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VISUAL ESSAY · PEER REVIEWED · OPEN ACCESS

The Janus-Faced Bloom: Migration, Memory, and Ornament

Asli Kinsizer
Assistant Professor and Art Education Coordinator, UCA Department of Art & Design | ORCID 0009-0002-9109-9327

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay examines my floral assemblages as a material record of migration from Türkiye to the United States. Preserved flowers, clay, lace, gold, and insect bodies carry attachments that remain unresolved within a new life. I argue that ornament is an active part of this record: it gives fragile matter value and visibility while sometimes shielding its damage. Through close readings of portraits, studio photographs, and finished works, I develop the Janus-faced bloom as a situated account of accomplishment and distress occupying one form. Lace connects remembered domestic labor with sculptural practice, while preserved wings unsettle the promise of renewal associated with flowers. These materials allow me to approach difficult experiences without explaining them completely. Blooming emerges as continuing with loss, with beauty and vulnerability remaining visible together.

Keywords: migration; feminine memory; material archive; floral assemblage; arts-based inquiry

Before I had language for the relationship between flowers and migration, I was already making work with flowers. In an earlier master's project about strong women, I paired each portrait with a flower. The face could show a person, but the flower helped me express something about her character and the feelings she brought into the work. I understood this mostly as an artistic choice. Looking back, I recognize the beginning of a visual language that would become much more personal after I moved to the United States.

Figure 1. *Flowers as Portrait Language*



Note. Four portraits from my earlier master's project on strong women, with floral imagery extending the portrait compositions.

In the portraits, floral imagery surrounds and extends the face, placing the women within a field of growth and ornament. My later assemblages retain that visual language, but their materials complicate it. A petal may be pleasing in color and damaged at its edge. A circular arrangement may suggest completeness while being composed of brittle remains. These tensions matter because I have felt pressure to appear composed while carrying experiences that were difficult to disclose. I use the Janus-faced bloom to describe how an ornamental form can sustain pleasure and disclose vulnerability at the same time. Its significance emerges through what the materials permit, resist, and conceal.

Figure 2. *A Living Flower Before Preservation*



Note. A living lily photographed in a domestic setting.

I find it difficult to throw away flowers given by people I love. I dry them and keep them after their colors fade and their petals become brittle. What I want to keep is also the feeling attached to the gift. After migrating to the United States, I turned to flowers to express an emotional state that was hard to put into words. I worked slowly around fragile petals and wings, trying not to break them. Painting, arranging, stitching, and gilding gave me ways to stay with what had changed. I could not make a dried flower fresh again, but I could give it a place in my work. I made things bloom because I did not know how to show that I was breaking.

Building a Life While Carrying Another

I arrived in the United States as an immigrant woman in my forties, carrying responsibilities and struggles that did not disappear when I changed countries. I continued my education, learned to work in another language, and raised my daughter, who is now completing her own university education. Eventually, I earned my doctorate and became a professor. I am proud of these accomplishments. They required years of work and gave me possibilities I had hoped for.

Alongside those accomplishments were long periods of loneliness, vulnerability, and tears that no one saw. Family responsibilities, financial pressures, cultural adjustment, and academic demands often arrived together. I felt that I had to work harder to reach the same place as others. I missed people and returned repeatedly to memories of conversations, daily rituals, and earlier versions of myself. Ordinary objects gathered more meaning because the people and places attached to them were far away. Building a new life also made me tougher, although that toughness did not make me stop longing.

The Janus-faced bloom is my way of naming this doubleness. I borrow the image of Janus, with one face turned toward the past and another toward what is arriving, to describe my experience rather than migration as a whole. The woman who became a professor and the woman who cried in private are the same person. I give this coexistence a material form in my assemblages, where radiance and fragility occupy the same flower. Its petals can shine while remaining brittle, just as my accomplishments remain real alongside the

struggles I carry. The brightness does not cancel the damage.

Figure 3. *The Bloom Under Construction*



Note. A floral relief in progress, surrounded by working cloth and painting materials.

Hirsch (2019) examines how women artists make memory tangible through ordinary objects, bodily gestures, and artisanal practices. Her reading helps me see my assemblages as a modest archive of attachments. A preserved flower can hold the feeling of a gift, while lace recalls my mother's hands. These connections do not make my migration equivalent to the histories of persecution and expulsion she discusses. My works arise from a particular movement between Türkiye and the United States, with its educational possibilities, family responsibilities, and unresolved sense of belonging. I have built a life here, yet the person I was before leaving remains part of how I inhabit it.

