom of expression but opportunities of expression. To be able to find out what one's inner necessities are and then to explore them – this seems to me the very fundamental liberty.

This is what Valentina Dubasky is doing. She has traveled extensively and her latest exhibition reflects her experience on the Silk Route from Italy to Asia. However these are not majestic, panoramic landscapes, but intimate environments created by plant life themselves or at least survives, in the world she passes through. She is sustained by places where modern incursions have not yet squelched the local flora – oases where no matter how urban-sprawled and ugly fight the city, a bit of dirt left alone has given green life the opportunity to take hold.



“Forest Site Wat Phimai”, 2001, one of Valentina DuBasky's works on view through Jan. 5 at Cheryl Pelavin Fine Art.

Her paintings depict not the sites tourists write home about, but ambient environments of color and light, anonymous rather than iconic. These edenic landscapes seem like places longed for and dreamed about, peaceful, beautiful, contemplative. The plants in her paintings and collages – trees, orchids, ferns and fungi – are softly lit and float in an underwater-like atmosphere, blotting out the all-too-often banal and grim arena of the modern city.

These plants and paintings are pretty, even beautiful. Beauty in the current art world is often accused of being trite, mistakenly seen as a way of avoiding important issues of the day. But this is because beauty is considered an end in itself, sought or denied depending on one's point of view. In both real plant life and Dubasky's artwork, beauty is not an end in itself but a part of a process, the visual byproduct of a fierce and expressive will to exist. Paradox-

ically there is also a strange sadness in this imagery, as if these plants shimmer on the edge of his vision as if they could as easily disappear as remain in our site.

These paintings evoke an intuitive understanding of plant life rarely seen in landscape or floral art. The trees are part of an entirely, larger brethren to other plants. Each plant marks its territory and even if it is one of many, it has, like a person, and individuality that cannot be denied. This is not how people usually think of trees or plants; they see them as settings for human activities – reproducible lawn decorations, nice additions to streets or parks, something to be cleared away on a building site, or perhaps in a larger context as oxygen-producing machines. Even less than wild animals, plants are not seen as free agents – rarely are they seen apart from human and's, as creative interactive elements in their own right.

In a way, the same can be said of art. It is seen as interior decoration, as a good investment strategy, as therapeutic activity or as message-oriented propaganda for a social course. But rarely is it seen as having its own often peculiar, inner necessity, engaged in staking its own claim in the world, interacting creatively with all who come across it. This may be a time for looking deeply into art and into the world around us, as Dubasky has done. Like ancient cave painters she seems to be trying to assure perpetuity of that which she loves and needs by making its presence on a wall. One thing is sure: to create a healthy world for all life, human and otherwise we must expand opportunities of expression, not let them slip away.

**Forests, Orchids and Fossils:  
New Cave Wall Landscapes** to Jan. 5 at Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, 13 Jay St. 925 – 9424,