

# Alice B

## Capturing the Romance of the Past in a

AS ORCHIDS ARE MY MUSE, SOME of my persistent inquiries are “What has made the orchid such an intense object of desire over time? How can our past tell us why we are captivated by the orchid in the present? And why are some orchids more personally compelling than others?”

On my artistic and intellectual exploration for answers, I was introduced to the almost hypnotic beauty of cattleyas by Jeff Bradley, an American Orchid Society trustee who resides in Houston, Texas, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at the AOS Members Meeting at Longwood Gardens in March 2008. He introduced me to a member of the du Pont family who viewed my painting *Illuminated Vandas at Longwood*, which was unveiled and exhibited in the conservatory. During that serendipitous meeting, the lively conversation that followed about two specific cattleyas named after two du Pont leading ladies sparked my interest in learning more about *Cattleya Alice B. du Pont* (Sunrise Chalet × Louise Georgiana) and the women behind this orchid.

Because I consider myself an artist and a scientist, intense research is integral to my studio practice. Thus, I immersed myself in the rich fabric of the du Pont family history, their vast contributions to American society and their influences on modern horticulture. I was fascinated reading about Alice Belin du Pont and her husband, Pierre S. du Pont, renowned American industrialist, horticulturalist, philanthropist and innovator. Their romance with the beauty of the natural world was deeply intertwined with their intense love for each other, a passion still visible today in the legacy of Longwood Gardens.

I was intrigued by what made the *C. Alice B. du Pont* so transformative and my goal quickly became to experience the orchid myself. Thus, I made my desires known to Horticulture Department Head Sharon Loving at Longwood Gardens. When Lee Alyanakian, senior gardener at Longwood, called me at the end of April 2009 to tell me the orchid was in bloom, I jumped at the chance to visit on May 1. I can't recall a better way to celebrate May Day than to have spent the entire day getting intimately acquainted with the magnificence of these orchid plants. Longwood

graciously allowed me access to their best specimens, which I juxtaposed against lush backgrounds in various locations of the conservatory. I spent hours sketching and painting character studies, and taking hundreds of reference photographs to understand the spirit of the flower in preparation for the portrait I felt now compelled to paint in my studio. I began to imagine parallels between the outward beauty, elegance and sophistication of the blooms and the inner beauty of the woman, Alice B. du Pont.

Painting *Alice B* was sheer delight. After a series of preliminary drawings, I designed the final composition using a composite of views to illustrate the flower's undulating complexity. The grand scale of the painting — measuring 72 × 48 inches (180 × 120 cm) — is meant to command one's attention. The distinctive style of sculpting the painting's underlying groundwork of fossilized botanical impressions — for which I am known — was enhanced by intense shades of emerald and azure, recalling the luxuriant backdrops at Longwood. Over this I layered as many as 70 coats of transparent oil paint, each illuminating the subtle shades and patterns formed by the petal's ruffled white landscape. I use layers of paint to capture light, animating the surfaces to achieve vibrancy, luminosity and drama. As I brushed on layer after layer of opalescent oil color I became more and more fascinated by the orchid's pure sensuality, giving me a deeper appreciation for the transformative intrinsic power of nature.

People often ask me how long it takes, given my time- and labor-intensive artistic process, to complete a painting. *Alice B* took nearly two years, from the beginning of my first creative insight and subsequent tug on my heart strings to the last brushstroke of my signature. Yet in my mind's eye, the circular essence of a painting's existence is not complete until it finds its way into the experiences of others. For this reason I found it an appropriate honor to be invited by Paul Redman, director of Longwood Gardens, to unveil *Alice B* where this story began, at Longwood, during a private event honoring Alice B. du Pont in February 2011. The painting was then on exhibition during Orchid Extravaganza through the end of March in Longwood's elegant Music



Room, built in 1923 by Pierre and Alice du Pont for private entertaining. Their portraits in that room remind me of the grandeur of that era. The painting, *Alice B*, pays tribute not only to an orchid of preeminent beauty, but also to an inspiring woman of grand spirit and vitality, sophistication and elegance.

# Contemporary Painting

TEXT AND PAINTING BY PATRICIA LASPINO



*Patricia Laspino designed the Orchid Alliance Project (OAP): Bridging Art & Science to explore the connections between art and science using orchid art as a floral metaphor. Her life's work is dedicated to the project's mission, which is to stimulate awareness and conversations about cultural and biological evolution, biodiversity and*

*conservation. The OAP is endorsed and supported by the American Orchid Society as an important part of its outreach efforts. The artist is consulting and has collaborated with the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History and the Freer and Sackler galleries in Washington DC; the US Botanic Gardens at the Capitol in Washington DC,*

*Alice B, measuring 72 x 48 inches (180 x 120 cm), is oil on canvas.*

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