

ARTIST

flower power

words by SHERI BAER • photography by BRITT BRADLEY



"Let me show you the world in my eyes..." The synth-pop beat of Depeche Mode infuses the studio space on Old County Road in San Carlos. Attired in a paint-splattered black work jumper, Ramona Stelzer twirls about, channeling the pulsing electronic energy of a band she's loved since the '80s. Along with her morning cappuccino, dancing plays an intrinsic role in her routine. "The music inspires me," she explains. "My body has to move before I can start."

When she's ready, Ramona approaches a massive blank 60 x 72 inch canvas. First comes char-

coal. With quick gestures, a sketch takes form, loopy black lines suggesting petals, filaments and stems. "I've been told you cannot do this, that it smudges, but I don't care," she says. "I use the smudge. I even go in with my hand and smudge it more."

Nearby, a full to bursting cart holds the tools of her trade. Buckets, plates and scrapers. Speckled cans of spray paint. Golden Fluid acrylics with names like pyrrole red, chromium oxide green and ultramarine blue. Small and medium brushes, but mostly large chunky ones. Ramona dips, lays down big sweeping brush strokes and dips some more. Time suspends, and when she

steps back for a pause, she unconsciously wipes her hands, creating a Jackson Pollock effect on her jumper. "Painting on a large scale is my passion," she describes. "It's a dance where my entire body moves, expressing feelings and thoughts through layers and colors."

What emerges on canvas can be loosely described as floral abstractions. Enter Ramona's studio—and the mix of big-scale completed works and canvases in progress smack you in the senses. And while the eye conceptually processes flowers, what's being conveyed is the "timeless beauty found in the ephemeral nature of existence."

"So here's the thing," Ramona clarifies. "People think I paint

ABOVE: Artist Ramona Stelzer with her works *Seasons of Existence 2* (60" x 72") and *Seasons of Existence 1* (60" x 72").



ABOVE: *Blanc de Fleur 1* (72" x 48"); Ramona working in her San Carlos studio.

flowers, but I'm not painting flowers. I paint humans."

Like flowers, she expands, humans are simultaneously delicate and strong: "We are beautiful, resilient and powerful beings, capable of blooming even in the face of adversity." And it's that tightly held belief, gleaned from her personal journey, that inspires her art.

Raised in the Black Forest region of Germany, Ramona confides that she had a "very challenging childhood," which drove her need for a creative outlet. After an intensive apprenticeship, she became a hairstylist in a prestigious salon, which also held art shows. "I always saw myself as an artist, too, because doing hair is art," she smiles, recalling the intricate hand painting involved in a balayage highlight.

After marrying and having two boys, she first applied paint to canvas in

2002, producing more realistic renderings of flowers that led to her first solo exhibit. As the years passed, Ramona launched her own hairstyling business, while continuing to paint and showcase her work to German and Swiss collectors. Then, in 2011, a major plot twist: the chance for her husband to relocate to Silicon Valley with a German software company. Speaking limited English, the family settled in Palo Alto. "All of a sudden, I knew nothing. I understood nothing," she recalls. "It makes you so humble."

Ramona signed up for ESL classes through the Palo Alto Adult School at Cubberley Community Center. As her sons did their homework, she applied herself to her own lessons,



ABOVE: *My Dancing Flower Garden 5* (60" x 60").

OPEN STUDIO

May 4 & 5 • 11AM-5PM
285 Old County Road • Studio #3 San Carlos
(and by appointment)

eventually returning to hairstyl-
ing to reconnect with people and
immerse herself in English. When
the 2020 lockdown shuttered
her business, she rediscovered
her art, trying different themes
inspired by her own and former
clients' life experiences. "At some
point," she recounts, "I realized,
'I have to paint flowers again. It's

calling me.' That's how I found
my way back."

**This time, everything
flowed in an abstract
way. "Sometimes I look at
my work and think, 'Did
I do this?' I can com-
pletely let go. It's so free.
It just comes out of me,"
she says. With the fam-**



ily resettled in Redwood City, Ramona initially worked in a converted bedroom before earning studio space in the Palo Alto Cubberley Artist Program. “I swear, I cried when I went to the same parking lot where I went to school to learn English,” she says. “To be there as an artist in residency felt like a full circle after 12 years.”

Now fully committed to her art career, Ramona revels in the daily creative dance. “If you trust and just start walking,” she observes, “all of a sudden doors open up.”

Actively embracing social media to reach collectors worldwide, she’s been profiled in a German docu-series, had her work spotlighted in *Vanity Fair*

UK and garnered exhibitions at the San Francisco Art Market, the International Art Museum of America in San Francisco and the Salon International d’Art Contemporain in Paris. Represented by the Mash Gallery in Los Angeles, Ramona’s work is included in a gallery exhibit captured by the Netflix series *Selling Sunset*.

And, from a private studio space in San Carlos, her large-scale pieces continue to blossom into distinct floral stories: *Seasons of Existence*, *Petals of Light*, *Begin to Bloom Again*, and her newest series, *My Dancing Flower Garden*.

After feeling “boxed” by German culture (“Everything always has to be perfect, so it’s hard to take a risk or try something new.”), Ramona relishes the spirited nature of the Peninsula. “Mov-

ing here was the best thing that could ever happen to me,” she reflects. “I feel like I was meant to live here.” That positivity, “enduring hope,” she calls it, shines through in her paintings, and it’s not surprising that her once-fledgling English has evolved into poetry. Capturing the essence of her work, she writes, “Within a challenging life, her wings take flight, strength whispers softly in petals of light.” **P**

wondrous blooms

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