

# Living

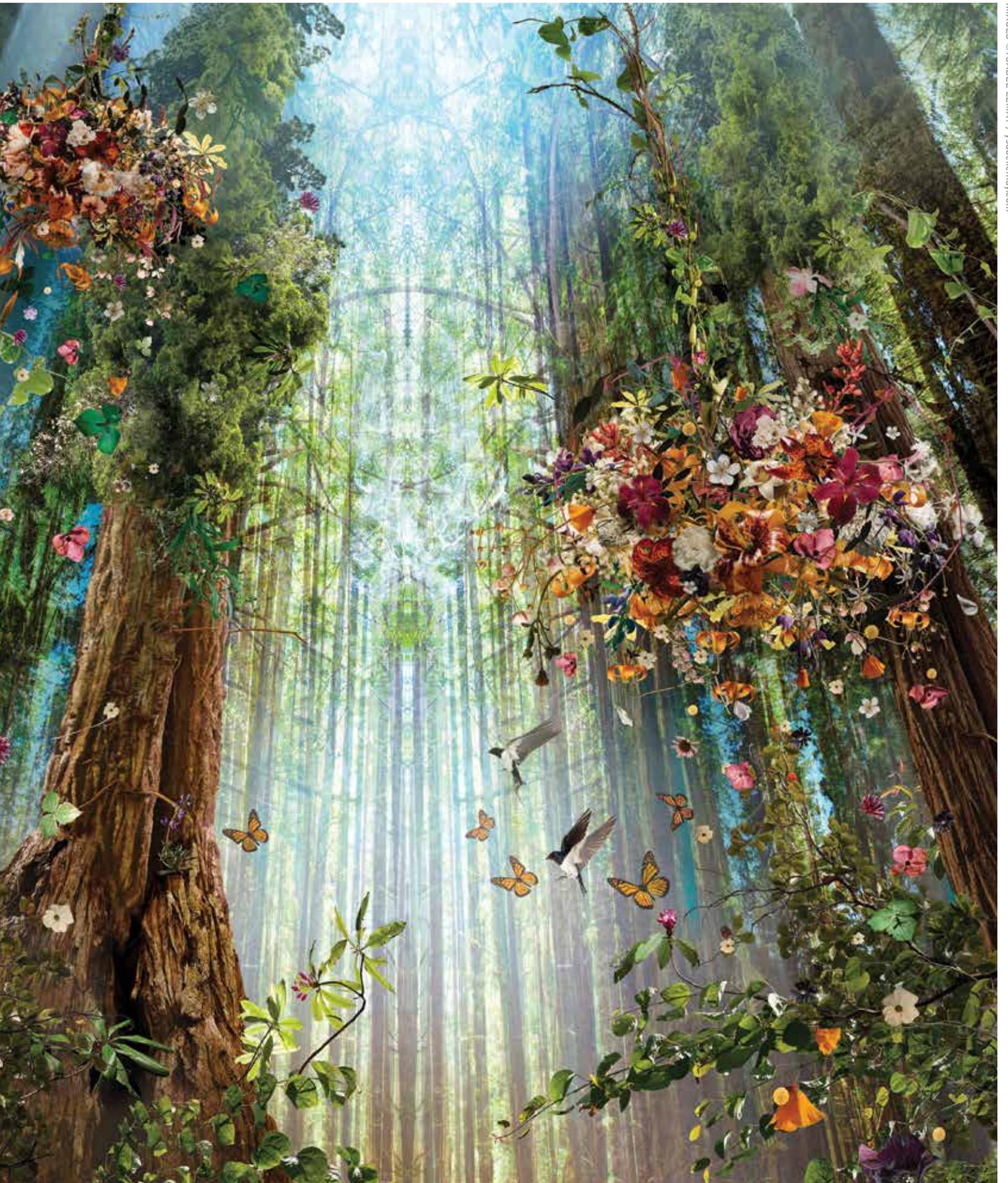
## CREATIONS

YSABEL LEMAY  
CELEBRATES NATURE  
IN EXQUISITE DETAIL

BY AMANDA ARNOLD

“It was some kind of middle-aged crisis,” says Ysabel LeMay. After years working in advertising, she quit the business to become a painter. “I painted for eight years, and I found it very claustrophobic,” she says. It grated on her to be in one space all the time, engulfed in turpentine fumes and creating work that could be purchased by just one client. She took three months to reassess her aspirations and create a new blueprint for her life, then a friend lent her his camera. “He asked me to do something with it, and a month later







I brought him two pieces—two of my collages—and when he saw the work, he was so taken by the work that he gave me the camera and said, ‘If you need anything, any equipment, you can borrow anything you want,’” she explains. And that’s how LeMay’s journey into fine art photography began.

