

- VTDigger - <http://vtdigger.org> -

## In This State: For botanical artist Bobbi Angell, the beauty is in the details

Posted By [Andrew Nemethy](#) On November 23, 2012 @ 4:42 am In [Profiles](#) | [1 Comment](#)



[1]

Standing in her studio, botanical illustrator Bobbi Angell talks about one of the many comprehensive and detailed botanical texts she has illustrated for botanists around the world. Photo by Andrew Nemethy

*In This State* is a syndicated weekly column about Vermont's innovators, people, ideas and places. Details are at <http://www.maplecornermedia.com/inthisstate/>.

From her cozy post-and-beam, off-the-grid house deep in the knobby hills of southern Vermont, Bobbi Angell explores exotic realms from French Guiana and the Greater Antilles to New Zealand, Brazil, New Guinea and Cuba.

She rarely does this by traveling, though. Instead the world comes to her in an unlikely way: pickled and photographed, or dried and carefully packaged in far away locales by botanists who expect her to create a picture that will be worth a thousand dry scientific words.

Bobbi Angell is a botanical illustrator, someone who makes her living by sketching flowers and vines, vegetables and shrubs – in sum, plants of all kinds from all around the world. But just as calling Frank Sinatra a singer or Facebook a website doesn't tell the whole story, calling Angell an illustrator vastly understates the scope of her accomplishments and depth of her abilities.

In pen and ink drawings, she unveils the very essence of each plant, relying on her acute visual observations and botanical understanding, as well as the help of a microscope and esoteric techniques that include rehydrating dried flowers by boiling them and careful dissection of rare specimens.

"I try to capture the personality," is how she puts it.

By all accounts, she's exceptionally good at it. Angell has long worked with the prestigious New York Botanical Garden and for a dozen years she illustrated garden columns for the New York Times. She has drawn for numerous gardening books, the John Scheepers seed and garden catalog, and the National Audubon Society's "North American Wildflower Guide." (For a guide to her work, visit [www.bobbiangell.com](http://www.bobbiangell.com)) <http://www.bobbiangell.com/>

During a career spanning more than three decades, she has illustrated well over 2000 species, and filled up more than a few many-volumed botanical texts with hundreds of plates of her drawings.

Botanical illustration is a singular and rather anonymous form of art. Often on her illustrations

the only clue to its creator is her initials, subtly drawn like a tiny plant depicting two berries (the "B") on a stalk (the "A"). In botanical circles her reputation is well-known, but among the larger public it's well-hidden, not unlike the delicate interior flower stamens, pistils and ovaries that she draws, critical parts that often go unobserved while our human eye is drawn to the colorful blossoms.

At its heart, botanical illustration contains a mind-bending yin and yang. The drawings must be scientifically accurate and representational, with all parts to scale. But they must also show the habit, shape and form of a plant, so each drawing reflects its natural appearance.



[2]

This drawing of *Neoraputia calliantha*, a tropical plant, is an example of Bobbi Angell's detailed botanical illustrations.

It's a paradox Angell thrives in, rather than feeling constrained by the little room for artistic license – Monet's "Water Lilies" and gardens won't do in her field.

"I work really hard to get things that are artistically pleasing, but the main focus is to get it accurate," she explains. "The fascination is in the detail, getting it exactly right."

A close look at the illustrations shows just how exactly right her work is: A leaf's fine texture, for example, is illustrated using hundreds of tiny pen strokes and innumerable fine tracings that replicate the veins. While some illustrations take only a day, others can take much longer. It doesn't help that sometimes her drawing models are disparate plant parts arriving in a package, requiring extensive botanical imagination.

In the last four years, she has branched out to do copper etchings, which she hand colors, providing a new creative outlet and a chance to make her art more publicly accessible. She works on them at the Whetstone Studio for the Arts in downtown Brattleboro.

Angell's career in illustration is mostly felicitous accident. She grew up in New York but grew to like

Vermont from years of coming up to ski at Mount Snow in Dover. When the Arizona college she was going to went bankrupt her sophomore year, she decided to transfer to UVM and continue as a natural history major.

