

THE GARDEN PATH

A Darling of the fashion set who stopped to simulate the roses.

By William Norwich

Black is so last season, so last century, as you no doubt know. Designers as diverse as Valentino, Rei Kawakubo and Jil Sander seeded their spring 2000 collections with astral color, high-hippie embellishment and voluminous floral themes. Fashion is in bloom again. For now.

This is not your mother's 1960's Flower Power, however. Beware of euphoric recall. **If "pretty" is the new frontier for grown-up women, then "flowers" are the New Subversives, at least for fashion's avant-garde.** Where else do you go when your precious punk black is co-opted by the mainstream?

The artist Peter Dayton, who works with flower images, enjoys a fashionable following. Among others, the designer John Bartlett, Pierre Balmain's Georgina Brandolini, the writer Bob Colcello, Vogue's design director, Charles Churchward, the interior designer Alan Tanksley and the aforementioned Valentino all collect the flower paintings that Dayton, once a punk rocker, has been doing for more than 10 years.

Dayton and his wife, Barbara, an artist who paints pictures of dogs, live with their infant son, Frederick, in a comfortable, not overly large house near the village of East Hampton on Long Island's East End.

The Dayton homestead has neither a garden nor dog.

"I don't have a sentimental connection to flowers or gardens," the artist said in his studio recently. "I'm not obsessed. I just use flowers because I like them. I don't really even see flowers as flowers anymore. I see them as color, shape, pattern."

From a distance, Dayton's pictures may look painted, but they are not. The artist collects photographs of flowers from magazines, seed catalogs and old garden books. He makes laser copies and manipulates the size of the images, then cuts them up, creates collages and coats them with resin or gel.

"I'm not that interested in contents," Dayton confessed. **"I'm interested in style, meaning, how things are done. I don't render."** He paused and sipped from a mug of coffee. "I take pictures and make new pictures from them. I don't think anyone would be interested in these flowers if they were painted. I really don't." Though Dayton doesn't take his own photographs of flowers, he has photographed



Peter Dayton and his flower paintings

garden gnomes for a series called "My Swiss Friend." Sometimes he works without flowers entirely and paints abstractions with resin or glitter.

Dayton's artistic talent was recognized at an early age in Upper Brookville, N.Y., where he grew up. "I vividly recall coloring in the outline of a robin on a mimeographed sheet of paper, and the teacher's praise: "This kid can really color,"" Dayton said, and laughed.

He got into punk rock while studying painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He went from lead singer in La Peste— "lots of vinyl; 28-inch waist"— to his own eponymous new wave band. He performed with the Cars, moved to Paris and got a record deal. "It all culminated with me lip-synching on French TV. A real moment of madness."

In 1989, he came home and moved in with his mother, who was living in East Hampton. "I had no money, but I wanted to start painting again." He got the idea for his flower collages by accident. "I happened to find all these old House and Gardens from the 50's in a Dumpster behind my mother's house. That's how I began."

The artist Jack Pierson saw Dayton's work and, in 1994, recommended him to the Chelsea art dealer Paul Morris. "Sometimes," Dayton said, "I think my success was due to real estate. Chelsea was such a new thing." Still represented by the Paul Morris gallery, Dayton is also preparing for a one-man show at the Winston Wachter Mayer Fine Art gallery on East 78th Street in July.

In the meanwhile, to keep his family in food and art supplies,

Peter Dayton paints houses. "Nothing faux, nothing except straight-ahead color," Dayton explained, "with the occasional threat to do people's bathrooms with my collages. But they always back off."

IN THE FLOWER POWER HALL OF FAME:

Queen Elizabeth
The Queen Mother
Minnie Pearl
Laura Ashley
Lilly Pulitzer
Martha Mitchell
Doris Day