

# Tower Hill gallery features Suzan Osborn with 'Views From the Garden'

BY CARLENE PHILLIPS · FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 2023

It would be a safe bet that Park Lane resident Suzan Osborn has been to the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill in Boylston as many times as anyone else in the area—maybe even more. And, as an early visitor, when it was called just Tower Hill, she might also have made the most visits over the longest time span. The reason for all those visits was to gather images from which to paint the expanding gardens as they evolved over a number of decades.

Some 28 of those paintings are now an exhibit, "Views From the Garden," in the Milton Gallery at Tower Hill, a long corridor off the lobby in the education and visitor center. The separate paintings, vibrant with reds, yellows, oranges, blues, and purples, form one long border garden of interesting shapes and colors, creating a pictorial history of the botanic garden.

I went with Osborn April 12 for the second of her "artist in the gallery" days (Thursdays in April; Wednesdays in May), which will continue through the end of the exhibit, May 31. It was a sunny, warm day, and a steady stream of visitors walked through the gallery, many headed outside to view the hillside with thousands of pale and bright yellow daffodils. As they passed by, many exclaimed at the paintings on the wall: "These are so pretty. I love them;" "I like the colors;" "That one is beautiful." And a few pointed excitedly to a large 2022 painting, "The Daffodil Hill," that perfectly captures the very hillside to which they were headed.

"The Daffodil Hill," by Suzan Osborn. (Courtes photo)

Throughout the three hours, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., many people approached Osborn (she had been given an identifying "artist" button) to comment on how much they enjoyed her paintings, and Osborn remained gracious and welcoming through the duration,

often talking about a specific painting when someone asked a question. Public relations manager Liz Nye came to greet and thank Osborn. “We don’t often have this opportunity for the artist to be here,” she said.

Osborn said she was honored to have her work in such a beautiful, bright space, amid natural gardens spread out over 171 acres. She described her first visits to Tower Hill shortly after it opened in 1986. She would drive up a steep, rutted road to the top of the drumlin, where there was an old, yellow farmhouse, with a botanical library, and next to it a cottage garden. Osborn captured that first garden with its pink and yellow tulips in a wide circle around a large birdbath, with lilacs in the background. Though actually painted in her studio in 2023, “View Near the Cottage Garden” was done from a photograph taken when Osborn first saw it. That garden looks very different today.

Another early painting is from 1989 and, at 30 by 40 inches, is the largest of all in the exhibit. It is a view of a Victorian fountain at the end of a long field of swaying, golden grasses. That field is now a rolling lawn around which paths meander, flanked by a variety of plantings. The fountain is in a different location—Osborn said she has kept track of its wanderings—and twin pergolas replace it at the south end of the lawn. A 1990s fall scene has that pergola in the background behind which is a tree with its leaves turned orange. A mass of lavender asters is in the foreground, and although there is only one monarch butterfly in the painting, Osborn said the flowers were “teeming with them.” A later painting shows peonies and lilacs by the pergola.

“The Victorian Fountain in a Field,” by Suzan Osborn.(Courtesy photo)

Beyond these three early paintings and a few between 2012 and 2015, almost all of the paintings on display were done between 2020 and 2022, “during the pandemic, when I had time to paint,” said Osborn. They were painted in her studio from photos or sketches taken at different times in the gardens during her many years of visiting. They are all oils, mostly on canvas and ranging from 20 by 16 inches to 24 by 30 inches. Seven “minis” were done on panel, a smooth wood surface that allows a more detailed image than canvas, which can soak up colors, making them more muted. The paintings cover all four seasons in the gardens—snowdrops and hellebores, tulips, poppies and larkspur, autumn crocus. But Osborn chose not to arrange her pictures with that in mind. Nor,

since many of the photos were taken with film, unlike digital photos that have dates imbedded, could she display them all chronologically. Instead, she arranged them by how they looked best in groupings along the wall. She knew each slightly recessed section of the long wall was 12 feet long so she experimented with paintings that complemented one another when spread over 12 feet on her kitchen floor.

It was about five years ago that Osborn, who has exhibited in galleries in Concord and Lexington and had an extensive show, "In Monet's Garden," at Fivesparks in Harvard, began to envision her Tower Hill paintings on the light-filled wall of the Milton Gallery there. After a couple of false starts, she wrote to Lea Morgan, manager of exhibits, and included some images of her Tower Hill paintings. Morgan, who has been in her current position for a year and a half, told me she had liked the images Osborn sent. "But," she said, gesturing to the wall, "it is so much more special to see them live. So colorful." Morgan said Tower Hill has four major exhibits a year, two indoor in the winter and spring and two outdoor in the summer and fall, trying to do something a bit different every year, always connecting people to nature. "Suzan's colorful paintings were perfect for this time of year," she said.

Osborn talked to me a bit about some of the paintings, explaining her thoughts at the time she was painting them. In "Cardinal Flowers in the Secret Garden," she said she liked the limited palette, with the vertical spikes of bright red cardinal flowers and the low, horizontal mass of white flowers. In a painting of a fuchsia clematis, Osborn said she was interested in the "twisty shapes" of the garden structure and the swirl of flowers around it. A painting set in the Orangerie greenhouse shows a large green ceramic pot holding an orchid, with a row of "dancing orchids" behind and a haze of green in a corner to balance the pot. Osborn said this is one she did quickly. "I like it because I captured it and didn't fuss," said Osborn, implying that she may sometimes "fuss" more than she would like.



All of the paintings are of actual gardens at Tower Hill at a particular time, and some have a glimpse of an identifying architectural feature. "But I have taken artistic license," said Osborn. "I combine different images while still capturing the essence of the actual place." For example, looking at her 2015 "Mid-May Blues," a pretty collage of sweet blue and white flowers, she said, "All those flowers were in the same garden, but not

necessarily next to one another like this.” And, pointing to a larger frame, “I moved the birdbath over a few feet.” In contrast to all the color, with hardly any browns and foliage very much in a secondary role, is “Moss Steps,” a smaller painting rich in shades of cool green. The stones, brought to Tower Hill from a historical site, are on one of the woodland paths. A painting of pink lady-slippers—a wildflower once abundant in the area and now endangered—sold within the first few days of the exhibit.

“When I look at each of my oil paintings exhibited in the Milton Gallery, I recall with pleasure the time and the place that inspired each of these ‘Views from the Garden,’” wrote Osborn in her artist statement. Looking at them, a viewer can share the pleasure, if not the memory, of being in these beautiful gardens.

Please **login** or **register** to post comments.

Logged-on paid subscribers  
may browse the ARCHIVES for older feature articles.

Contact The Press
Subscribe or Renew
Advertise
 Search
 Browse the Archives

CLICK AN AD!