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LIVING

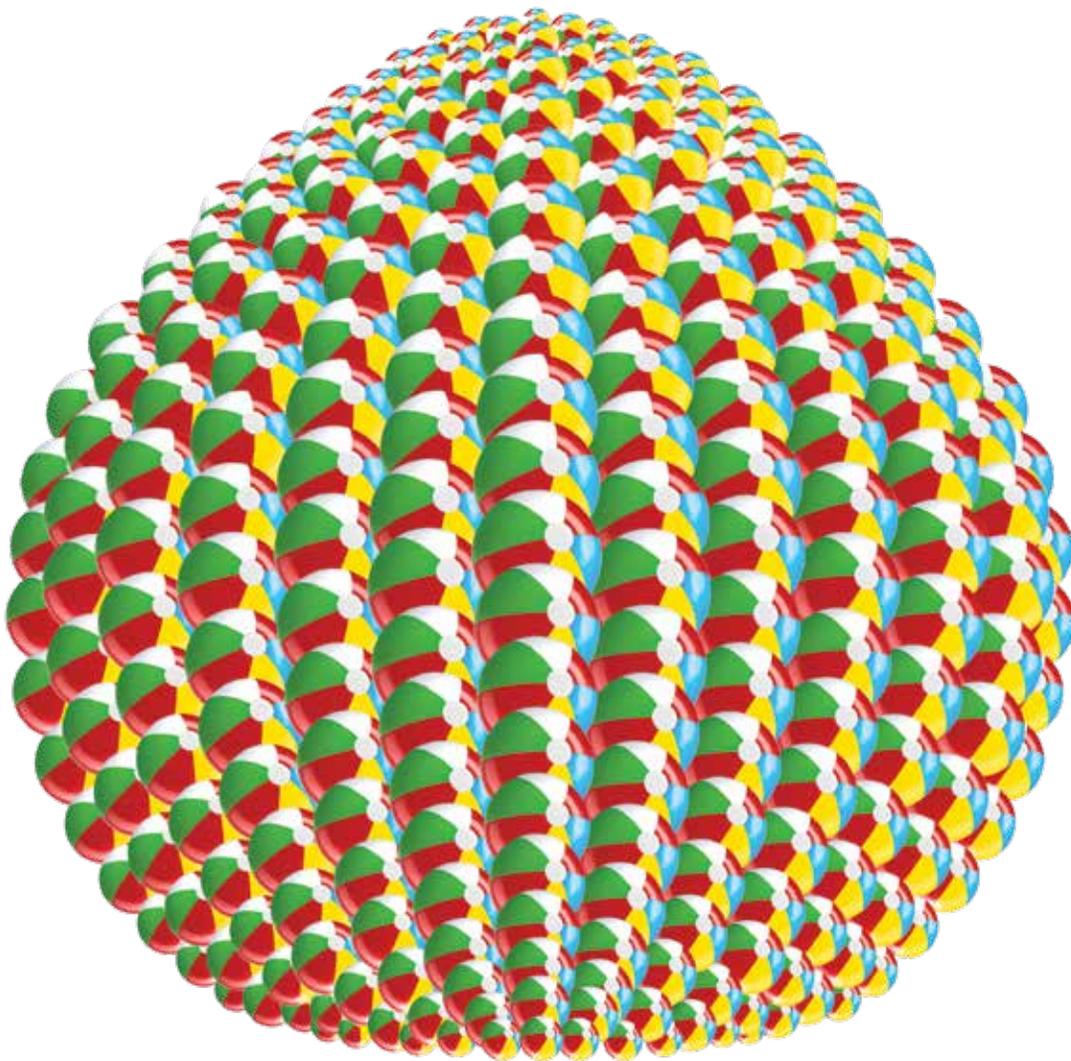


Outdoor Living

Artist in wonderland:
Cassandra C. Jones
(opposite) gathers
inspiration at Ojai's
Taft Gardens, where
she transforms the
shapes, colors, and
textures of horticultural
exuberance into photo
collaged creations
like the one below.

Botanical

R T



At Taft
Gardens,
nature's
masterpieces
inspire the
works of
others.

BY **JOAN TAPPER**
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY **GARY MOSS**



Strolling through the Taft Gardens & Nature Preserve (taftgardens.org) in Ojai with artist Cassandra C. Jones is nothing like taking a conventional horticultural tour.

