

5 artists who harness the fleeting beauty of D.C.'s cherry blossoms



By Haben Kelati

March 16, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



Artist Chris Pyrate works in his D.C. studio. Pyrate, who grew up in Southeast Washington, has murals in Georgetown and the H Street corridor and was commissioned by the Washington Wizards to design custom uniforms. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)



Listen 7 min



Comment 2



Gift Article



Share

They arrive fresh each year, sure as the pastel petals themselves. They slip in quietly among the tourists and selfie takers. They sidestep marriage proposals and toddlers kiboshing family portrait sessions. They come with their sketchbooks and easels and clickety-click-click film cameras.

They're the artists, drawn by the rare yet reliable beauty of Washington's cherry blossom trees. They come to create something permanent out of something passing. They come because even though the scene is so thoroughly known — and done and crowded and, frankly, kind of a nuisance — they can't resist.

Artists need inspiration, and as these five explain, they come because the blossoms offer a spectacle of it.

Chris Pyrate

Chris Pyrate grew up in Southeast Washington and remembers that, during his childhood, the cherry blossoms were more of a nuisance than anything else. “Every year, it gets all over everything, it brings pollen,” Pyrate says. “And I have allergies, so I didn’t like that season anyway.” As a kid itching to see the world, he couldn’t have predicted that those pale pink petals would one day be like a North Star leading him home.



Part of Chris Pyrate’s “Georgetown on the Journey,” a cherry blossom art installation in Georgetown Park. (Albert Ting)

In his early adulthood, Pyrate’s career as a muralist and storyboard artist for films and books brought him to cities like Miami and New York. Those cities’ unique artistic traditions prompted him to consider his hometown’s signature aesthetics. He began incorporating D.C. iconography — including the monuments — into his art. But it wasn’t until he lost a series of loved ones in the District that the cherry blossoms and their significance came into focus. He was commissioned for a billboard and drew an astronaut in a bed of flowers reaching for, of all the petals, a cherry blossom. “I named that piece ‘Missing Home From Paradise ... What a Fool,’” he says. “This piece meant I wanted to come home. ... I was on that journey already, but this solidified it for me.

Pyrate returned to D.C. in late 2017. Since then, his colorful drawings of cherry blossoms have transformed from a manifestation of homesickness into love letters to his city. Now, like the petals that used to annoy him, Pyrate’s work is all over the city. He has murals in Georgetown and the H Street corridor and his own blossom-inspired clothing line, and he was commissioned by the Washington Wizards to design custom uniforms for the team.

He knows his work is only half the equation. “Art is partially what you make it as an artist,” he says. “But it’s not really done until someone witnesses it. And you can’t force *how* they witness it.”

But Pyrate can hope people sense what he pours into this art: love, pride, something that feels a little like home.

Lea Craigie-Marshall



One of Lea Craigie-Marshall's earliest childhood memories is wearing a raspberry-pink fur coat and enjoying the cherry blossom trees with her dad. Cut to 2022, and Craigie-Marshall, who works with mediums ranging from stained glass to digital art, was chosen as the National Cherry Blossom Festival's official artist. During a media appearance last year, she was asked about the perspective of her renditions of cherry blossoms, and something clicked: "I'm realizing as I'm looking at the art that I created for the festival that the actual, literal perspective was where I was standing when I was walking with my dad along the Tidal Basin," she said in a recent interview.

For Craigie-Marshall, her appreciation and love for the cherry blossoms have grown into something much bigger than a fond memory. "I think beyond the beauty, we need to remember that this really was a gift from Japan," she says about the origin of the trees' arrival in Washington and their significance as a symbol of cooperation across cultures. "We need to remember the culture and the people behind it."



A 2022 Metro SmartRip card designed by Craigie-Marshall. (National Cherry Blossom Festival/Courtesy of Lea Craigie-Marshall)

Craigie-Marshall is passionate about social justice and puts it at the center of much of her art. Her intention was to use this platform to draw a connection between the fight for justice and the beauty of an event that means so much to her personally and to Washington's identity. "I just want to use my art for good, for positive things," she says. "If I have a voice, I'll use it."

Jackie Battenfield

Trees of all kinds have been an enduring subject for painter Jackie Battenfield. Although she's never lived in the area, Battenfield has family ties to the DMV region that gave her the opportunity to see the cherry blossoms as an adult, already well established in her career, and she felt their inspiration immediately. "I'm totally intrigued by the shape and the form of different types of cherry blossoms," she says. Admiring them was easy; figuring out how to represent them proved far more challenging.



Jackie Battenfield's "Incandescent" (2019), acrylic on mylar panel. (Courtesy of Jackie Battenfield)

Painting the cherry blossom flowers in their real-life size didn't allow her to focus on the intricate details that originally intrigued Battenfield. So she went big, creating a larger-than-life meditation on a fragment of nature. "I had to enlarge them so much," she says, "and that's when you start to see the spectacular array of the individual petals and how they all cluster together. That's what excites me."

Many of Battenfield's paintings demand a moment of contemplation. "My work has never been about the realistic," she says. "It's about interpreting and also allowing people to look at [nature] with fresh eyes. We're surrounded by it, but how often do we really take time taking it in and looking at it intimately?"

Frank H. Day



Photographer Frank H. Day at Rawlins Park in Washington. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

Frank H. Day isn't scared of how often cherry blossoms are photographed and how common their photos have become in the D.C. region. In fact, that's what makes him want to photograph them in the first place. "The incentive there is to take a really overworked, ubiquitous subject and try to make it something that's almost unrecognizably different and more beautiful," he says. Instead of heading down to the basin while the sun is shining and the crowd is large, Day prefers to visit D.C.'s favorite spring bloom after the sun has set. "Working at night envelops everything in an atmosphere of mystery," he says. "The familiar becomes new."



Day's "Cherry Blossom 100" (2011), archival pigment print. (Courtesy of Frank H. Day/Addison/Ripley Fine Art)

Every year for about a decade, he's headed to the Tidal Basin with a flashlight in hand, trying to see something new in the familiar blossoms. And he almost always does. "In the last year or two, during covid, the pictures got a lot more anxious and less balanced and perfect," Day says. "They were a shattered tree against a disturbed sky; different, slightly more acidic colors."

That beauty and disturbance, the familiar and the new — they're the elements that keep mystery at the core of Day's photographs. "It's a launching point for practically everything I have done," he says. "You can't explain everything. You should not be able to explain everything."

Ken Girardini



Artist Ken Girardini inside his home in Sykesville, Md. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

Ken Girardini's experience as an exchange student in Japan during high school changed him — and it influences his art to this day. He was there during the summer, not peak cherry blossom season, but the tree's flowers were still everywhere. Girardini remembers seeing the blossoms printed on streamers and kimonos, represented in origami. "It's really a big deal," he says.

Today Girardini is a mixed-media artist. Among his works is an image of a flowering cherry blossom branch drifting above a gray Jefferson Memorial that overlooks an even grayer Potomac River. The scene comes to life with a splash of pink paint and three-dimensional metal blossoms.

"It's the fact that cherry blossoms are so ephemeral," Girardini says about what draws him to depict the trees in his art. "They're here for a few days or weeks. ... They're inspiring for that simple moment. It's a fleeting moment." And yet, by choosing metal, Girardini has captured beauty that is fleeting in art that is meant to last.



Girardini's "Jefferson Memorial With Cherry Trees," mixed media. (Ken Girardini)