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Nick Taggart and Laura Cooper ↓

If you let a leathery old distictis vine crawl up your house, push its way through a window and fan out comfortably on your studio wall, you probably aren't worrying about the divide between house and garden, plant and human, life and art. If Nick Taggart, who works in this studio, doesn't paint those actual vines, his wife, artist Laura Cooper, might thread them into a collage, and the collage might spark an outdoor color scheme, and the garden, raging up around Taggart's window, might inspire a painting called "Garden Party," dripping with vines and smeared with flowers.

A trip uphill through their terraced landscape is like hiking through a painting, and a lot of their own plants—yarrow and angel's trumpet, canna and cardoon—star on paper and canvas in their Glassel Park cottage. Cooper features these in stark, iconic silhouettes, in the style of vintage cameos, or packs them into busy visual bouquets with paint, fabric, seeds, stems and snips from plant catalogs.

In Taggart's hands the blooms whirl together more abstractly or show their creepy insides, hovering bugs and all. Or he might present two views of the same plant—the soft petals and prickly pods of love-in-a-mist or devil-in-a-bush, depending on which of its common names you choose. Such ambiguity is one of Taggart's themes and his focus in depicting images that might otherwise seem sentimental or clichéd. "I'm fascinated by this familiar-yet-alien world with its subtle balance between wild and chaotic, beneficial and destructive, beautiful and grotesque." Cooper agrees: "Melancholy attends beauty. Decay is a part of life. Things start to get interesting when you can sense that edge."

A California native and a veteran of UC San Diego and Cal Arts, Cooper once escaped childhood shyness by plunging into fairy tales full of magic spells and bewitched gardens that weren't what they appeared to be. Fittingly, she was introduced to English-born Taggart, a product of rural Devon and London art schools, by a friend who had a vision of the two of them in Taggart's garden. Never mind that in 1989 little grew there besides old succulents and weeds, or that neither Cooper nor Taggart gardened. "This place spoke to me," Cooper says, remembering her first glimpse of green through the gate. "It wanted to be transformed."

Once she moved into the house that Taggart has owned since 1979, they began to learn about plants together, haunting botanical gardens and reading landscape history. By the mid-'80s, with their lot planted and carved into rooms ("pink garden," "moon garden," "outdoor bath"), they took up with other gardening artists to form the Germinators. And as their landscape grew, their artistic interests changed.

Working in three-dimensional outdoor spaces, Cooper was briefly inspired to craft evocative, wraithlike sculptures of fabric, resin and leaves, which she called "floating dresses." Taggart's wide-ranging subject matter—from interpretations of movie images to urban landscapes—became more organically based and, lately, almost all of their work has centered on the garden. "We like things to be as connected as possible," Cooper says. "Instead of bits and pieces, we want the whole web." Naturally, Cooper and Taggart, who teach at Art Center College of Design and Otis College of Art and Design respectively, have collaborated on a garden-art project for their "red garden": a pair of fiberglass body-cast planters of themselves, filled with ornamental grass.

