

A watercolor illustration of a pink magnolia flower, showing the delicate layers of the petals and the central reproductive parts. The colors range from light pink to a deeper magenta. The style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and some darker shading in the center.

LOCKDOWN

21 March – 14 May 2020

*Pink Magnolia
x Soulangeana*

Sean McCavera

This book is dedicated with eternal love:

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How this book was made

In early March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic struck the world like a massive tsunami – a huge wave quickly spreading from China to Italy and then rapidly into the UK.

The UK entered lockdown in March 2020 – a total shutdown from the busyness and ordinariness of everyday life. No air traffic, no traffic on the streets, no people on the streets. Government imposed restrictions required schools, universities, pubs, cafés, restaurants, hotels to all close immediately – only essential food shops and supermarkets remained open.

Digital life at home became the norm ... the corona or COVID-19 virus controlled everyone's whereabouts as people worked and stayed at home. The only permitted contact with the external world was daily exercise. During lockdown, I exercised every day by walking around the beautiful Barbican and community gardens.

Spring was incredibly bright and warm. For the first time I heard city church bells ringing on the hour (and half past) and birdsong as I monastically walked the quadrangled garden. I spotted a small pink magnolia tree in a shady, secluded part of the garden. It produced concentrated pink flowers, from buds to overtly sexualised de-petalled heads. There are many other varieties of magnolia and other beautiful trees in the garden, but this one captured my attention.

With an iPhone, I took many many photos (approximately 1200) of the small magnolia tree through its short seasonal flowering life. I didn't

put on my reading glasses, as I wanted to see the effect of taking photographs without 20/20 vision and what impact it would have on the subsequent artwork.

I was struck by how much radiant beauty this small tree gave out in such a shaded, insignificant part of the garden. It was such a contrasting visual metaphor for the pandemic. Beauty can be present in the most challenging of circumstances.

It was an extraordinary bright warm spring with glaring sunlight and bright blue plane-less skies. The flowering blossom of the magnolias was in sharp contrast to my own challenging personal journey of being treated for prostate cancer. I was undergoing the whole range of treatment from x to y as the whole world too suffered with the pandemic. I made this series of 31 paintings, inspired by the images stored in my iPhone's digital library. The number coincided by sheer chance with the number of pages in the sketch book and the flowering lifecycle of the plant. There seemed to be a synchronicity between the natural world and the practical art of making, wanting to make art to show that beauty was still part of us.



How the paintings were made

An outline of the drawings was made using an architect's fine nib black ink pen.

Concentrated watercolour pens in a selection of colours were used in combination with Chinese calligraphy brushes to create fluid washes and to maintain an intensity and uniformity of the colours throughout the paintings

The idea was not to create botanical paintings but to record the intense beauty of colours from buds to falling petals.

Images © Sean McCavera, 2020

How to use this book

The book comprises 31 paintings illustrating the blossoming of the pink magnolia plant 21 March to 14 May 2020.

31 paintings equal a calendar month – never mind the anomalies of some of the other months!

One way to use the 31 paintings is as a daily pictorial gratitude colour warmer. With the book propped up on a desk or table, you can choose the painting that will brighten up your day with instant colour and beauty.

Select and use any page as part of your daily gratitude routine.

I used the book while in hospital post-lockdown undergoing brachytherapy treatment. At the start of the day, I flipped open a page and left it on the hospital bedside trolley. The sheer glow of floral colours shone and gave me a sense of living light in a tiny corner of the hospital.

If you want to go further, select your favourite pages, have them made up as transparencies and attach them to windows as sun-glow stained glass paintings. Enjoy and use the book interactively – with others too – as a way to welcome warmth and colour into your day.

Sean McCavera
December 2020

T-13 *south*

Soothing and smoothing out
the ins and outs of a year gone by
– of intra-psychic tensions

Cool and circular with calmness of breath
– the in and the push- out;
the beauty of the calming breath

Still don't have the Bjorn Borg
low, low, low
resting heart rate
Just sit in the space and soothe and smooth out
the palpitating turkish coffee heart beats,
chug, chugger, chug, chug, chugged.

Staying with the emotions –
all emotions are just that
– emotions

They come and go
'*You don't have to nest on them!*'

Hand on heart the other on head

Open heart to circular love
flowing, flowing, flowing;
Natural love,
Supernatural love;
Essence of love,
Love essence.

