

Elisa Carollo, "Isabella Ducrot's Practice Remains Rooted in the Quiet Power of Materials," *Observer*, July 7, 2025.

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Isabella Ducrot's Practice Remains Rooted in the Quiet Power of Materials

In new works at Petzel, the 94-year-old artist renders floral compositions and lush landscapes of germinating natural life through minimal gestures that celebrate the earth's beauty.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 07/07/25 12:27pm



Ducrot continues to deepen her exploration of the natural world with "Visited Land," her latest exhibition at Petzel in New York.

Photos by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

Petzel

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[Isabella Ducrot](#)'s work is a hymn to the veneration and economy of materials. Her delicate paintings, in their materiality and process, carry a nostalgic resonance—an echo of bygone eras that transports us to an alternative artisanal retro-time, when life moved in closer harmony with nature's rhythms. They conjure a world in which human existence flowed in seamless alignment with the earth's pulse, a bucolic and primordial dimension that inspires and sustains her new works. Now 94, the celebrated Italian artist is exhibiting at Petzel in New York with "Visited Land," a show of work that deepens her exploration of the relationship between material and the natural world.

When we spoke a few days before the opening, Ducrot reflected with striking clarity and thoughtfulness on her roots in a historically distant era shaped by a radically different value system, formed in pre-industrial Italy before the rupture of the 1960s and 1970s. That period, marked by postwar industrial acceleration and the rise of consumer capitalism, brought what she describes as a dramatic break from ancestral traditions. "I fully experienced those ancestral habits, the ones where nothing was ever thrown away," she told *Observer*. "Consumerism has this very blunt phrase: use and throw away. This was a disaster from a cultural standpoint. Before the sixties, everything was recycled, so there was a familiarity with materials and more than anything, fabric."

Growing up, no bedsheet ever went to waste; what once covered a bed would eventually be repurposed to scrub the kitchen or transformed into something else, like a blouse. "There was a constant practice in which fabric, like other materials, was scarce and therefore subject to continuous transformation. I experienced all of this without being fully aware of it."

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Isabella Ducrot in her studio. Photo by Gina De Bellis. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York

Shaped by the *forma mentis* of that bygone era, Ducrot naturally preserved the fabrics and artisanal papers gathered across her life and travels, later pressing them into service as canvases. Yet it's worth noting that she didn't do so expecting to become an artist. What guided her was an instinctual bond with materials and their capacity for transformation. "I made paintings without knowing I was making paintings, but it was a kind of devotion to these clothes. This familiarity with raw material was decisive," she said.

A writer, poet and artist for four decades, Ducrot, now 94, never studied or worked in the formal art world. Her work only recently gained widespread international recognition after her inclusion in the Venice Biennale and in Art Basel Unlimited in 2022. Her artmaking remains deeply intuitive and, as she puts it, is all the more genuine for that. She learned by observing and absorbing ancestral cultures and traditions during her extensive travels. Over the years, she assembled an exquisite trove of fabrics dating back centuries, mostly from Asia and Eastern Europe—Russia, Turkey, China, India and Tibet. Treating these textiles as artworks in their own right, Ducrot employs a wide range of mediums and techniques to revive fading ancestral knowledge and reconnect with generations past.

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In her "Profusion" series, Ducrot built on the tradition of still life, crafting exuberant representations of flowers cascading from pastel pots. Photos by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

Ducrot began traveling when she was 30, and her repeated visits to India proved especially formative. There, fabric assumes a more sacral dimension; it is woven into daily rituals, aesthetics and meaning. "That use and the presence of the beauty of the fabric made a great impression on me," she explained. "My academy—if I can say that—is the world. It's the travel, the work I've done with my eyes and the thoughts on what I was seeing around me."

Her engagement with materials is intimate and profound, marked by a deep understanding of their inherent properties, their histories and their expressive potential. This attunement to cultural specificity has allowed Ducrot to continue creating works that transcend time and geography, reviving ancestral traditions from around the world. Her practice is a timeless, transcultural testament to human civilization, celebrating the universal impulse toward the creation of objects, myths and symbols.

