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{Texas visual art}

“Invasive Beauty”: Penelope Gottlieb at the Museum of the Southwest

Michelle Kraft December 22, 2025

Some 15 years ago, while my husband, a friend, and I were on a rafting trip through Big Bend’s Santa Elena Canyon, our guide gestured toward a stand of wispy trees bordering the banks of the Rio Grande. “Those there are saltcedar, also known as tamarisk,” he remarked. I nodded in response, finding the latter name poetic; I’d been admiring these gangly-yet-graceful trees, with their feathery leaves and frothy pink flowers, since we’d arrived in the area days before.

“They’re an invasive species, originating in Africa and Europe,” he went on, “and they’re a threat all over the American Southwest.” This tree, the river guide explained, sends down a deep taproot, making it difficult to eradicate; and it consumes vast quantities of precious water, up to 200 gallons per day per tree. I glanced back at the stand of tamarisk we’d just passed, swaying in the gentle breeze, deceptively beautiful but now also menacing. I’ve recognized the species ever since. The trees grow up and down the country road on which I now live, feigning placidity as they suck up barrel-loads of valuable ground water that might otherwise replenish the Ogallala Aquifer.

In her exhibition, *Invasive Beauty*, currently on display at the Museum of the Southwest in Midland, painter Penelope Gottlieb explores the paradox of such beguiling invasions. Drawing upon sources as varied as 17th-century Dutch still life, 19th-century naturalists, and contemporary Japanese anime, her works allude to life cycles, death, extinction, catastrophe, seduction, chance, and colonialism — all pointing to the delicate balance of the complex (eco)systems that we as humans annex, occupy, exchange, and consume. The show features paintings and constructions from two of Gottlieb’s series, *Extinct Botanicals* and *Invasive Species*, and occupies three of the museum’s galleries.

Penelope Gottlieb, “Potentilla Multifuga EX,” 2012, acrylic and ink on canvas panel

Upon entering the first gallery, the viewer is confronted by a large, highly chromatic floral extravaganza; its sinuous vines escape the boundaries of the picture plane, trailing ceiling- and floor-ward along the walls. The title card names the work as *Potentilla Multifuga EX* and refers to a yellow, rose-related flower, commonly named Ballona cinquefoil. Presumed extinct, it was indigenous to California and is now known only by its inclusion in late 19th-century herbaria. At first glance, the scene resembles Victorian wallpaper gone awry, a florist's fever dream; but closer observation hints at carnage. There are tendrils of barbed wire hiding among the vines and splatters of red paint resembling bloodshed. Even the dark creepers groping the walls threaten and encroach — much like the urban development suspected of choking out Ballona cinquefoil.

An installation view of Penelope Gottlieb's "Invasive Beauty" at the Museum of the Southwest

Works from Gottlieb's *Invasive Species* series occupy the second gallery. Here, the artist has overlaid her own paintings of invasive plants onto prints from John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* series. The 19th-century naturalist, best known for his