### FANTASTICAL WORLDS

LeMay uses the word “hypercollage” to describe her elaborate compositions, which involve hundreds, sometimes thousands, of image files that she puzzles together via Adobe Photoshop into otherworldly works. The smallest of her wall prints are 4x4-feet (about 50 gigabytes), and she’s also made mural-sized installations as wide as 27 feet. For the largest of her art, she breaks the composition into panels and works on each separately, as it’s difficult to tackle such a widescale piece on the computer. “And I have

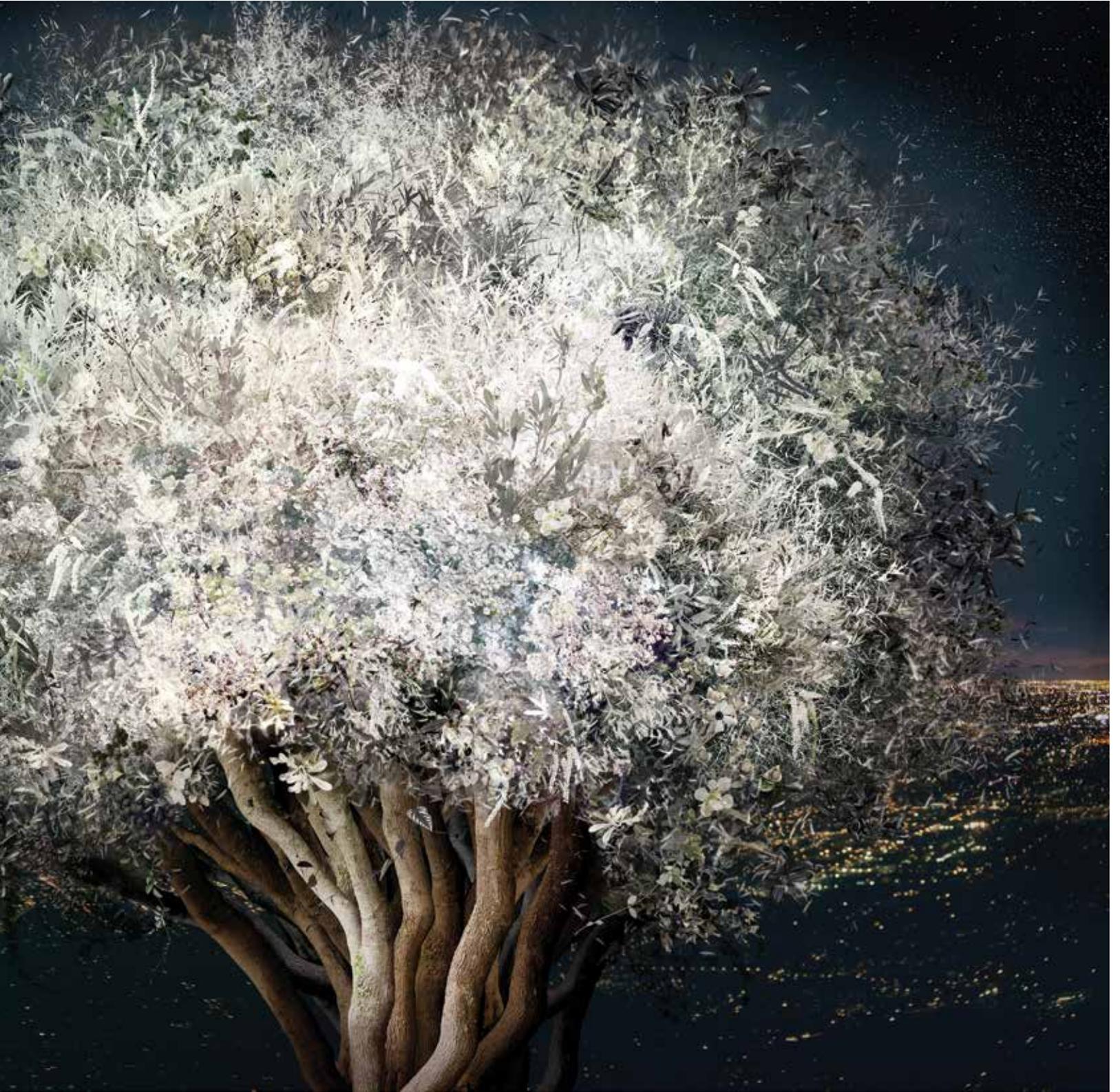
to flatten my layers to keep adding,” she says.