Here, tucked away in Santa Ana Canyon, are 15 curated acres of South African and Australian plants in blooming profusion. What Jones sees and describes, though, is an otherworldly collection of nature's whimsy: seedpods that resemble Muppet mouths; blossoms that look like jellyfish, feathers, and stars; trees with faces; and flowers with the texture of soft plastic toys.

She knows the plants' real names, of course, and her walks are purposeful and serious. Jones has been working in the gardens for several months, as an artist-in-residence, under a new program that she helped develop and that meshes spectacularly with the nonprofit garden's interest in enlightening visitors through art and beauty.

An Ojai resident, Jones first visited the garden about six years ago and had harbored a desire to do a serious art project there ever since. But there was never time—until COVID-19 struck. Last year Jones sat down and wrote a proposal asking for access to the garden for three months, ideally spanning a couple of seasons. Her concept coincided with ideas that the nonprofit Conservation Endowment Fund (CEF)—the steward for the Taft Gardens & Nature Preserve—had been entertaining. They created an arts council, and the residency was born.

THE GARDENS' ROOTS

The story behind the gardens goes back to the 1970s, when John Taft, an environmentalist and preservationist, acquired land—covered in chaparral—in the canyon. Taft had a passion for the place, and in 1981 he founded the CEF. Four years later, after the devastating Wheeler Fire cleared the land, Taft brought South African landscape architect Laurence Nicklin to Ojai to develop a garden dedicated to



Paths wind through the Mediterranean-climate gardens, which showcase specimens from South Africa and Australia (above). The 15 acres of plantings were the longtime project of environmentalist John Taft (left).



A palette of botanical specimens (clockwise from top left): artichoke agave, aloe flowers, grevillea, leucospermum. A walk produces a basket of blooms (opposite), which seem especially profuse in late spring.



South African plants. Jo O’Connell, an expert in Australian horticulture, helped shape an additional section.

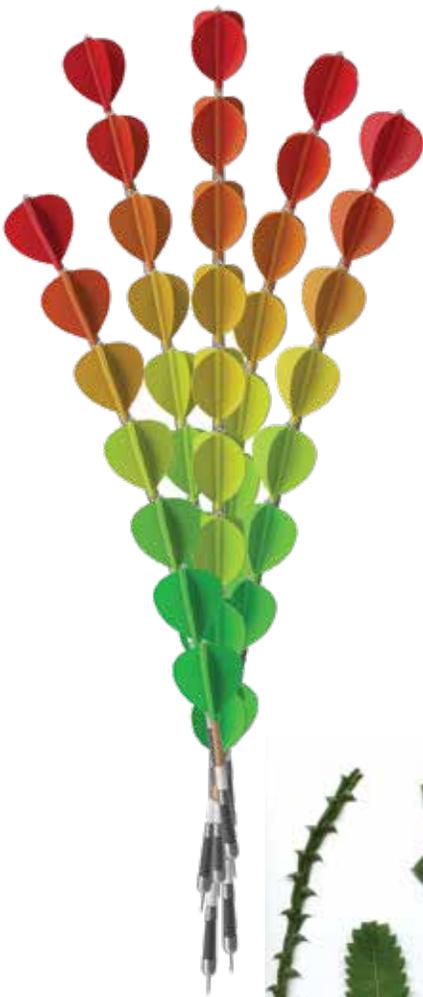
Throughout the 1990s the CEF partnered with other nonprofits for a range of educational and arts programs; then in 2001, John Taft shifted his efforts to establishing a conservation center in Montana. Today his granddaughter, Jaide Whitman, is president and CEO of the organization overseeing the Ojai gardens and preserve, which encompasses 264 acres including the cultivated Mediterranean-climate

sections, some infrastructure, and open space. We have “incredible botanical specimens,” says Whitman. “This is an experiential and spiritual place.”