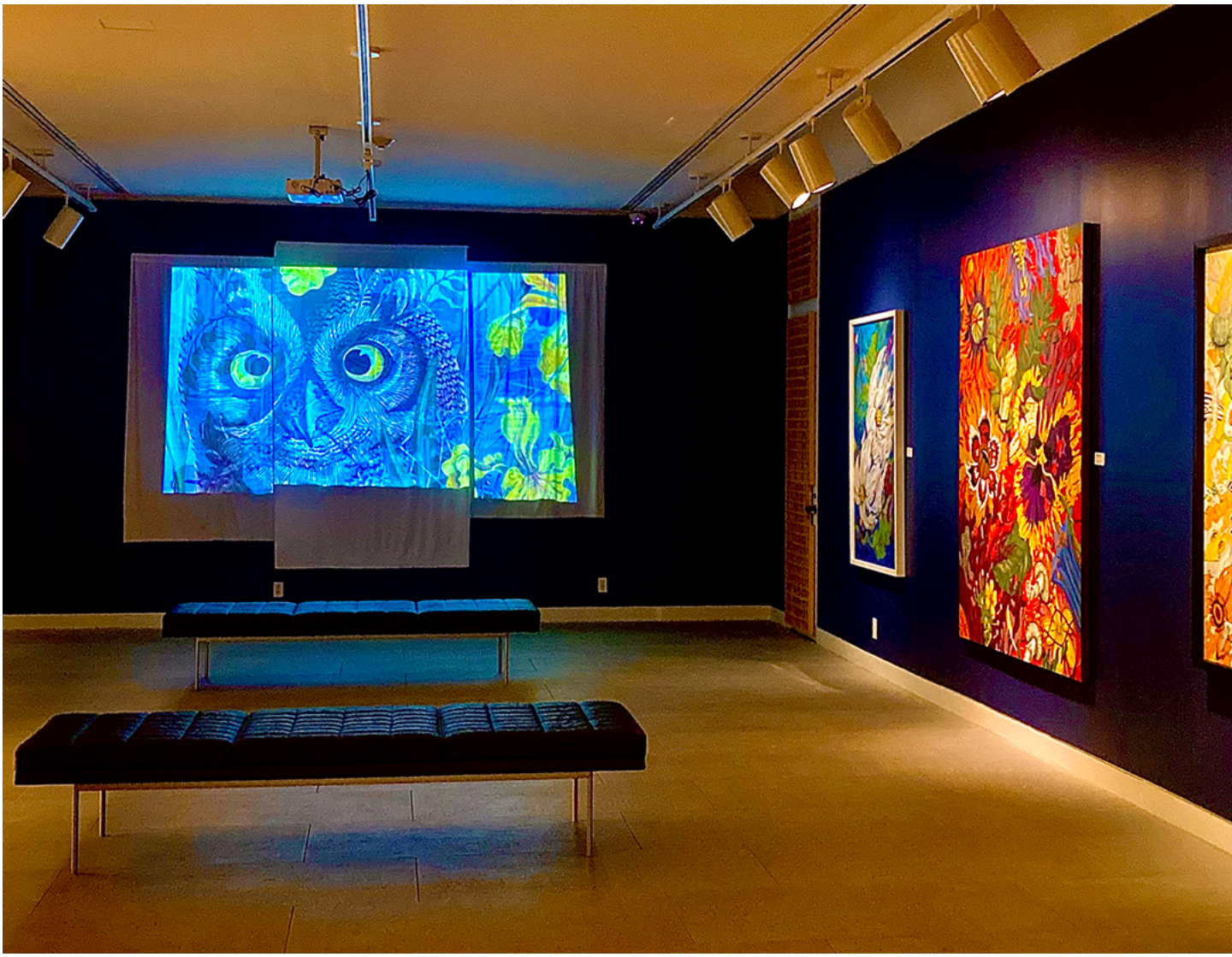
ornithological illustrations, engaged in intensive study and documentation of North American birds, most notably by hunting and taxidermizing his subjects. “The painful paradox of Audubon’s work,” Gottlieb points out in her statement about the series, “remains that his wonderful images of nature relied on its ghoulish and insatiable exploitation.” Citing the illustrator’s “ruinous study of nature,” Gottlieb commandeers his work, invading his images with non-native species of plants. The outcome is revelatory: in the same way that I first admired the picturesque saltcedar, unburdened by any knowledge or regard for its history and consequences of encroachment, it is easy for the naïve viewer to admire Audubon’s bird illustrations, ignorant of his macabre methods for achieving them. In Gottlieb’s paintings, non-native flora twine, entrap, and strangle the indigenous fowl. The birds’ carefully posed and “naturalistic” movements (achieved by Audubon’s stuffing and pinning them into place) are now frantic and desperate. Hence, Audubon’s and Gottlieb’s works function together as a visually seamless conversation, a meta-analysis of the history of “naturalism,” delicate eco-systems, and their destruction through reckless human intervention.

Penelope Gottlieb, “Phyllostachus Nigra IN,” n.d., acrylic and ink over John James Audubon print

In *Phyllostachys Nigra IN,* for example, Audubon's famous image of a wild turkey is encaged within a growth of black bamboo, indigenous to China, where it is used as timber. The woody stalks are nailed together with picket slats, calling to mind bamboo's use as a building material, such as for scaffolding, while simultaneously fencing in the majestic bird. Across the base of the painting, the turkey's identifying information, along with the 19th-century engraver's mark of W.H. Lizars (and Gottlieb's own signature), are still present, as well as the notation, "Drawn from nature by J. J. Audubon." In its beak, the turkey holds a bud; a scrolled label identifies it as *Thismia americana,* a flowering plant not documented in the U.S. since the early 20th century. The combined elements act as omen: as humankind disrupts complex ecologies, it risks the continued extinction of native species.

The motifs of 17th-century Dutch still life recur throughout the works, too. Referred to as *vanitas*, these paintings showcased the exotic "New World" riches gained through colonialism and international trade, while also symbolizing the transience of life and the material world. Over and over, Gottlieb adapts these ideas to her *Invasive Species* works: there are galleons and merchant ships; Chinese vases; (human) life-cycles referenced through budding, full-bloom, and wilting flowers; varied insect life, including butterflies, a symbol of resurrection; plated fruits; lizards, emblematic of Satan and sin; chests filled with riches; and references to decay, such as worm-eaten fruit and leaves. Audubon's birds of America, recognizable to us, but exotic to the European audiences that first subscribed to his collections, are ensnared by invasive roses, wisteria, and tiger lilies, simultaneously deadly and beautiful.

At the center of the gallery, bathed in soft sunlight afforded by a skylight, sits a sculptured installation of garish, technicolor flora. The grotesque arrangement is Alice-in-Wonderland-like in scale; it is scattered with playing cards and a giant die, a discarded paintbrush, a single matchstick — detritus symbolic of fate, chance, and cataclysmic countdown. All of the gargantuan plants are potted; none grows naturally. From one flower dangles a great Daliesque pocket watch, suspended by a nooselike red cord, a visual reference that occurs throughout the *Invasive* series and that, here, evokes Alice's White Rabbit. Gottlieb has noted the use of *kinbaku* knots throughout many of her works, referencing "the Japanese art of erotic knot tying; literally a form of man-made bondage."



