

# What lies beneath: Peonie 1 by Katherine Boucher Beug

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acrylic on canvas, 61 x 46.5cm courtesy of the artist and Oliver Sears Gallery



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In Katherine Boucher Beug's studio, creativity happens. But even when she is out walking, "a particular colour chord, for example, a newly harvested field against a particular grey sky" will play its part. She'll bring that colour contrast back to the studio and alter the colour relationships in a painting she is working on. "Colour," says Boucher Beug, "is the basis of my perception - colour and drawing."

Boucher Beug grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. Her parents divorced when she was four and that, she says, together with her "subsequent step-parents", was "the most formative influence of my childhood". Post-divorce, "I lived with my mother but identified more strongly with my father. She was a Boston Quaker, he an Irish Catholic. I decided that I was 'really' Irish and would be a poet."

Her mother went to painting classes and encouraged her when she was young. Very good schools and progressive teachers followed.

Aged 19, she spent summer 1969 in Ireland. She ended up waitressing for Heidi MacNeice in the Spinnaker in Kinsale, and it was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Macdara Woods and Timothy Brownlow also worked there. "They read my poems and were very kind to me," says Boucher Beug.

At school, "only interested in art, English and drama", an earlier friendship, when she was 12, with a 'new girl' whose stepfather was an art collector, also made a difference.

"We smoked our first cigarettes on her stairs looking at Gabriele Münter paintings, Roualt and Morandi. My high school teacher, who had studied with Josef Albers at Yale, taught us Albers's color theory. I took to it immediately and excelled in the exercises which are precise and analytical. It was my language."

Years later, Boucher Beug taught that theory at the Crawford and other workshops; she has been teaching since 1971. "I had no formal training but my Irish grandmother, Catherine O'Neil, was a teacher, as was her mother."

Aged 15, she had been sent to France to learn French.

"Being in France, getting away, was like coming home. I decided then that I would never live in America."

At Northwestern University, Illinois, Boucher Beug studied printmaking and lithography. "We ground down our own stones by hand, and the process is complex. This is what hooked me."

In Chicago, she met Joachim Beug, and in 1969 they went to Hamburg. "The art education in Germany was demanding and unforgiving. The demands for high-quality drawing were like nothing I had experienced in the US, and I was determined. I copied Dürer drawings each day to educate myself. Professor Kranz, who studied with Paul Klee, still influences the way I paint today."

"Obsessive observing" is Boucher Beug's touchstone. "Precise observation is the common thread: for abstract or figurative work, for poetry [she is a "box under the bed poet"] and ceramics." She works "the way a writer works". She's in her studio in Dunderrow, Co Cork by 9.30am. "The rest of my life happens after 3pm."

Looking back over five decades of work, she sees "figurative and abstract as working together". Text is sometimes incorporated into the image, and her love of theatre has led to her designing set and costumes.

This painting, Peonie 1, is one of a sequence. "The flower project ambushed me and took me over and told me what to do. I must have an extremely strong relationship with what I paint. When my favourite dog was run over on a road, I painted nothing but roads for two years."

Now, it's flowers from her garden. These beautiful white and mauve peonies "grow just across from my studio. Peonies are forceful, brief and magnificent."

There are over 30 different kinds, and legends abound: named after Paeon, the doctor who used peony roots to dress wounds inflicted on Pluto by Hercules, peonies should only be picked at night.

"I grow my flowers from seeds, take care of them, suffer when they are sick, watch them every day from birth to death." She is now ordering seeds for next year.

Peonie 1 she sees as a "teacher painting", her guide over the next few years. "Most of it happened in a rush, after a great deal of flower drawings."

This still life with its sensuous peonies, the tilting ceramic vase she made herself, the diagonal, brush-stroked background, the plate and its shadows celebrate both stillness and movement. It's a work about "looking and knowing what you love". Boucher Beug also sees it as "a work both abstract and representational - both precisely observed, drawn and painted from life, from the object".

As for 'peonie', not 'peony'?

"Because I'm terrible at spelling."

Her new show, 12 Flower Paintings, is at Oliver Sears until October 29. Nice work? Rejecting the word 'nice', Boucher Beug sees her flower paintings as "having an edge, even the capacity to make one feel uneasy or unsettled". Nice? No. "Because life isn't nice. It is wondrous and awful and a miracle and difficult, and the work is real."

*Boucher Beug's Flowers: The Book - flower drawings, photographs and paintings will be published to coincide with a solo show at the Lavitt in Cork next March [www.katherineboucherbeug.com](http://www.katherineboucherbeug.com) Instagram: [boucherartwork](https://www.instagram.com/boucherartwork)*