Amy Pollien

*Cosmos and Zinnias with Turtles on Eagle Lake*

Eagle Lake, at 465 acres, is the largest body of fresh water in Acadia National Park on Mount Desert Island. It is easily accessible from Rt 233 where two parking areas lead to numerous options on the carriage roads. It has been a wonderful destination for drawing and painting, with small “outlooks” off the carriage roads that provide spectacular views of Cadillac Mountain and the Bubbles. I made a color study of the pewter sky and light blue mountains last year on one of the hottest days in late spring, when the frogs and turtles were out in great abundance and not a breath of wind disturbed the surface of the lake. Eastern painted turtles were making their way to the sandy shore to lay eggs and sunning themselves on the rocks. The lacewings and dragonflies flitting around the reeds will have to wait until the next painting!

For this composition I looked for a man-made container that would represent the chaos of weeds and sticks washed up on the lakeshore that provide such a rich environment for amphibians. I wanted something that wasn’t as pure as the drinking water supply but rather referenced the warm compost around the edges that gives life to all parts of the food chain, and I found it in this Majolica jardinière, circa 1890. I have this on loan so it’s not part of my personal collection, but the owner has the same complicated relationship with this piece that I’ve experienced: we loved these designs as children and our enthusiasm for ornate curlicues, odd figurative choices, and weird glazes never waned even as they fell out of favor in recent decades. My parents would have hated this piece and I can’t really blame them. The handles and base represent dark, waterlogged branches, the body is decorated with stylized fish and seaweed with underwater flowers unknown to any botanist, the glazes are lurid and variable. I find the overall effect is unexpectedly naturalistic - and the high key colors make a bridge between the flat gold and gray of the lake to the bright hues of the garden flowers.

Every year I grow dozens of flower varieties for still life compositions, but there are a few repeat standouts in the Maine garden. “Sensation” cosmos are so named because their early maturity in cooler zones (80-85 days) created a sensation when the variety first came out in 1930. It was an All-American Selection six years later and is still one of the largest selling seed packets. They are spectacular in the garden, topping out at five feet and covered in pink, white, and dark magenta blooms with golden centers, much prized by bees. They’re also a full season contributor to my still life paintings with their long stems and resilient nature. “State Fair” zinnias are valuable in much the same way; prolific and long standing they come in a range of colors that complement the cool pinks of the cosmos. This is an old standby of New England gardens in fully saturated hues of red, magenta, purple, orange, and lavender. My grandmother called this flower “Youth and Old Age” as it was known at the beginning of the last century. The botanical name references German botany professor Johann Gottfried Zinn (1727-1759). The smaller yellow blossoms that arch out from the body of the bouquet are called Marguerite daisies, aka Argyranthemum frutescens. In addition to their graceful, nodding stems and pale yellow petals that glisten in the sunlight, they are drought tolerant, deer resistant, and pollinator friendly - truly a gift to the gardener.