

Slow Flowers JOURNAL

By Debra Prinzing

NEXT UP: NEW STYLES FROM INSPIRING DESIGNERS

Three emerging floral artists share their influences and inspiration.

As part of the progressive floral design community, I'm on the lookout for inspiration and ideas that challenge my assumptions and point of view. And as I reflect on what I've learned during 2018, I find myself being drawn to three design talents whose Instagram feeds I can't stop watching. Their stories, voices and creativity shine a refreshing new light on local and seasonal floral aesthetics.

Let me introduce them to you: **Whit McClure**, of Los Angeles-based **Whit Hazen**; **Jessica Gring**, of Seattle-based **Odd Flowers**; and **Brandon Scott McLean**, of Homer, Alaska-based **East Hill Floral Design**.

Their work is stimulating and unconventional. They use botanical ingredients that are both common and familiar, mixed with the unexpected and quirky. All three have charted a personal path, drawn from influences outside of conventional floral mores. I love what these emerging talents represent, and I see them as the future of our Slow Flowers community and ethos.

Here are my Q&As with each, edited for length.

Using flowers and produce from his Homer, Alaska, greenhouse, Brandon Scott McLean pays homage to 18th-century Dutch painters he admires.

Who: Whit McClure

What: Whit Hazen

Where: Los Angeles, Calif., by way of Washington, D.C.

Find her at: whithazen.com; @whit_hazen

Background: Studio floral designer **Whit McClure** moved to Los Angeles three years ago, and she has been designing with flowers ever since. Her introduction to flower farming and floral design is rooted in connections made through food justice and the local culinary community in Washington, D.C. Whit spent years after college working on farms, in community gardens and in the nonprofit world, teaching people of all ages and walks of life how to grow their own food. Eventually, she found floral design as the perfect blend of working with plants, crafting beauty, and collaborating with others while remaining committed to social justice in her free time. Ever-inspired by nature's abundant beauty and driven to respect and protect its resources, **Whit Hazen** is motivated to bring more beauty to the world for others.

How did your journey lead you to flowers? After working in the nonprofit world, I took on a side job working for **Sidra Forman**, a chef and floral designer in Washington, D.C. Because of my background around local food and growing food, I also started to become interested in flowers. I was asking questions about where flowers are being sourced. I found it interesting that there's been such a large movement in the last decade around local foods, but it hadn't shifted to flowers as much. Even though Sidra's style is more classic than mine, I was just always drawn to the fact that she made it a priority to use local products and that she never uses flower foam. Another influence is Los Angeles floral designer **Felisa Funes**, whose studio is called **Of the Flowers**. She's become a dear friend and mentor. From her, I've drawn a lot of understanding around recreating things that are in nature and how to manipulate flowers in a different way. I'm also influenced by graphic design and funky color combinations I see on buildings in Southern California.

How do you describe your design aesthetic? It's whimsical, bold and seasonally inspired. Another thing that makes my work different is that I'm not sold on always using "luxe" products, mixing the "dos" with the "don'ts," so I think that makes people reconsider flowers they may not like, flowers considered homey or rustic. For my studio practice, it's important that I can merge my passions of art, flowers and politics. I often think about how flowers bring so much joy to people's lives and how there's still so much work to be done so that more people can experience that joy (like access to economic opportunity, education, healthcare, etc.). I create beauty while at the same time expressing my strong opinions, using my voice and resources to speak truth to power. My hope is that my artwork encourages others to do more of both in their lives.

What is the craziest design you've made this year? For Amara Kitchen, a restaurant in L.A.'s Highland Park area, I created a geometric wall hanging that is also reflected by a ceiling mirror. It created a fun, optical illusion in a small space.

What's on your horizon for 2019? I am planning to make some of my Instagram posts into prints because I've had a lot of interest from followers. In the next year, I want to do more work around defining my personal style and aesthetic. By doing more (styled) shoots, I think I can show what I'm capable of doing.





