

Full of Joy: Late Summer in the Meadow

by Kay Faye Fialkoff

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Innocent curiosity. That's what it really was. That day, I watched my hand rummage through a bin full of bulbous tubers. I was shopping in a popular ethnic market in my area. The tubers were just one of many diverse seasonal choices offered in its produce department. Taped over the bin, the hand-written sign read *Jerusalem Artichokes*.

I wondered what the plant would look like when it grew. I had had the same thought before when I bought a beautiful saffron-colored turmeric root from the market and tried, unsuccessfully, to grow it as a potted plant on a sunny windowsill in my living room.

Hoping for better results, I bought a small Jerusalem artichoke the size of my thumbnail and took it home. I planted it in a small plot in my front lawn that was dedicated to a large border planting of daffodils and forgot all about it. When it began to grow, I was amazed at how fast the stalk grew and the great height it reached. After only a few growing seasons, the one stalk multiplied into a dense population that billowed with beautiful sunflower-like blossoms in the fall—just in time for migrating butterflies. What a spectacular display they would have made in any meadow in North America, welcoming Monarch butterflies on their migratory path!



Prayers for the Earth: Meadowland Suite, No. 3

One stalk was so heavy it fell to the ground. Instead of removing it, I let it continue to grow, again exercising my curiosity, to see what form would evolve. To my delight, the growth pattern was lovely. I harvested the plant, took it into my house, put it in a pail of water, and then drew it. I also took photos for future reference. This was the inception for designing *Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite, No. 3*.

I wanted the theme of the suite to highlight the reproductive cycle of the American Goldfinch, creating a live study. The goldfinch nests late in the summer to take advantage of the Bull Thistle's growing season. If it decides to nest in a thistle rather than a tree, it builds its nest deep down in the stems, where the thistle's sharp thorns protect it from predators.

I sought a model for my life drawing in a thistle patch in the Green Way section of Bergen County New Jersey's Allendale Celery Farm, a protected nature preserve with over one hundred acres of varied habitats. In its northwest corner is a wildflower meadow adjacent to a small pond. A large stand of Bull Thistles grows unobstructed in full sun next to a cluster of pine trees.

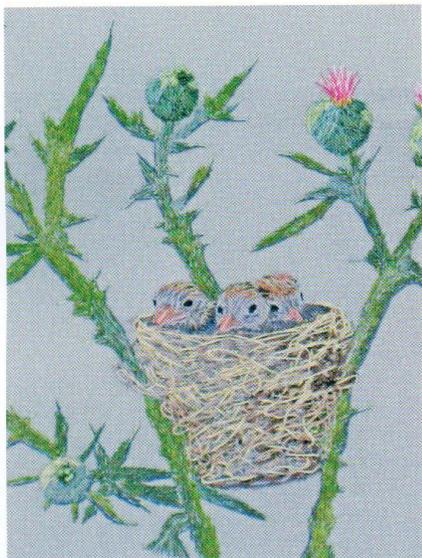
Having chosen the cluster I wanted to draw, I carefully wired a model bird on top of the tallest prickly array, put on my wide-brimmed sun hat, and drew the plant. I also took some photos for future reference.

After researching the dimensions of the goldfinch nest, I drew it at the base of the stems. I had to shorten the stems to accommodate the top of the plant where a male goldfinch is perched on purple thistle fluff.

To render the hatchlings, I drew from my experience in observing nesting House Finches. Many years ago House Finches began visiting my area. Their warbling song caught my attention. The males sang in an endless serenade outside my kitchen window. Soon, a pair made a nest in a hanging potted plant I'd placed under the awning adjacent to my kitchen side-door. Since then, I've made the finches welcome to nest under the awning's eaves, anchoring a gerbil's running wheel on its back to provide a stable cavity for nest building.



Detail of goldfinch



Detail of bird nest

It's a great joy to watch the nest being built, the eggs laid, the endless days of birds sitting on the eggs. And finally, the *cheep cheep* sounds of the hatchlings. I'd perk my ears to see if I could guess how many babies were in the clutch! And then, watch them grow into fledglings! Sometimes, I'd pick a time when the adults were away searching for food and climb on a ladder to look at the babies. I made it quick so as not to risk the House Finches' wrath. The images stayed with me. They came in very handy as I composed the goldfinch nestlings.

I found a photograph of goldfinch nestlings sitting in a tree nest in *Wild Bird Guides: American Goldfinch*. The nestlings were photographed from the back. I studied the poses carefully, turned the images around in my mind, and composed three nestlings viewed from the front. It was a leap of faith to be able to do it. I achieved it because of my observations of the House Finches' babies.