That quickly changed when she met professor David Barrington, director of the Pringle Herbarium. It was instant scholastic love at first sight.

"He was the first botany professor I met, and I became an instant botany major," she says with a laugh.

Getting into illustration was even more unexpected.

"I had no background in anything artistic," she says, talking about her career while sitting inside the plant- and sun-filled kitchen of the home she shares with partner Jim Herrick. "I'm pretty much self-taught when working with plants."

She did take one drawing course at UVM, and it got her thinking about whether she wanted to be a scientist. She soon found herself drawing plants "instead of writing term papers," she says with a laugh, finding rewards in sketching what others tried to say with words.



[3]

Botanical illustrator Bobbi Angell with one of her dogs in front of the off-the-grid home she shares with partner Jim Herrick on a secluded hillside spot in Marlboro. Photo by Andrew Nemethy

Garden remains her "home away from home," where she still goes once a month to meet with botanists, look at specimens and pick up materials, but she works with many other botanists at places like the Smithsonian, Harvard University and London's Museum of Natural History.

Upstairs in her sunny artist's studio is a window ledge of boisterous green plants and eclectic artwork hanging on the wall. There's a spacious drawing table where she works, an adjacent table that holds her microscope, artist's utensils and inks and myriad filing shelves.

On the table is one of her latest assignments, a small alcohol-filled glass jar containing a *Rhizanthus*, a genus of parasitic flowering plants from south and southeast Asia. She holds it up to show off the blossom, a soggy blackened lump in fluid. It's a graphic reminder of Angell's distinctive ability to translate that lump into an elaborate living representation, peeling it into cognition like a human CAT scan machine and translating the image into all the myriad parts of a full-blown plant.

Despite digital advancements, she does all this the old-fashioned way.

"I am pretty primitive. I still use a crow-quill pen and I still draw everything by hand under the microscope," she explains.

When she is not wading deep in the scientific taxonomy of monocots, dicots and gymnosperms, Angell has plenty else to keep her busy on her 240-acre plot, located a mile off a town road. The couple's steep hillside is terraced with massive stones where they raise sheep, goats and chickens and keep three rambunctious dogs.

Herrick, a contractor, is an artist himself, with his heavy equipment. He has created lovely bouldered settings for flower beds, vegetable gardens, vines and bushes on their cascading south-facing slope. It is an idyllic quiet spot, at once refuge and window on the natural world.

Both inside and out, plants, it seems, happily rule Angell's life.

"I was just so attracted to it, and I felt important, I felt like I was contributing something to the botanists," she explains.

Learning that there were people who found work as medical illustrators, when she graduated in 1977 she decided botanical illustration could be a profession as well, though, "it was certainly not a common way to make a living."

Thanks to a lucky connection that led to doing an illustration 35 years ago for the New York Botanical Garden, that uncommon path has blossomed and grown impressively, not unlike the big, robust *Wisteria* vine that surrounds the entrance to her house. The Botanical

---

**1 Comment To "In This State: For botanical artist Bobbi Angell, the beauty is in the details"**

**#1 Comment** By [Meg Smith](#) On November 25, 2012 @ 7:42 am

A wonderfully written story! Vermont is full of hidden gems like Bobbi Angell but we need writers like Andrew Nemethy to bring them to light. Thank you!

---

Article printed from VTDigger: <http://vtdigger.org>

URL to article: <http://vtdigger.org/2012/11/23/in-this-state-for-botanical-artist-bobbi-angell-the-beauty-is-in-the-details/>

URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://vtdigger.org/vtdNewsMachine/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ITS-Bobbi-Angell-3.jpg>

[2] Image: <http://vtdigger.org/vtdNewsMachine/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ITS-Bobbi-Angell-Neoraputia-calliantha-pen-and-ink-6.jpg>

[3] Image: <http://vtdigger.org/vtdNewsMachine/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ITS-Bobbi-Angell-2.jpg>

Copyright © 2011 VTDigger. All rights reserved.