Figure 4. *A Bloom Across Material States*



Note. Two states of a floral assemblage before and after the addition of gold.

I begin by shaping flowers in clay, establishing petals and circular forms before adding the botanical fragments I find around me. In the studio photograph, purple and pink flowers are distributed across a pale relief. The working cloth and paint around it make the labor of arrangement visible. I am drawn to the difference between the handmade forms, which I can shape, and the preserved petals, whose brittleness limits what I can ask them to do. The composition develops through that negotiation. My memories enter the work through the decisions I make about what to retain, support, or cover.

The paired photographs make gold's effect particularly visible. In the first state, red marks and dried brown forms interrupt the purple petals and pale granules. In the second, gold draws these elements into a more continuous ornamental surface. The altered surface appears more finished, although its vulnerable materials remain. I associate gold with the magnificence of palaces, churches, and mosques; here, I give that radiance to ordinary matter. Gilding draws attention to the fragments while making their damage less immediately visible.

This ability to draw attention while protecting vulnerability recalls a familiar reassurance: “I am fine.” We often say it to people we love, but when I say it, I sometimes ask myself: am I? I may be crying inside while offering words that keep my distress private. Here, the two faces of Janus belong to the same moment: one reassures, while the other struggles. Gold gives this tension a material form in my assemblages. Its radiance offers a composed surface while the fragile matter remains beneath it. Like “I am fine,” that surface allows me to share something of myself while keeping other feelings protected.

My Mother’s Lace and What Remains Unsaid

Figure 5. *Lace Inside the Flower*



Note. A yellow and white blossom with lace incorporated between the petals and the central flower.

My mother made lace when I was a child. I remember watching her hands. That memory returns when I find old lace in a thrift store. I wonder who made it and how much of her life passed through the work. I cannot know her thoughts, but I imagine the hours of concentration and the feelings she may have kept to herself. Lace has become, for me, an image of the woman who swallows her troubles and continues working.

Parker's (1984/2019) account of needlework and femininity helps me understand how domestic skill has been valued while being separated from fine art. I bring that history into the flower's structure. In the yellow blossom, the open textile pattern lies between the painted petals and the smaller central flower. The lace's gaps interrupt the apparent solidity of the surface. They also make the labor held in its pattern visible. I want to keep flowers, lace, violet, pink, and gold in my work because they give me pleasure. Treating these choices as intellectually serious requires attention to the material decisions and gendered histories they carry.

My memory of my mother's hands gives lace a significance that exceeds its decorative use. The secondhand pieces also suggest other makers, although their histories are unavailable to me. I do not know whether they stitched in silence, pleasure, or frustration; those are questions I bring to the material. The lace connects a known memory with an imagined life without making them interchangeable. It also returns me to my own habit of containing difficult feelings. Am I speaking through this inherited form, or continuing to place what troubles me inside something pleasing?

The Afterlife of Fragile Things

In the wing assemblage, the flower's outline is formed by dark butterfly wings edged with gold. Green and blue iridescence remains visible within the overlapping surfaces. From a distance, the repeated shapes can be read as petals. At closer range, their origin changes the encounter: the wing refers to a body and to a movement that can no longer occur. This shift unsettles the promise of renewal usually attached to a flower. The work offers a new arrangement of the material while keeping its loss of living function in view. This raises

a question about my own use of ornament: what happens when a pleasing form contains material evidence of loss? Arranging wings into a bloom creates a new form without returning them to flight. The work therefore gives blooming a material limit. What survives is an altered relation among fragments, rather than a recovery of their living state.

Figure 6. *A Flower Made from Wings*



Note. Preserved butterfly wings arranged in a floral form and edged with gold.

Figure 7. *The Gilded Beetle*



Note. A gilded beetle surrounded by white beads and floral fragments.

In Figure 7, the beetle assemblage makes the insect body harder to overlook. A dense field of white beads surrounds its elongated form, while gold emphasizes its contours. The beetle's recognizable shape resists the uniformity of the surrounding texture. Its body appears armored, yet preservation has made it vulnerable to handling. I am interested in how these qualities complicate the softness associated with floral femininity. The specimen also asks me to attend to a life beyond my own story; the meanings I give it cannot exhaust what it was.

Figure 8. *The Dark Center*



Note. A dark preserved insect body at the center of a gray circular field with four pale flowers.