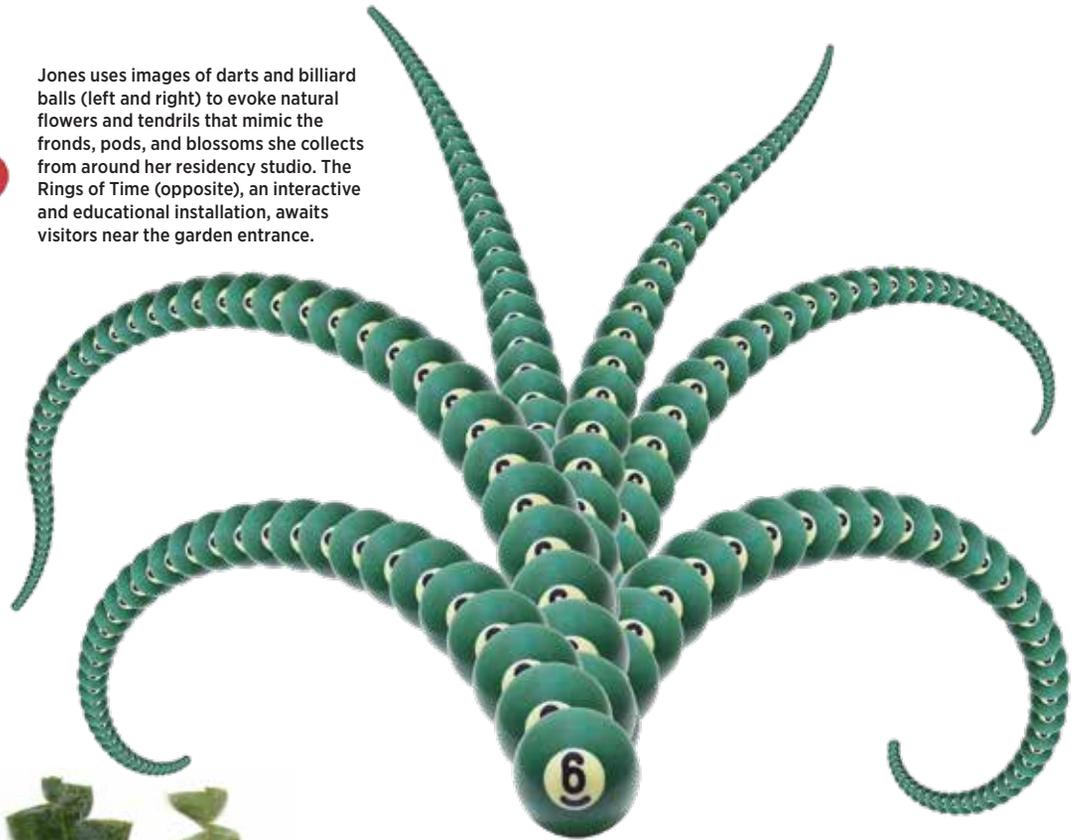
WELCOME GUESTS

The gardens are open to a restricted number of visitors, by reservation only, and the lack of crowds enhances the tranquil and restorative experience. “Our core offering is a self-guided tour,” says Whitman, which meanders through the aloe and





Jones uses images of darts and billiard balls (left and right) to evoke natural flowers and tendrils that mimic the fronds, pods, and blossoms she collects from around her residency studio. The Rings of Time (opposite), an interactive and educational installation, awaits visitors near the garden entrance.



South African gardens, the Australian garden, toward the art studio with its own small rock garden, and past impressive agave cacti. “There are also special guided events, and we’re working with nature therapists to develop walks that provide a therapeutic experience.” Statuary and benches invite visitors to sit and savor the surroundings.

“As for the residency,” Whitman adds, “Cassandra has paved the way. It’s a natural for us.”

For her part, Jones says, “I had a solid focus of what I wanted to do, which was something with an environmentalist bent that doesn’t feel like a lecture.” Inspired by the surrounding horticulture, she’s been working in her signature photo-collage style, combining familiar images—of billiard balls or darts, for example—in ways that evoke something quite different, like a cactus. In the airy art studio she’s in four days a week are tables with finds from her walks: seedpods from banksia trees; blossoms from the many varieties of leucospermum, also known as pincushion protea; and spider flowers of the grevillea species. “Nothing I’m making is representational,” she says. “It feels like the plant but isn’t exactly it.”

The impetus for her project came after the Thomas Fire, which burned hundreds of homes in the area. Jones and her family quickly evacuated, “and when we came back,” she remembers, “there was a layer of ash. All our modern technology went up in smoke and rained down on the valley.” Ash from such wildfires contains nanoplastics and other toxic elements that don’t break down. “It dusted Ojai and is taken up by plants. We’re infusing our nature with us.” That realization is reflected in Jones’s images of benign plastic objects like beach balls or Mylar balloons transformed into greenery. “I’m trying to draw people in with beauty,” she says of her perspective-altering art. ♦



An exhibit of Cassandra Jones’ work will take place at Taft Gardens on May 29. Nature’s art is also there, on permanent glorious display.