'*Be with me*
Be with me Rey!'¹
I love those words!
'*Be with me (Rey!)*'

Love is undisciplined
– and so it should be!

Why regulate a force
Why regulate a life-force
A love-force!

Loving – to give love
Powerful to give love
Life changing to give love
Life enhancing to give love...
Love is ... (lovely) ...

How accepting that love is too.
Accepting love, too.

Love has no hate
Such a ... such a force
When love has no hate ...

'What a wake up call ...'

So much wants, wants-done
Not bucket list stuff
Just wanting to be done
Love the wanting to be done
Love the wanting to be done;
such a life force
The frankincense of life
– is the wanting for it

Have to make it clear – not the physical
wanting of things and stuff
Just the wanting – the essence of life

Metallic mouth at times
Solitary tear, a black-run,
on a deep steep ski run;
down on to the right cheek,
Where it fizzled out!

*'Chemo & brachytherapy & EBT appear with
great frequency on my word predictor!'*

Have good flow!

- await parting of the seas
- interminably holding back
- don't know what's holding it in!
- one day the garden hose will burst from the
brass tap

Still – *'What a wake up call ...'*

The metaphysical, the existential, the cosmological
– whatever they all mean ...

*'Thought I was a gonna!
(Could still be a gonna!)*

Regained the physical

T-13 *south*²
High up

I knew I would get out
Lockdown by Covid-19 from the plane-less skies
to green trees
I knew I was going to get out
Walked straight out!
Down the grand avenue
of majestic London plane trees³

1 'Be with me', Rey says whilst meditating at the beginning of
Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker (2019)

2 Cancer ward, University College London Hospital – high up
on the 13th floor with panoramic views of London

3 Plane trees – majestic and grand architectural avenue shaped
trees, unique to London































































Afterword

The first time I remember really noticing a magnolia tree was in my early twenties. I was out walking with a friend, and we passed a huge cream magnolia tree in full bloom. “Magnolias are my favourite flower”, she said to me, “and this tree looks like a bride.” I balked slightly at the analogy: this tree was not nearly diaphanous enough to remind me of a bride. My early-twenties self had been educated to believe brides should be nubile, delicate, ethereal and gently measured in their emotions. This tree looked too solid, too practical, too earthed, too much like it had things to do. It looked like it was already a partner and a mother, already expert at managing a home and a career. It looked like a woman in charge of her own life.

The images in this book took me back to that memory. As I experienced each one, my first feeling was that of adjusting my internal ‘aliveness’ sensor. The artist states it was not his intention to make technical botanical illustrations, and indeed the outlines are stylised and minimalist. Yet in that minimalism, and with a beautiful depth and richness of colour, there is captured a dimension of creative, individual and very of-this-world femininity that is vibrantly alive and becoming. We humans need time in our becoming: empty spaces to process, to percolate, to question, to learn. A magnolia doesn’t have the time or the need for these interludes: given the right conditions, she (because in my native language a magnolia is a ‘she’) can get on with realising, without questions or hesitations, the maximal potential that is written in her genetic code. For the time she is alive, she hides nothing. She unapologetically radiates out into nature, and this is what my sensors were adjusting to: the density of being and becoming represented in each image.

Much like the ‘bride’ I saw all those years ago, these magnolias are getting on with their complex, unique and very beautiful business of living. But there is a great deal more to them than beauty. In each image there is a voice, a personality, a drive and a strength that is sometimes almost matriarchal. As I ‘met’ each of these images, I felt like I was meeting a succession of phenomenal women, in Maya Angelou’s definition of the word. Though completely self-contained, there was a sense of unity and common purpose between them – perhaps unsurprisingly, as they were all blooms of the same tree. To me then, as well as a celebration of nature, this collection becomes a celebration of phenomenal women in partnership and community. I was put in mind of the quote: “a flower doesn’t think of competing with the flower next to it. It just blooms.” In today’s society, we often see beauty in competition with other beauty rather than in harmony with it.

For those who haven’t seen them, the Barbican gardens are a life-giving place. In the heart of the hustle and bustle of the City of London, they provide an embrace of natural life. I feel strangely reverent thinking of the small magnolia tree in a secluded corner, singing its message out to anyone or anything within earshot. Once again I feel that sense of unity, harmony, coexistence. And I feel happy the artist made friends with this tree. I feel happy he told her story.

Martina Avellino
December 2020

This book is number of 30 copies.

