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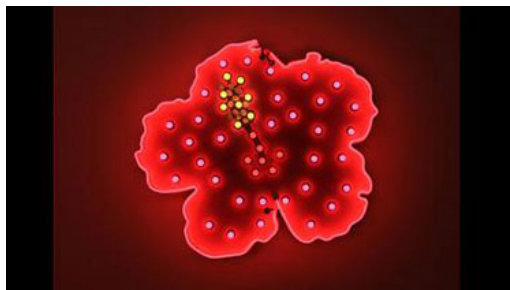
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Flower Power: Efflorescence at the John Hartell Gallery

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By SHAY COLLINS

Prof. Iftikhar Dadi, history of art, and his collaborator Elizabeth Dadi deftly combine the visual and symbolic facets of flower emblems in *Efflorescence*. The Dadis simultaneously mimic and critique nation-states' translation of borderless flowers into political imagery. The perversion produces six beautiful, otherworldly sculptures that utilize the flower form without resembling flowers in size, shape or material.



Courtesy of the John Hartell Gallery

The accessibility of the Dadis' images speaks to the prevalence of associations between nation-states and their claimed floral imagery. The exhibit's description notes that the connections between certain nations and flowers "are especially arbitrary," writing that the flowers "can truly be characterized as 'contested botanicals.'" To this end, the Dadis produce versions of the "national flowers" of six contested geopolitical regions that multiple nation-states claim to possess. Yet, it is difficult to disassociate the images from their previously related nation even with the Dadis' argument in mind.

Consider the shamrock. While quickly surveying the six sculptures, neon light radiating through the dimly-lit John Hartell Gallery, I saw the shamrock sculpture and immediately thought of Ireland. The familiar form elicited thoughts about Ireland as a political idea before I considered clover as a plant or Ireland as a geographical region. To articulate this point, the exhibit's description quotes Cornell professor emeritus Benedict Anderson, international studies: "Imagination plays a central role in how individuals cognize the nation." Similar imaginative attachments to emblems and symbols, such as passionate devotion to national flags, play out continually. However, Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi's sculptures also deal with the physical, artistic transformation of plant into emblem.

By outlining the sculptures with neon lights, the Dadis evoke signs and industrialization. The neon lights are obviously affixed on to the foremost plane of the sculpture with silver, metal joints, speaking to nations' abandonment of flowers' biological details in favor of attention-grabbing signage. Additionally, viewers cannot closely inspect one of the sculptures without submerging themselves into the sign's neon glow and, thus, being acted upon by the sign. The exhibit's statement notes that the industrial sculptures convey how "delicate natural forms are institutionally developed as fixed emblems to vindicate intangible claims of identity." A long history of signification and institutionalization thus connects the clover and the instantly recognizable shamrock, for example. Besides the obvious neon incorporation, the sculptures also include more subtle traces of industrialization.

Even without a political or philosophical reading, however, *Efflorescence* is still an impactful, alluring exhibit. In the slightly darkened gallery, the vibrant flowers’ forms were mirrored in the sleek, wooden floor. The sculptures integrated the surrounding walls and floor, washing the surrounding environment in an electric, neon haze. Against the gallery’s dim lighting, the sculptures’ saturated, intense imagery and neon glow transformed the John Hartell Gallery, instilling a hushed atmosphere. In *Efflorescence*, flowers bloomed as noticeable, salient forms even when detached from national symbolization.

As the exhibit’s description states, efflorescence refers both to glowing and staining, such that “the act of blooming is also simultaneously the art of discoloration.” This statement reveals another interesting aspect of the exhibit: the lifelessness of the featured flowers. Whereas efflorescence implies action — flowering out, blooming, discoloring — the exhibit’s sculptures and the targeted national emblems both replace the flowers’ biological lives with a supplement: national identity, or perhaps just a neon buzz.

Efflorescence effectively interacts with its surrounding psychological environment, pushing relatively minimalist sculptures to great philosophical lengths. The Dadis present the viewer with six simple floral sculptures bedecked in neon and geopolitical contexts, and the viewer’s associations complete the exhibit’s effect. For example, I struggled to detach my viewing of the shamrock’s physical form from pre-existing thoughts about Ireland, the Boston Celtics and other related entities. Yet, when I viewed a sculpture that represented a flower I did not recognize, the tension dissipated. The sculpture represented an industrial translation of the floral form, a bizarre and striking translation, but, for me, one devoid of geopolitical imagery.

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