Photo by
Joshua Veldstra
Photography

Who: Brandon Scott McLean
What: East Hill Floral Design
Where: Homer, Alaska
Find him at: @brandonscottmclean

Background: Born and raised in Homer, Alaska, **Brandon McLean** has a background as a sketch artist and a mural painter. His introduction to gardening began at a young age, thanks to his grandfather, who owns two independent garden centers in Riverside, Calif., and spends large portions of each summer in Homer. Fifteen years ago, his grandfather built a 450-square-foot glass greenhouse on property adjacent to where Brandon lived with his family. Over time, it has become Brandon's personal "mini farm," filled with fruit trees, 30 garden roses, *Dahlia*s, perennials like bleeding-hearts, hellebores, *Clematis* and other flowers that seem to defy the odds of Alaska winters. A self-described "farmer-florist," Brandon primarily designs for weddings and events.

How did your journey lead you to flowers? I started just with growing vegetables, but slowly, I was drawn to flowers and transitioned to all flowers a couple of years ago, growing a mix of perennials and garden roses. I have a history in art, but I didn't even think of floral design as a medium. Seeing what was happening on social media changed my perspective about flowers as an expression of art. The peony industry in Alaska was also fascinating to me, and I worked for a while with **Michelle LaFriniere** of **Chilly Root Farm**, and she was doing florist work that really intrigued me.

Who are some of your influences? Sarah Ryhanen, of **Saipua**; Susanne Hatwood, of **The Blue Carrot** in the U.K.; and Gabriela Salazar, of **La Musa de las Flores** in Mexico. Saipua was one of the first social media accounts I'd seen, and it was so unique that I was definitely so drawn to it. I was able to attend of class of Susanne's in San Francisco, which was a great moment for me. I also love Dutch still-life paintings and Dutch artists from the 1700s, like Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum.

How do you create the still-life florals that fill your Instagram feed? It's all about what's seasonal. I'm constantly inspired by what I'm surrounded by. I have a nectarine tree and an Asian pear tree, and it's fun to use those in designing. I love using fruit for my still-lives and tablescapes. For my photographs, I use one little corner of our house that gets the perfect lighting, and all of my photos are taken with my iPhone.

How do you describe your design aesthetic? I love designing with the crazier, more wild, natural materials. As I mentioned, I love using fruit. I use a lot of foraged items like high bush cranberries and dried grasses; it's what I find on old back roads and hiking trails.

What is your current floral crush? This year, I became obsessed with pansies. They're not a typical cut flower, but they have all these intricate designs and detail. They're whimsical and cute. I ordered Chianti Mix pansy seeds from **Chiltern Seeds** in the U.K. and grew them in the greenhouse in pots. They seeded themselves, and now they are everywhere!

What's on your horizon for 2019? Right now, my flower life is just on the side, and I have a job that pays the bills. I haven't fully transitioned to flowers full time, but I've acquired some property, and I'm hoping to clear it within the next year. Ideally, I'd like to get some high tunnels on it. I'd also love to have a studio and a cooler and be more of a typical florist in the winter, maybe finding unique ways of designing, like using dried ingredients I save from summer.





