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The art of holiday decoration and flower design

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D.C. floral designer Sarah von Pollaro uses art and nature to inspire her designs.

Florist Sarah von Pollaro says you can spruce up holiday plants by thinking outside the pot: Here, by using recycled food cans. (Sarah von Pollaro)



By **Adrian Higgins** Gardening columnist December 12, 2012

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Sarah von Pollaro stands transfixed before a painting by the abstract expressionist Clyfford Still. The canvas is big, and painted mostly in a glaring yellow that yields on its right edge to a slash of red. White patches look like ragged tears.

She studies the brush strokes, still fresh-looking decades on, and the cryptic outlines where the pigments and shapes face off. "It would be interesting to

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turn it on its side, to see how it felt,” she says. That isn’t going to happen. The gazillion-dollar picture is affixed to the wall of a subterranean gallery in the East Building of the [National Gallery of Art](#). Von Pollaro says she comes here often, to clear her head and to get design ideas.

Adrian Higgins has been writing about the intersection of gardening and life for more than 25 years, and joined the Post in 1994. He is the author of several books, including the "Washington Post Garden Book" and "Chanticleer, a Pleasure Garden." [View Archive](#)

On this visit, she has also taken in Calder’s [Rearing Stallion](#), a wire sculpture (“You see the inside even though there’s nothing there.”); a Rothko [canvas](#) rendered into blocks of fuchsia, brown and orange (“Makes you think in color.”) and a [Pollock](#) of hypnotic drips (“He stuck with his vision.”).

Von Pollaro is not a painter, graphic artist or fashion designer, but a young florist who is trying to make her mark in a town where public — and private — holiday

decorations so often cling to the traditional look like fake snow to holly. At the National Gallery, she catches sight of newly arrived pots of poinsettias, wrapped in plastic sleeves. “Oh. The worst is in the office buildings, and they’re all by the door, and they die” from the drafts.

Back in her home and studio in [Columbia Heights](#), I ask her to show me some floral designs that move beyond the evergreen kissing ball, the velvet-ribboned wreath or, horror of horrors, lipstick-red poinsettias stacked into the shape of a tree.

Floral designs by Sarah von Pollaro. (Adrian Higgins/THE WASHINGTON POST)

Von Pollaro doesn’t disdain poinsettias, but in her world, there are no poinsettia pyramids. There

is no foil. She is drawn to varieties whose blooms are creamy white, speckled or bicolored. And the pot is the thing. She takes a large, yellow-white poinsettia and puts it in a recycled metal can made for pistachios, blue and corrugated. In a smaller, repurposed plum tomato can, she places a dainty scarlet cyclamen whose blossoms pick up the colors of the label.

Apart from fine art, von Pollaro says she is inspired by the flora all about us, and she forages where she can, including in a friend’s large suburban garden. She also stares at fish. “Aquariums,” she says. “I love the colors of fish.”

She moves on to a wreath for the front door of the refurbished rowhouse she shares with her husband and 2-year-old son (and employees of her business).

The wreath is square and formed from pencil-thin beech twigs. As she is adding greenery, she is thinking of the [Clyfford Still](#) painting, how he treated the right angles and made the brush strokes come together. She keeps much of the twiggery uncovered, softening it with scavenged greens and pine cones, and ginkgo leaves that she has painted a matte silver. Perhaps in the wreath's sparseness, she is also thinking of Calder's wiry horse.

I ask her whether we should have more cut flowers for the holidays, but she has anticipated the question. She lines a shallow glass bowl with variegated aspidistra leaves and begins to create a rich mound of flora for a centerpiece. Foraged arbor vitae foliage forms the base, into which she places the decorative stems of leucadendron, dark pine cones and vibrant crimson roses. The result is a festive mound. She dislikes long, bare stems and can't abide that wet, green floral foam. She also rails against bulbous glass vases with narrow necks: They throttle the blooms and mess up the desired shape of an arrangement. Tip: Pick something with a wider mouth and use a grid of floral tape to hold stems in place.

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At 34, von Pollaro brings a refreshing generational sensibility to her work. A Yale grad, she says she is driven to succeed, and she is trying hard to get noticed. WETA viewers have watched her on a fundraising [special](#) on flower-arranging. Von Pollaro likens herself to an executive chef who sees local, organic food, environmental sustainability and social justice as all part of the same 21st-century pie. Except with flowers.

The floral industry, she discovered, is not always a bed of roses. In New York, where she apprenticed, she learned the tradecraft of floral design but also found a culture of egotism, snobbery and greed. " 'I'm the best' and 'How much can I charge the client?' It wasn't my personality. It took me until the ripe age of 25 to see I could do this my way."

Predictably, von Pollaro is plugged in, and her Web site cleaves her

enterprises into her floral design business, [Urban Petals](#), and [Flower Empowered](#), where folks can buy flower-arranging kits and watch videos, including some from her gig as the “[Flower Chef](#)” for Whole Foods Market.

She also spends a lot of her time making sure that the arrangements she might make for corporate events, embassy parties and high-profile venues like the Kennedy Center are repurposed for homeless and women’s shelters, soup kitchens and other places where people need cheer the most. “We have to recycle,” she said, “or we are going to kill our planet.”

She is, of course, talking about recycling not just flowers but joy, which might be the purest form of Christmas decoration.

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