

# Exquisite art leaves you wondering

Lester's man-made plants sprout from months of painstaking labor.

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Artist Leigh Anne Lester sits in front of "Slowsidle," a large-scale cutout of a botanical amalgamate made with drafting film and countless X-acto blades. JOHN DAVENPORT / EXPRESS-NEWS

How?

That was the most-asked question at the opening of "Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards," a quietly powerful exhibition of mostly new work by Leigh Anne Lester currently on display at the Southwest School of Art.

How did Lester create her delicate, impossibly precise carbon drawings of mutant plants?

How did she make the lacelike, creeping “Slowsidle,” a large-scale cutout of a botanical amalgamate?

How did she work the seemingly infinite, near-microscopic details into “Mutant Spectre,” a graphite drawing of a fantastical hybrid?

Well, it wasn't easy.

“So much of all of this has been process,” says Lester, a gregarious 44-year-old with close-cropped red hair who balances her art career with operating the Cactus Bra Space and minding the store at San Angel Folk Art, both in the Blue Star Arts Complex.

Lester spent about a year working on the new pieces for the show, drawing from various sources, such as vintage botanical drawings, the Internet and the flora in her backyard, for her subject matter — oddly lovely hybrids of disparate plant species that nature never intended.

“Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards” expands on Lester's previous work exploring the ramifications — good and bad — of genetic manipulation. She has been “doing plants” for about 12 years, but the inspiration for “Imitatio Perfecta,” a series of six carbon drawings, goes further back. Lester, who previously created a piece using carbon paper for a show in 1995, liked the implications of using the now-quaint method of duplication in relation to the underlying theme of her current work.

Coming up with the idea was the easy part.

“I knew what I wanted to do and I was like, ‘Oh, my god. How am I going to do this?’” she says.

The answer Lester arrived at involves template drawings, tracing paper photocopies, 0.3 mm mechanical pencil leads and months of painstaking work. Each piece in the "Imitatio Perfecta" series consists of an exquisitely detailed impression on a piece of carbon and the resulting copy on paper.

Or so it seems at first glance. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the drawing on paper is not actually a carbon copy. It has sprouted shoots and tendrils seemingly of its own accord.

"Mutant Spectre" posed a different kind of challenge for Lester. She chose to do the drawing on drafting film because of the material's semi-transparent quality. Its surface, however, is slick, requiring Lester, a southpaw, to approach the drawing strategically, working in horizontal swathes to avoid wiping her work off the page.

The drawing, particularized down to pinpoint granules of pollen, took Lester about six months to complete. Along the main branch of the piece, textured bark pools and folds like velvety fabric, compelling viewers to lean in well past the invisible barrier that keeps exhibition-goers at a respectful distance.

"I'm surprised there isn't nose grease on this," Lester says with a laugh.

The artist used drafting film for "Slowside," too, not to mention countless X-acto knife blades. It is mounted on the wall so that it casts a shadow, adding another ghostly layer to the piece.

At present, Lester is working on pieces for a drawing show opening at the McNay Art Museum next month that will likely inspire another chorus of "How?" But for Lester, it's more about the ends than the means.

"I probably don't put out something unless I enjoy it in the end. I would hate to have something here that nagged me," she says of her work in "Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards." "And none of it nags me."

Well ...

“There are a few things that nag me,” she concedes with a laugh. “But I’m not going to tell you what they are.”

“Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards” is at the Southwest School of Art, Russell Hill Rogers Gallery II, Navarro Campus, 1201 Navarro St., through Feb. 27. 210-224-1848; [www.swschool.org](http://www.swschool.org).