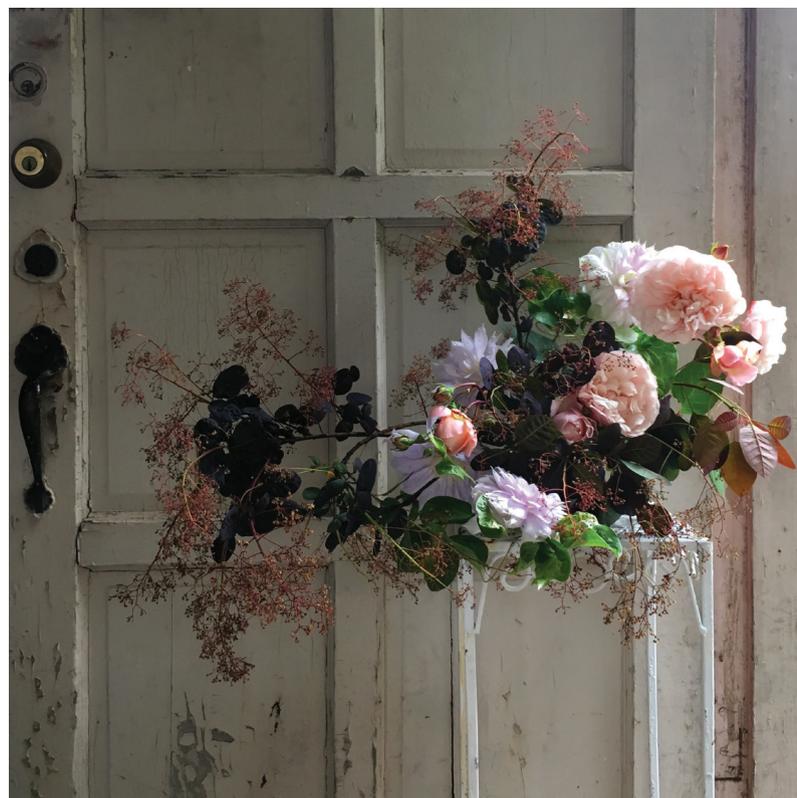
Who: Jessica Gring
What: Odd Flowers
Where: Seattle, Wash.
Find her at: getyouroadflowers.com, @odd.flowers

Background: Studio-based florist **Jessica Gring** studied horticulture at Edmonds Community College outside Seattle, at a time when agriculture was only beginning to be taught. She became friends with **Dennis Westphall** and **Diane Szukovathy**, owners of **Jello Mold Farm** in Mount Vernon, Wash., at a local farmers' market, and eventually interned and apprenticed for them for two seasons in 2009 and 2010. That led to stints with two retail florists, **The London Plane** and **Marigold & Mint**, joining the staff of **Seattle Wholesale Growers Market** and freelancing. Jessica created **Odd Flowers** in 2015 and now designs for private clients, including the downtown Seattle lululemon.

How did your journey lead you to flowers? My interest in agriculture was originally toward vegetables. I'd never met or even thought about the fact that there were flower farmers. Diane and Dennis grew all these weird, beautiful things, and their little booth at the farmers' market was like a candy shop. Diane taught me how to design. She's an amazing floral designer. My passion was birthed in the Jello Mold barn, designing with things I had grown – it came to fruition in a way that was unchangeable for me.

What inspired the name Odd Flowers? When I worked at Jello Mold Farm, Dennis used to save crooked stems of flowers for me and keep them hidden in a bucket with a Post-it note that said "odd." They were the odd stems – the ones that couldn't be sold. I thought, "That's my business name!" It is at the heart of how I design.

Who are your influences? I've learned so much from people I freelanced or worked for. My designs are rooted in the Northwest,



having worked for **Brita Fisher** and **Jeni Nelson** at **The London Plane**. I also learned a lot about color from them. **Anne Bradfield**, of **Floressence**, is an amazing businesswoman. **Bobbie Yanoupeth** and **Michael Sing**, of **BAHTOH**, have had a big influence on me in the way they run their flower shop, making everyone feel at home as a community.

I love the way **Max Gill** designs, which is part of this whole movement of things being wilder. His designs look like he just walked through the garden and picked a handful and set it in a vase. Not too premeditated, and not too perfect or precious.

How do you describe your design aesthetic? I always think about creating a little story or a little neighborhood where the flowers tell me where they want to go. I love weird muted colors and beautiful textures. I'm always on a budget, but the things that have been my restrictions – like using leftover flowers – now define my aesthetic. I try to make a big impact with unusual elements instead of going straight to the roses!

What's stretching you creatively? One of my challenges this season was to work with products I historically have hated – and find something to love about them. One was neon-yellow snapdragons that I thought were really ugly. But my design turned out weird and rad. Another design I really liked making used big *Rodgersia* leaves.

What's on your horizon for 2019? I'm apprenticing with a friend who's a craftsman-carpenter. It's a totally different direction for me, but I want to learn how to build things. I think it will help me be a more valuable designer, knowing how to build installations. ■