I've found many challenges embroidering this suite. The first involved the male goldfinch. Since I couldn't predict how much of the finch's underbelly would be visible through the purple fluff, I decided it would be best to completely embroider the bird before stitching the purple bloom. It turned out to be a good decision.

The nest was very difficult. I felt it was important to have as few stitches as possible in the space to prevent the background silk fabric from puckering. So how was I supposed to achieve success? At first, I thought about crocheting a form to match the nest's shape and couch it down along the design of the nest's edges. Then thread could be easily woven in and out of the holes.

But when I observed a female House Finch making a nest under my awning in the gerbil wheel, I changed my mind. I watched her sitting in the nest, turning around, and inserting tiny twigs in the partially formed nest. I realized that if I could let myself be her, I could experience nest-making and come up with a solution. So I did just that through visualization. And sure enough, a solution came to me. I would couch down thread and weave through the thread. A friend of mine who had a silk buttonhole thread collection happily agreed to let me borrow a few different-colored spools for the project.

Before I began, I returned to the American Goldfinch guide to study the goldfinch nests pictured there. The nesting

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materials made for a variety of textures. Plant matter and plant down protruded from the outer surfaces. Keeping those images in mind, I began the process of laying the buttonhole thread. I let the thread lay at will, couching it down as I went. The process slowly began to take on a life of its own. The work became an exercise in not letting my brain decide what to do but letting the nest maker in me be my guide. Whenever I wasn't sure how to proceed, I visualized myself nest-building. As a result, the creative side could play, and I could make progress with the weaving/couching process as well as color selection.

The thistle bracts are bulbous containers formed by overlapping leaves that encase the thistle fluff which is really a large cluster of individual flowers. The challenge for the thistle bract motifs involved topography. A close study of the bracts at various stages of flowering showed a variety of geometric shapes between the thorns on its curved surface. On a closed bract, the shapes were more trapezoidal. As the bract grew and opened to reveal the purple fluff, the shapes along the surface between the thorns became more diamond-like. My observations helped me with the bracts' designs. I embroidered them by applying colors that would create a sense of curvature to the bracts.

The underlying form of the suite's composition is the Chinese mandala, Yang and Yin. The mandala is a horizontal S-curve dividing the top- and bottom-halves of a circle into black and white. In the white half is a black circular disc and in the black half is a white circular disc. Each half contains a



Detail of Bull Thistle buds

round spot of the opposite's color. The embroidery's design plays with color in the same way as the mandala—the yellow in the goldfinch is contained in the yellow of the Jerusalem artichoke's flowers.

The mandala represents male and female so the embroidery follows suit with the female goldfinch in flight and the male sitting above the nest. In nature, the male goldfinch feeds the young in the nest after the first week of life.

It also represents summer and winter. The late summer theme straddles both of these aspects in nature.

This work has taken about three-and-a-half years to complete because of the numerous, complex elements. Studying color from life depended on seasonal availability. Photos can take one only so far. Much of the time I was solving problems before applying needle to fabric. Finally, personal and professional commitments limited my availability.

In translation, the Hebrew words at the top of the embroidery mean "full of joy." For me, that's what a meadow is. Even in late summer, there is something special to celebrate in the meadow. Plant down and plant matter are plentiful. Wildflower seeds are mature, abundant, and readily available as a food source. The goldfinch, also known as the wild canary, sings beautiful vocalizations that echo across the meadow's expanse. Late summer in the meadow is a joyous time, and celebrating it with embroidery is a wonderful thing! ■

Kay Faye Fialkoff is a member of the Bergen Chapter. Her Prayers for the Earth: Wetlands Suites, Nos. 1-4, and Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suites, Nos. 1-2, have been previously published in Needle Arts. Fialkoff is also the author of Finding Katy: A Memoir, the story of her life's journey. Visit her website: <http://www.findingkaty.com>.



Detail of Jerusalem artichoke bud

Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite, No. 3 is fifteen inches in diameter on silk fabric. Threads used include Robison Anton rayon threads and buttonhole silk thread (Vintage Belding Richardson Corticelli B & A Size D buttonhole twist on wood spools). Color mixing throughout the work was accomplished by laying different colored threads side-by-side and by over-stitching various colors.

The silk buttonhole twist used to create the bird's nest is from the thread collection of Marguerite (Pam) Young who, for thirty years, shared with Fialkoff her life-long passion for fiber, craft, and art.

Without the continued use of an American Goldfinch specimen from the Princeton Biology Laboratory, Fialkoff would not have been able to embroider the American Goldfinch so realistically.