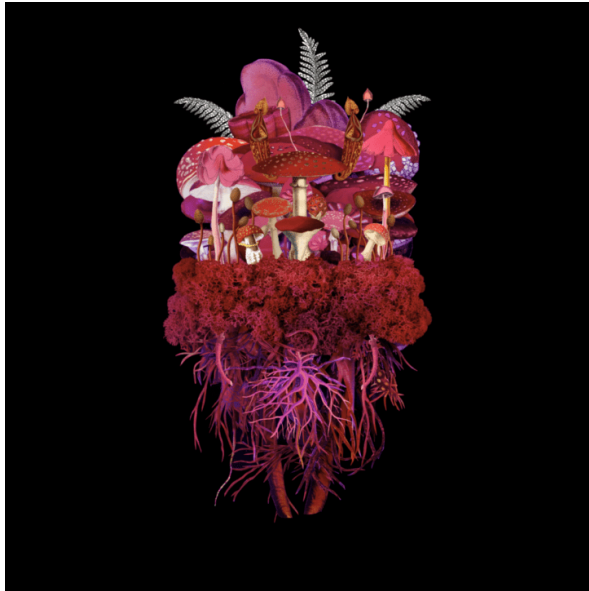


Entangled Art

The deep roots of Jana Nicole's *Botanical Troupe* series

I'm not sure, in over thirty years of interviewing people, that I've found myself in more convivial surroundings than the artist Jana Nicole's living room, in her former-schoolhouse home in the East Sussex village of Wilmington.



We're sitting in sheepskin-rug-covered Georgian armchairs either side of a crackling fire, in a large-yet-cosy room adorned by her striking pop art, among other interesting appointments: a six-foot corn plant; a doll's house, oddity-filled cloches.

Jana Nicole, petite, American, 55, sits opposite me, her long black hair cascading from underneath a Rikki-Lee Jones beret, a twinkle in her eye. Her Labradoodle puppy Bonnie is curled up beside her, having relinquished the purple soft-toy crocodile it's been carrying around.

Every now and then, during our two-hour-long conversation, she throws another log onto the fire.

This very rural setting is not what you'd immediately expect from an acclaimed pop artist whose work is currently – at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge – hung on the same wall as pieces by urban artist *par excellence*, Banksy.

Jana Nicole has reason to be cheerful, as her artistic stock is rising fast. When I last met her, it was prior to an exhibition at the Hop Gallery, in Lewes, in 2016. Now she's more accustomed to being exhibited in high-end establishments like the Saatchi Gallery, in Chelsea, or the aforementioned Fitzwilliam. And her fame is spreading across the Channel: earlier this year she won the historic and prestigious Prix Puvis de Chavannes, at the Salon des Beaux Arts in Paris, for her remarkable *Botanical Troupe* series, becoming the first American or UK-based artist to receive the honour, in its 100-year existence. These pieces are collages, painstakingly created with adorned cut-outs and real flora, celebrating the beauty of their fruit and flowers and spores, but also the tangled underworld empire ruled by their roots and mycelial networks. More of which later.



Another reason for that twinkle: Jana Nicole is looking forward to an artistic homecoming, of sorts: a solo exhibition of her recent work – featuring her ‘botanicals’ – in the coach-house of Glynde Place, the Grade 1-listed Elizabethan Manor House, home to the Viscounts Hampden, who occasionally open its doors to the public, for select art events. The building will be home to her show for the first eleven days of December, with a couple of open-to-the-public evening parties as an extra attraction. Those are going to be *hot* tickets.

Artists’ pasts generally hold the key to understanding their present work, and Jana Nicole’s path to her award-winning present has been fascinatingly tortuous, held together by a strong central thread of creativity. Born in Chicago, she spent the first eight years of her life in the Mid-Western city of Cincinnati, before moving with her interior-designer mother to Palm Springs in California, after her parents’ divorce.

“Palm Springs is a very spiritual, very artistic town in the desert, 100-odd miles from LA,” she tells me. “I was encouraged to draw and paint from an early age – I was particularly drawn to female nudes, and horses. But I was a latchkey kid, and when I wasn’t doing art, I was free to roam the area, catching scorpions, collecting samples of flora, like tumbleweed and succulents. I’ve always been a collector, and this has become a big feature of my art.” She collected fauna, as well as flora: she learnt how to pick up a tarantula without being bitten, but steered well clear of black widows: “you’d have to shake your shoes out, just in case.” She learnt the hard way that desert snails are proficient at escaping from cardboard boxes.