In the gray assemblage, four pale flowers occupy points around the circular field, leaving a dark insect body at the center. The subdued palette reduces the distraction of saturated color, and the central form remains exposed. I read this work as a change in how I permit distress to appear. The flowers still provide an ornamental frame, but they offer less cover. The contrast suggests that disclosure can develop through a shift in arrangement and color rather than through an abandonment of beauty.

Looking beyond the first impression

“How beautiful.” I have heard this response to my work, and it corresponds to a pleasure I share. Yet the images invite another pace of looking. The gold edges, repeated petals, and pale beads draw attention toward an ordered whole; the brittle fragment and preserved body interrupt that order. A viewer who notices only the arrangement encounters a different work from a viewer who recognizes what it contains. This does not make one response false. It makes the time spent looking consequential. The sequence of images in this essay supports that slower encounter, moving from living flowers and studio labor toward preserved bodies and an exposed dark center.

The Janus-faced bloom describes this coexistence within a single form. It does not assign beauty to a false exterior and suffering to a more truthful interior. My pleasure in making is as real as the distress the materials allow me to approach. The metaphor becomes useful when it helps me ask precise questions: which fragment remains exposed, where does gold cover an edge, and when does repetition absorb a body into a pattern? These decisions shape how much of an experience can be recognized. Beauty can make a difficult object approachable, but it can also postpone recognition of what troubles it.

Blooming Is Not Becoming Whole

The small actions of preserving, stitching, and gilding have given me ways to work with attachments that my journey did not dissolve. Becoming an academician changed my circumstances, but it did not settle my

relationship to the life I left. In the studio, I can rearrange a fragment and make room for it within a new form. I cannot recover its earlier condition. That limit has become important to how I understand blooming.

I do not regard suffering as a necessary route to growth. These works record the effort of continuing under circumstances that have sometimes been difficult to share. Their scale and materials allow me to approach those experiences through particular objects rather than make my life stand for migration in general. The flowers I keep, the lace I find, and the gold I apply form an incomplete record. They cannot recover every conversation or explain the lives of the women whose work enters mine. Their significance lies partly in what remains unknown. Making gives those attachments a present form while leaving their histories open.

I am still learning how much of myself to reveal in the work. I want to keep the colors and ornament that give me pleasure while allowing the fragile materials to be seen more clearly. When I look at these flowers now, I see the woman who worked toward a new life and the woman who still struggles, caught in memories of the life she left behind. I do not need to choose which one belongs in the picture.

About the author

ASLI KINSIZER, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor and Art Education Coordinator in the UCA Department of Art & Design. She migrated from Türkiye to the United States, and her studio practice builds floral assemblages from preserved flowers, clay, lace, gold and insect bodies. ORCID 0009-0002-9109-9327.

Editorial & Review Credits

Editor-in-Chief: Elizaveta Akimova. Author: Asli Kinsizer.

Peer Review Board:

- Josephine Florens (Contemporary figurative oil painter, Odesa and Germany; CAA Annual Conference Committee member; Apexart International Open Call juror): ““The Janus-Faced Bloom” presents a compelling exploration of migration, memory, and feminine identity through the expressive language of contemporary visual art. The artist’s thoughtful use of preserved flowers, lace, and gilded natural forms transforms fragile materials into powerful reflections on resilience, belonging, and the emotional complexity of rebuilding a life. This work demonstrates how artistic practice can preserve personal histories while opening meaningful conversations about beauty, vulnerability, and transformation.”
- Maria Raskin (Mixed-media artist, Turkey; MA Fashion and Costume Design, Moscow State Textile University; Diploma in Traditional Iconography and Ancient Fine Art Techniques; Apexart New York juror): “This visual essay offers an original and materially attentive account of migration, memory, and feminine labor through the concept of the “Janus Faced Bloom.” Its strongest contribution lies in demonstrating how ornament, including gold, lace, preserved flowers, and insect bodies, can simultaneously expose vulnerability and create space for dignity and continuity. The author’s close readings of her own assemblages make a persuasive case for beauty as a complex mode of inquiry rather than mere decoration.”
- Yiting Chen (Visual artist and illustrator, Beijing; Gold Winner, French Design Awards and MUSE Design Awards; exhibited at ICFF New York and Maison&Objet Paris): “At first glance, these flowers are beautiful, but the longer you look, the more you notice the fragile things they're made of. I was especially struck by the use of gold: it gives the work a sense of wholeness without making the damage disappear. That tension between beauty and loss is what makes the series stay with me.”

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