



This Side of Paradise

Inspired by Dutch Golden Age still lifes, artist Jim Graham reexamines our relationship with nature.

WRITTEN BY MONIQUE MCINTOSH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON SULLIVAN



Painter Jim Graham recently began working on a series inspired by classical Dutch floral still lifes. In *The Florist* (opposite), he's created a collage of a florist's process, from initial designs to the final bouquet. He uses various images and object studies as reference, such as a black-and-white copy of a vintage painting from 1955 (right).



One wonders how the Dutch felt when they first saw tulips, watching them burst into unpredictable colors. In the 17th century, the Old Masters obsessed over these blooms, painting them in fanciful still lifes laden with other treasures from the Dutch empire. It's hard to conjure the same awe for something that's now so readily available. But the human instinct to fantasize about nature endures—and it's an impulse that's endlessly fascinating for Tucson-based artist Jim Graham.

In his surreal paintings, Graham toys with our desire for exotic wildness while challenging our dreams about nature as a separate utopia. "I want to think about nature in a way that very much includes us," he explains. "That we see ourselves as an active participant in shaping the environment and how the environment, in turn, responds to us."

The subject feels inevitable for the artist from Melbourne, Florida, his childhood having been defined equally by the coast and the fanciful imagery it inspires: Think mermaids and manatees, real flamingos alongside lawn-decorating imitations. These two Floridas are entwined in earlier works like his "Coastal Lot" series, born after discovering an abandoned, hurricane-wrecked diner that "was slowly turning back into dunes," says Graham. Here the human hand is present, palmetto fronds entangled with bird baths and plastic flamingos.

Moving to desert-dry Arizona inspired him to narrow his gaze to exploring the classical Dutch still lifes. He's drawn to their fallacy; these tabletop floral arrangements could never exist in real life, featuring flowers that bloomed during different seasons and in far-flung regions on Dutch trade routes. "It's the artist's way of composing and controlling nature into a single view," he explains.

His reinterpretation of this genre brings self awareness to this artifice, showing both the raw material and the artist's deliberate act of refining it. He conflates these facets in his painting *The Florist*. It's a collage of moments that capture a florist's process: notebook sketches, scattered blooms being prepared on a workbench and a bouquet artfully posed in the studio. "This is my way of being closer to what I'm making and how I am making it," says Graham. "I don't want my painting to feel like a final picture, but to offer a longer view on nature." ■