Art-wise, she was ahead of the game. One late-seventies summer, aged just 12, she was awarded a place on a college-accredited course in Cincinnati, where she learnt life drawing and sculpting, among fellow-students nearly twice her age. Her enjoyment of that course encouraged her, when she turned 18, to enrol in an LA art school; an adventurous spirit, she transferred to the London seat of the college, but was disappointed by the over-technical nature of the curriculum. “I learnt a lot about London’s night life”, she says, “but the only positive thing I learnt about art practice was how to sharpen a pencil with a blade.”

The main reason she dropped out, after three years of four, was that she’d found another creative outlet, back home in the States: she bagged a job designing props and costumes for the film industry. The next ten years saw her work in a variety of roles which included animating video games, dealing with Madonna’s fan mail, and designing costumes for B-Movie horror films, including (she gets out her phone and shows me a picture) for the lead character Mindy, in the movie *Return of the Living Dead Part 3*. “Cut-off jeans, ripped fishnets, Doctor Martens and a lot of cleavage,” she smiles. This get-up, she tells me, has been nominated among the ‘all-time top 50 horror-movie costumes’.

In 1998, having met her soon-to-be husband, the Brighton-bred film-maker Richard Conway, she left California again, and moved to England, first to London, then to Oxfordshire. They had three kids, and her creative career took something of a back seat, “though I never stopped making stuff: I never could, I took up jewellery-design, as a side-line.” In 2010, the family moved to the comfortable house we are sitting in, a stone’s throw from the Giant’s Rest pub, and a short walk from the iconic Long Man.

“This is where my artistic career flourished again,” she says. Her kids went to primary school in the nearby village of Firle, which was fortuitous. “Firle is like a magnet for artists,” she says, “and I met a group known as the ‘Firle Collective’ featuring Chris Gilvan-Cartwright [aka ‘The Baron Gilvan’], Isobel Smith, Vanessa and Damian Mooncie, Carola Van Dyke, and others. They took me under their wing.

They saw the creativity in me, and were *really* encouraging. I started painting again. Not for commercial gain, to begin with. In fact [she points to a painting behind me], influenced by my rural surroundings, I started painting chickens.” The chickens on the wall are stylised, consciously eschewing perspective, painted in a muted colour palette. They are *interesting* chickens. But they are a million miles from the extraordinary style of art Jana Nicole moved onto next.

“I’ve always been fascinated by pop art. I love American pop art – Andy Warhol is a big favourite – but I think I have been more influenced by British pop art, which is very different. Richard Hamilton, of course, but especially Peter Blake. I’m a great fan of Blake. It’s interesting, isn’t it, when you are living in a foreign land you are particularly taken by the attributes of that place, over those of your original country. I’m a big Anglophile. And Peter Blake is very *British*.”



I think it’s fair to label Jana Nicole as something of a pop artist herself, and, given the mix of the traditional and the commercial in her cultural and creative career – from all that life drawing to the B-Movie costume design – it’s hardly surprising that her career has gone that way. Add to all that her penchant for collecting ephemera, and you understand her A-Z series, produced in the 2010s: collages incorporating upcycled found materials, many of which were already in her possession.

My eyes have been drawn to her striking A-Z *Zodiac* work installed in a box-frame on the living-room wall, and I’ve seen other A-Z creations in a previous Jana Nicole show. There’s an A-Z of children’s cereals; an A-Z of board games, and, my favourite, and A-Z of

swear words, each letter getting a box within the frame, and its requisite expletive: ‘A is for Arsehole’; ‘B is for Bollox’; ‘C is for...’ etc. These have all been recreated as limited-edition prints, in true pop-art mass-production fashion.

Another series that smacks of pop art’s tradition of turning everyday icons into fine art is her *Flag* series, and Jana Nicole takes me into her large outhouse studio, to see some of the original artworks, again turned into prints for sale. These generally feature the US national flag as a starting point, recreating the iconic Stars and Stripes with found objects or rough brushstrokes of commercial paint, and various twists added to make a political point: decrying the gun-lobby (*United*), neo-liberal economics (*Boom or Bust*) or police brutality (*Civil Unrest*, *The Fallen*).

There are two more series worth highlighting, before we get to Jana Nicole’s current body of work. First up are her portraits, unlike any



portrait you might have seen before. She interviews her subjects at great length before embarking on the artwork, asking them questions about their loves, their hopes, their fears, their dreams. Then, using photographic as well as hand-drawn and found materials, she creates a collage, with images of her sitters' responses exploding out of their heads. The resulting images are like a visual biography: "they can only be fully understood by the subjects, though for the viewer a lot of it is open to interpretation." Subjects have included celebrities such as Norman 'Fatboy Slim' Cook, the cult filmmaker Julien Temple and Joe Strummer (whose portrait she created posthumously, with the help of his wife Lucinda, and access to his personal archives).

