ALOE, LAVENDER, ROSES, AND SAGE populate the neat garden outside Penelope Gottlieb’s hillside home and are docilely constrained by the paths that crisscross her extensive yard. Inside the artist’s airy studio, however, it’s another story entirely, as blossoms in fiery orange and electric blue explode off the canvas in Pop Art style. You can practically hear one of the go, “Ka-pow!

The vivid dynamism is intended to be attention getting, says Gottlieb, because the subject is serious. These paintings—part of her ongoing Extinct Species series—highlight plants that have disappeared from the earth. “I’m shouting, ‘Here I am!’” says the Santa Barbara-based artist. “It’s my way of communicating.”

Gottlieb’s message spans both the political and artistic. “In a century we’ll lose 50 percent of all plants,” she says. “And when a plant is lost, you usually can’t regain it. It’s scary.”

In the face of the gloomy prognosis, though, according to Gottlieb the works “express the joy of life and beauty of the moment” as well as a sense of the past. “The flowers hint at the fleeting beauty of youth,” she says, and they pay homage to the tradition of 17th-century still-life vanitas paintings that intimate mortality. That’s why she often
includes unexpected details like a playing card or dice, which hint that pleasures of the flesh will eventually pass away.

The extinct species may share the stage, but they are always in the spotlight, and they are always the starting point of Gottlieb’s creative process. How does she figure out what extinct species looked like? Botanical drawings are often cryptic or confusing, so she relies instead on descriptive prose for the details. That’s actually an advantage, she says, since it allows her more freedom to come up with what she thinks the plant should look like. The point is not to re-create reality: “These paintings are about loss, language, and imagination.”

A Los Angeles native, Gottlieb moved to Santa Barbara with her husband, Andy, a film producer, about 15 years ago. With a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, she had a career as a commercial artist but decided to enter the painting program at the University of California Santa Barbara to earn a master’s degree. Since then her work has changed dramatically as she tackled subjects that called for radically different media and artistic approaches. Her post-9/11 Surveillance portraits were ultra-close-ups airbrushed on aluminum; the delicately colored drawings of houses in the No $ Down series were her comment on Americans’ sense of entitlement to home ownership, an ideal that proved to be fragile in the wake of the housing market crash.

All the while, however, Gottlieb was fascinated by the idea of researching plants through language. Her earliest explorations of that theme, in the late ‘90s, evoked old prints of botanicals. “I did a few but didn’t quite feel that it was working. The initial work seemed too derivative of past interpretations of nature,” Gottlieb says.

She put the subject aside for several years. “What I realized was that I needed to have the plants moving in a more violent, crazy struggle to survive.” And, indeed, soon extinct species seemed to be exploding from the center of the canvas, surrounded by weapons and artillery. The work has continued to evolve. “I thought I didn’t need to be so literal,” she says. When she finally hit on her current approach, she realized, “Yes! This is it!”

The paintings are typically 50 by 40 inches or more, filled with brilliantly colored flowers the jostle and overlap each other in the space. Gottlieb starts small, though, developing her composition in pencil on standard-size paper. She scans the drawing into a computer where she refines her color choices, then transfers the drawing onto a canvas, adjusting hues and adding fine lines that texture the work and evoke traditional etchings.

Recently Gottlieb has worked has also worked on a complementary series called Invasive Species, which focuses on things that are often responsible for the extinction of indigenous plants, including non-native plants, people, and industry. Using reproductions of John James Audubon’s bird prints as a base, she paints in vegetation that wraps and strangles the winged creatures in an eerily predatory but gorgeous way.
The latest work on Gottlieb’s easel, however, was a commission from UCSB Arts & Lectures that is being turned into a fine-art poster to raise money for the program. Gottlieb particularly appreciates the connection to that nonprofit. “The challenge is to find work that’s important,” she says. “I don’t want to just paint pictures of pretty flowers. My is political with lots of layers.”

To see more of Gottlieb’s work, visit penelopegottlieb.com.

*Erigeron karvinskianus*, acrylic and ink over Audubon print, is part of the Invasive Species series.