

The New York Times

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JUNE 26, 2008, 11:39 AM

Seeing Things | Flower Power

By [BROOKE HODGE](#)

Seeing Things is a bi-weekly design column by Brooke Hodge, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Ikebana arrangement by Sogetsu at the Japanese American National Museum. (Joshua White)

“Living Flowers: Ikebana and Contemporary Art” is a smart new exhibition at the [Japanese American National Museum \(JANM\)](#) in Los Angeles. The show presents examples of ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging, alongside works of contemporary art. There are pieces of the latter by established artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, James Welling, Laura Owens and Manfred Pernice, as well as by emerging talents like Andy Ouchi and Anna Sew Hoy, among others. Instead of selecting art with floral subject matter, the exhibition’s curator, Karin Higa, challenges viewers to look closely for the formal, conceptual, compositional and pictorial strategies common to both art forms. While artists Sharon Lockhart and Judy Fiskin used ikebana arrangements as a point of departure for their serial photo works, Monique van Genderen adopted a flower motif as a bridge to explore abstraction in painting. B. Wurtz takes abstraction in a different direction with his sculptural compositions of everyday ephemeral objects, like plastic bags, that are mounted atop rudimentary wood. Higa commissioned three renowned ikebana schools with branches in Los Angeles — Ikenobo, Ohara, and Sogetsu — to design eleven different arrangements that change weekly and rotate throughout the exhibition, creating evolving relationships between the contemporary artworks and the “living flowers.” (Which means you should visit more than once.) The light, airy exhibition design by Escher Gunewardena Architects recalls the tokonoma alcoves in which ikebana is traditionally displayed, and underscores its status as an art form. “Living Flowers” is on view until September 7, 2008.

Living Flowers installation view, showing work by Monique van Genderen, B. Wurtz and Sogetsu Los Angeles Branch. (Joshua White)

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