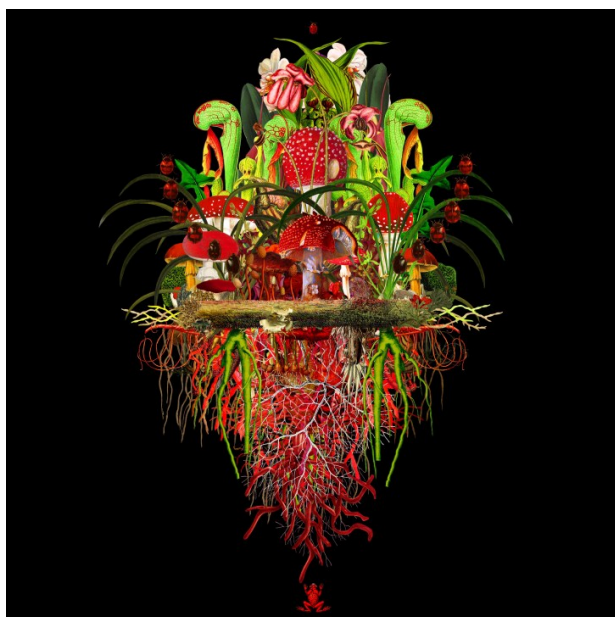
Another portrait series of sorts is the *Animal Attraction* collages, in which she half-hides photographic images of celebrity divas (past and present) within an animal torso (a zebra, a leopard, a tiger or an ostrich), free from the colourful bars of the stylised cage behind them. Is she anthropomorphising the animals, or animalising the women? Either way, these hybrid beasts gain a degree of sexual allure, accentuated by botanical bouquets sprouting from their heads.

It was those botanical bouquets that led to her present series, which has done so much to bolster her reputation. "Towards the end of my *Animal Attraction* series, I realised that I was becoming more interested in creating the bouquets than I was in the rest of the work," she says. "This was a signal to move on." She had long been collecting books filled with botanical art, "particularly by female Victorian artists who were marginalised by the art world"; she had also read up on the incredible underground empire of mycelial networks, in books such as Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, and Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life*.

The process she developed, creating multi-layered collages incorporating artfully embellished cut-outs of botanical paintings, interwoven with actual strands and fronds of flora, is extremely complex, and some of her methodology remains a closely guarded secret. "It's a painstaking process," she says, which involves a lot of intricate blade-work. I would say that my time spent creating these 'botanicals' involves 50% research and 50% cutting, with scissors and knives. I use up a *lot* of blades."



What is striking about the finished works, which represent fantastical plant forms both above and below the ground, is their exuberant waywardness, eye-popping colours, and awesome quasi-natural beauty. They are not intended as figurative reproductions of particular plant forms – "I'm a fine artist, not a botanical artist" – yet they appear to be proud, living entities. You can almost see the roots growing, the petals opening into the sun.



Examples of such ‘botanical’ works were accepted for the Other Art Fair at Saatchi Gallery in 2018, during which the artist was approached by Marie Lhomet, from the Salon des Beaux Arts in Paris. Would she like to exhibit several of her works at the annual autumn exhibition?

This was in 2019, and Jana Nicole was delighted to come away from the experience with the Prix Special de Jury, and an invitation to be the guest artist at the same event in 2022 – the 160th edition of the annual exhibition, at the Orangerie Senate, in the Jardin du Luxembourg – for which she produced an enormous 3x2-metre botanical sculpture, which was installed in pride of place inside the doorway of the

historic gallery, as a prelude to a roomful of her vivid creations. For this body of work, she was awarded the show’s top prize, the Prix Puvis de Chavannes. “I was deeply honoured,” she says, showing me inside the large box where the work – now disassembled – has been stored: “particularly as the French jury saw fit to award the prize to a non-French artist, which doesn’t happen very often!”

The show in Glynde Place will not simply be a re-run of Jana Nicole’s successful exhibition in Paris. “I’m working hard to incorporate site-specific floral elements into the work: plants which are native to the Downs and Weald. This will, I hope, give out a powerful message about the importance of the plant kingdom that surrounds us, and that extends below the ground level, by means of the vast mycelial network underneath our feet.”

By now the fire has reduced itself to smouldering embers, and Bonnie is up and barking, as we prepare to get into the car, so I can be given a lift to nearby Berwick Station. Before we leave, I ask what’s next, for Jana Nicole, after the extraordinary success of her *Botanical Troupe* series. Will the Glynde Place exhibition represent an end to the line of this particular body of work? That twinkle, again, as she leads me back into her storeroom, and quickly shows me an object that hints at the next road-fork in her multi-faceted artistic journey, an object I promise not to reveal to the reader. Suffice to say, the artists’ botanical creations are destined to take on more *three-dimensional* proportions; the roots and tendrils and sprouts and shoots to extend every-which-way but flat. A metaphor, perhaps, for her blossoming career?

Alex Leith