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From the last gallery wafts recorded birdsong. Pastoral and inviting, audible throughout the exhibition, these lilting tones fill the space. In this darkest (both in lighting and in theme) gallery, catastrophe appears complete. Projected images of additional works from Gottlieb's *Extinct* and *Invasive* series fill one wall. The remaining walls display paintings from *Extinct Botanicals,* some different in character than those within the first gallery. These works are dynamic and explosive, with a suctionlike one-point perspective.

Penelope Gottlieb, "Potentilla Multijuga," 2008, acrylic on paper

One example of this is a second rendering of *Potentilla Multijuga*. While the version in the first gallery explodes, this one implodes. Bathed in the yellow tones of the extinct

flower for which it's named, this scene is a cartoonish Armageddon of *kinbaku*, mortally wounded plant life, machine-gun fire, brass knuckles, dice, the business-end of a Medieval morning star, and protozoa-like paisleys. All are propelled headlong by an irresistible gravity, as toward an inexorable black hole or a cosmic drain. The work is an elegy, as Gottlieb notes of the *Invasive Species* series, for "an age marked by relentless environmental decay, marked by ecological collapse and accelerating change."

Whereas historical paintings of plant life — such as those by 16th- and 17th-century European artists like Maria Sibylla Merian and Rachel Ruysch, and 19th-century naturalists like Audubon — are studio-bound, serene, and illustrative of a nature ordered by humankind, Gottlieb's works seek to upend such hubris. She adopts the visual motifs of these art historical periods, turning them back on themselves with deftly rendered draftsmanship. On the surface, the works are beguiling, seductive, and beautiful; but they contain, too, an undercurrent of danger, violence, and disaster. In her hands these images self-satirize, interrogate, and expose the conundrums and consequences of an ever-accelerating impulse of expansion and annexation — catalyzed when European feet first touched "New World" soil (even before this, really, from when humankind first harnessed fire as a tool) and which continues outward, beyond, perhaps, even the gravitational pull of our own planet.

Penelope Gottlieb's Invasive Beauty *is on view at the Museum of the Southwest, in Midland, Texas, through January 4, 2026*.

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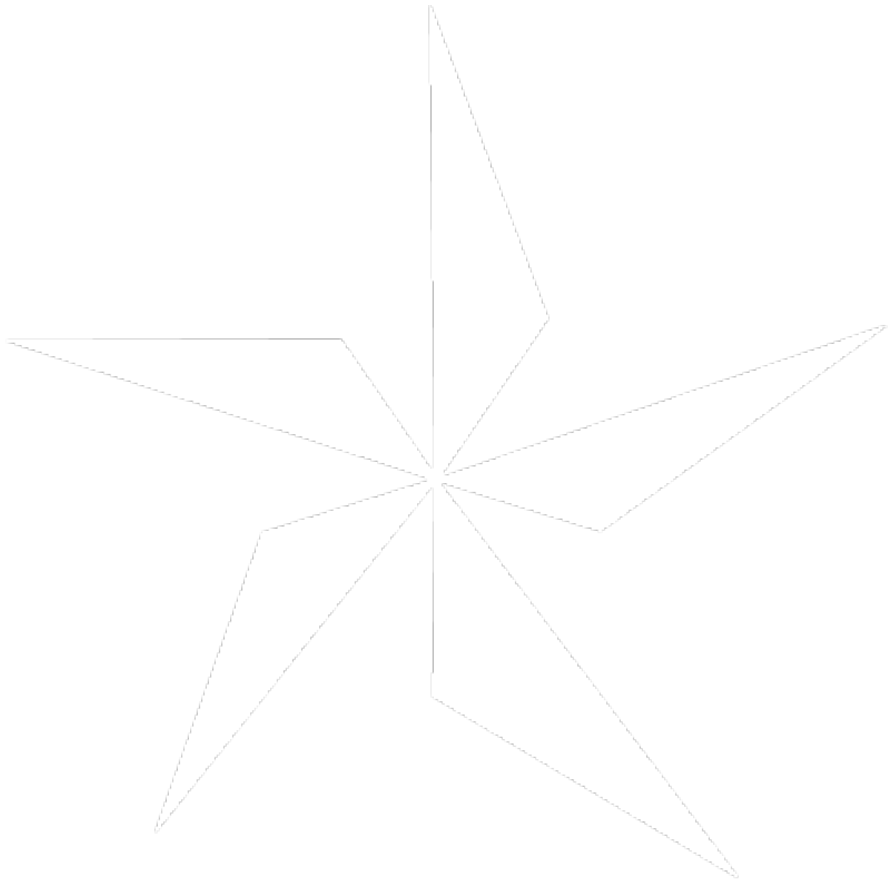

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