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In a world increasingly driven by mass production and digital abstraction, Ducrot's countercultural embrace of slow, handcrafting stands as a vital reminder of the enduring value of artisanal knowledge—the quiet wisdom embedded in time-honored craft.

What is perhaps most striking about Ducrot's work is its ability to carry a shared heritage of traditions, embedded not only in the materials and techniques she employs but also in the essential yet symbolically resonant archetypal visual language she uses. While Ducrot is cautious about invoking spiritually charged descriptions of her practice, she acknowledges that the imagery in her paintings and drawings largely emerges through instinct and intuition. "I've always been afraid to use these terms," she said, "but there was, in fact, a sort of surrender—a yielding to something that I don't really understand very well."



The show is Ducrot's second solo exhibition with the gallery. Photos by Daniel Polonsky. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

In the new works on view at Petzel, floral compositions and lush landscapes of germinating natural life are rendered through minimal, essential gestures that celebrate the purity of the earth's beauty. At the same time, their material presence gestures toward more celestial realms. For the first time, Ducrot incorporates

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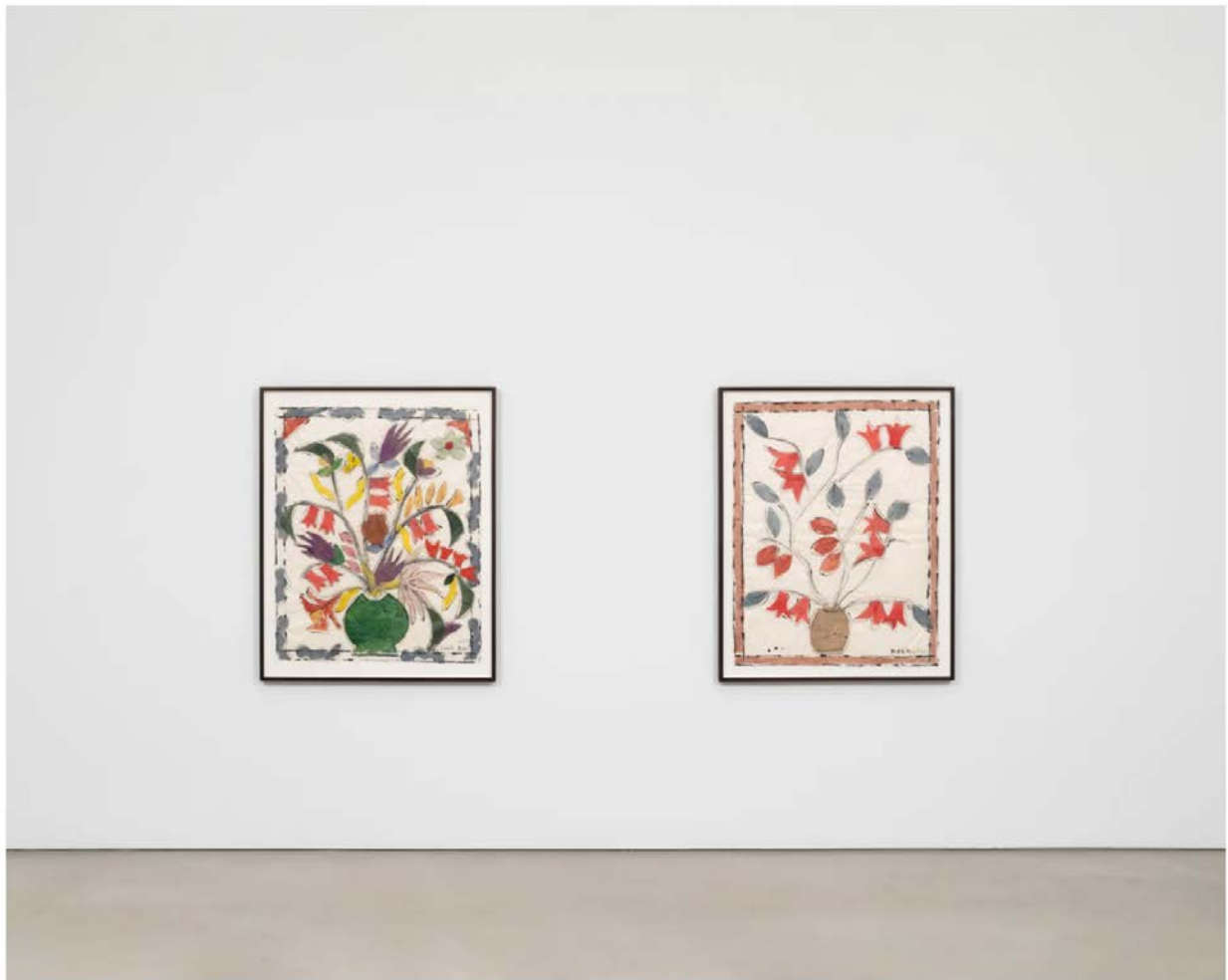
meteorite powder into her process, bridging micro and macrocosmic dimensions in poetic, painterly reflections that ask us to reconsider our place in the universe, as part of broader, interconnected systems and ecologies. This gesture also informs the exhibition's title. "While I was making them, I received the gift of meteorite dust," she said. "'Visited' is meant to refer to the fact that I colored part of these paintings by dissolving meteorite dust. The result was that part of the painting was made with this material that came to visit our Earth."

