
Catie Barron

Where Art and Science Meet

By: Yara Zgheib

This story begins, as most good ones do, in a garden. An orchid farm.

A father and his eight-year-old daughter are gathering bark chips. Added to the soil in their own back yard during the winter freeze, they will break down, infuse it with nitrogen, and ready it for planting in the spring.

"While dad worked hard, I was busy scaling the mountains of bark chips. I saw this tiny white wing sticking out of the mulch. It stopped me in my tracks, and with as much gentleness as an eight-year-old could gather, I slowly pulled at it. What came out was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

It was a white cattleya orchid with angel-like wings. It was silky smooth and had ruffles. It was broken and dirty, so I sat there on the pile and wiped it as clean as I could, taking great care to not damage it further. I remember carrying it in my hands all the way home and giving it to my mother. I was so proud of having found something so magical."

Catie Barron was called Catherine Pietrzyk at the time. From her father, she inherited a passion for botany, and in particular, a love of flowers.

"Dad would tell me about the different seasons and which flowers grew when. He taught me about bulbs versus seeds; annuals versus perennials. We built flower beds in our garden and perused plant catalogs for flowers, fruits, and vegetables."

Me, age 4 holding a flower and wearing flowers on my pants.

In their garden, they planted beans and strawberries in spring, squash and Brussel sprouts in winter.

"I spent hours in the garden watching every plant bloom then produce the food we would eat. I admired that plants could create food and the seeds that allowed us to continue that cycle."

Catie's father was a trained union contractor, but in his free time, he loved to draw. He introduced Catie to her second passion: art.

My first preschool painting of flowers, age 4.

He painted murals on the walls of their basement. Catie would soon do the same, drawing large images on the walls of her bedroom and spending weeks painting them.

After high school, she applied to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She was accepted, but tuition was a problem, so she studied art and graphic design at Iowa State University. Two years later, she left her studies for a job in banking.

Life took her on a roller coaster ride of career and life changes. Once, having lost her job to downsizing, Catie used her severance package to enroll in horticulture school.

"I was seeking something that fed my soul better."

At thirty-three, she was diagnosed with stage 2B reproductive cancer.



Photo Credit: Catarzina.com

"My life changed forever and my journey took on a new, important meaning to me. In the hospital, during my surgery and recovery, I had many conversations with myself and God. I was being given this amazing opportunity of a new life; I was going to make sure I was doing what I was meant to do with it.

I realized that each of us has a gift and that if we can find out what it is, we can make a huge difference in the world. For the next six years, I worked in non-profits trying to find a way to give back what I was given.

I shared my struggles with a counselor who told me that our lives are like a tree. Our childhood is the trunk and our choices become the branches. We may take a branch out and realize that it has come to an end. Sometimes, we must return to the trunk and take a new branch.

She asked me what I wanted to be as a child. My reply was immediate: "An artist!"

She asked me why I wasn't an artist and I honestly had no answer."

Twenty-three years after she had been accepted at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Catie applied again... and was accepted, with grants and scholarships!

Since then, Catie's mission as an artist has been to explore the human connection to flowers and their effect on society.

"I discovered that flowers are with us at the most important times of our lives. We can rarely think of hosting an event or having a special occasion without flowers being a part of it. They help us remember those times in our lives and recall the emotions we felt during them. Flowers are so much a part of who we are."

From her first experience with the cattleya orchid, to the first time she received flowers from a boy, to her wedding bouquet, flowers in a funeral home,

"These flowers have meanings that have crossed generations and far away distances to reach us. [...] they bring comfort to those who are suffering and create a connection among people."

Catie's work is unique, both in technique and content. Her paintings reflect her strong grasp of botany and appreciation of its beauty.

"Plants have a brain. Even if you plant them upside down in the ground, they know which way to grow and will manipulate their stems to breach the surface of the ground. They sway with the movement of their light source. Some believe, and I suppose I do as well, that they have a soul and can feel too. Studies have shown the benefits of human conversation on plants ability to thrive.

Plants ask for nothing. They manipulate, through evolution, their colors and fragrances to attract bugs and bees that will help them propagate through pollination.

George Carlin once said that each time he sees a flower growing through a crack in the sidewalk that it is absolutely heroic. I get that. I believe it is the respect and admiration that I have for flowers that translates into the affectionate way I treat them in my artwork."

Catie paints with oils. The technique she applies is called a reductive process. It involves covering the canvas with paint at first, then using turpentine on a rag, brush, or even hands, removing the paint to create the image.



Photo Credit: Catarzina.com

"As I pull each piece of the painting out of the darkness, my heart beats faster and I get that excited eight-year-old feeling again. It's my favorite part of painting. It screams creation to me."

Her work bridges the space between science and art. Her paintings are intricate, breathtaking, and anatomically accurate. Through them, the viewer is introduced to the wonder of nature and comes to value the different forms of life with which we share the planet.

"Art is a brilliant delivery method for science. It makes it approachable and understandable. Without science too, much of the art we create today would not be possible."

Pigments, for instance, are born of minerals ground, dried, combined, or oxidized. Through science, colors like this Prussian Blue become possible:

Catie loves mornings, bird of paradise flowers, and brightly colored, spring green. A favorite season is harder to choose. When she lived in the Midwest, it was fall. Now that she lives in sunny Arizona, she enjoys the spring:

"Spring encompasses hope so well. Hope for the winter thaw, hope for warmer days, and hope that life is renewed."

If she could go on the field trip of her dreams, it would be to the Singapore Botanical Gardens. In it is preserved a portion of their original rain forest. Tropical plants like ginger, birds of paradise, and orchids of every shape and size grow together in harmony. Witnessing life in its fullest equilibrium in such places soothes the soul.

Catie's journey in art and life keeps taking her wonderful places. At every stage, she observes, enjoys, and appreciates.

"Art has taught me to cherish moments and people. It has taught me to spend more time in the present and see the gifts around me. Art has taught me about intuition and that if we stop long enough in a spot, we will see all the amazing details that we often are too busy to notice."

Catie's work can be viewed and purchased at

www.catarzina.com

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