In many of her works, Ducrot invites us to reflect on the need for tenderness, care and empathy, drawing on the symbolic associations of flowers, which are long tied to rituals of offering, honoring and adornment. Through their enduring presence in cultural traditions, flowers become vessels of emotional transmission, embodying both vulnerability and vitality.

The choice to work on Japanese Gampi paper introduces another symbolic layer. Its apparent fragility poetically echoes the precariousness of today's ecologies, increasingly disrupted by human intervention. Yet these works do more than lament loss—they celebrate the resilience of natural life, animated by vibrant botanical forms and flourishing flora that pulse across the surface. At the same time, Gampi's historical use as a medium for preserving manuscripts and antiquarian texts deepens the works' resonance, underscoring a core tension between environmental decline and the human responsibility of custodianship, urging viewers to contemplate the ecological consequences of our actions.

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The series began as an outgrowth of Ducrot’s “Bella Terra” works: bucolic, sweeping landscapes that exalt the earth’s bountiful beauty. Photos by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

The challenge of using such delicate paper on a large scale—some works span nearly four meters in length—further heightens the tension between fragility and strength. The material appears fragile, yet in Ducrot’s hands it reveals a quiet resilience. “I wanted to emphasize the contrast between this paper, which appears extremely fragile, and using it to make very, very large works,” she explained. “It seems so delicate that it sounds absurd to create something so big, but in reality, this Japanese paper is not fragile at all; it’s an incredibly strong paper. It’s a perfect symbol of resilience.”

Although Ducrot refuses to associate her works with any direct narrative or political commentary, they function as visual metaphors that already carry these critical messages about disrupted natural cycles, as well as a profound devotion to material, encouraging preservation of both substance and tradition. Ultimately, her

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works invite viewers to explore the layers of meaning embedded in their material and structure. In her vision, the act of preserving artisanal knowledge is not about nostalgia—it becomes a pathway to a different kind of future, a way to reimagine more sustainable, attentive relationships with the natural and material worlds that surround us.

Isabella Ducrot’s “Visited Lands” is on view at Petzel Gallery in New York through July 18, 2025.



Ducrot’s “Profusion” works center on unfurling desire while “Visited Lands” offer a meditation on human responsibility. Photos by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

<https://observer.com/2025/07/isabella-ducrot-petzel-new-york-visited-land-exhibition/>