The building blocks of LeMay’s artworks are the images she makes while traveling the world documenting flora and fauna. She’s made photography trips to Asia, the Amazon rainforest, the Caribbean, the Florida Everglades, and the forests of Northern California, among other destinations. “Sometimes I do pieces that are specific to an area, but most of the time I combine photos from many different places,” she says. This gives her works a sense of mystery: “I like to create illusion.” For example, in one artwork, a small branch could appear to be a tree. Viewers are left to question if what they’re seeing is the tropics, underwater, or in a forest. The worlds pictured in her art are intended to be fantastical, not literal.

### PROCESS SUPPORTS CREATIVITY

Since LeMay sources hundreds to thousands of images for each piece, she needs a highly organized process for filing and selecting images. When she





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returns from a photography trip with thousands of photos, the first thing she does is select her favorites. One by one, she makes extractions from those favorites and adds those extracted images to the appropriate folders in her vast image bank. For example, she might extract a wild orchid from the background of an image and add it to her “Wild orchid” folder. That way, when she’s creating a work and desires a wild orchid, she can easily source one from that folder.

This extraction process is paramount to LeMay. As she’s removing backgrounds, she has what she calls a Zen moment, she explains. “This is when I connect with the plant, the energy of the plant, and the detail of the plant.” She opens the file after the extraction and looks at the flora on a large scale, examining every minute feature of the plant. “It is a very important process in my work,” she says, because it allows her to commit those images to memory. “I know by heart thousands and thousands of images. I have memories of thousands of images because I connect with that plant on a deeper level when I have the extraction process.”

After she’s made extractions and filed the images into the many folders of her bank—a several-day process—she’s ready to begin building artworks. It’s important that her files are organized and that her memories of each image are clear because when she begins to create, it’s in rapid fashion, she explains. With a basic design in mind, she puts in an image, removes it, puts in another image, removes it, and so on, and so on, she explains. “It’s a very visceral experience. I cannot think too much. I have to work fast to bring those elements, those layers into the work. So, it’s intense.” It usually takes four to five weeks to reach “a perfect feng shui” in a work, she says, and a feeling that the piece has something to say. She knows she’s finished when she sees balance in color, form, movement, and depth of field. “You know when the balance is there,” she says.

As she comes to the completion of a piece, LeMay prints the composition to take a closer look at details she may be missing on the computer screen. "Sometimes I look at it and say, This is too strong, this needs to be increased ... there is a line that I couldn't see on the computer," she says. "It's a much better, newer perspective on the work and it helps me to finalize it." She also often asks others to look at a printed work to give her a fresh take, and prefers it to be someone who doesn't know anything about digital art. "It helps me to stop looking at the trees and start looking at the forest," she says.

### STAYING TRUE

LeMay notes three challenges that she faces in her work: One is physical pain. She spends long hours in front of the computer, which causes her hands and back to ache and her eyes to become weary. "The computer drains your brain," she says. She takes breaks, eats well, and exercises, even when consumed by a project, to stave off the discomfort.

The second challenge is keeping her art fresh. "Even if you're using the same materials, you have to push through and break new ground all the time," she says.

The third challenge is staying true to herself even when the galleries that represent her apply pressure. "When you [work with] a lot of galleries it's like you are married to many people," she says. She has moments where she feels pulled in many different directions. "You have to stay authentic to your vision without being influenced by the people that sell for you." You don't want to repeat the same thing

over and over at the request of a gallery, and you also don't want to be pressured into new work when you really need an incubation period to come up with a fresh angle. "You have to stay strong in the reasons why you create, why you are doing what you're doing," she says. "The work is not for your gallery. The work is for the people that you connect with. It is coming from a higher place."

Besides showing her work in galleries, LeMay also does commissioned work, but she's learned to be selective with those projects. "I accept a commission when I feel that it will be seen by a lot of people and it has value. If it's just to bring in money, I usually don't do it." The project also must move her artistry and skills forward.

Her biggest commission to date was for the U.S. Department of State—a 27-foot mural for an art and cultural center in Taiwan. "It was challenging technically" she says, requiring multiple panels of hypercollages. And she had the opportunity to spend a month in Taiwan making 10,000 images of the country's flora and fauna. "I loved the experience of traveling by myself in Taiwan and discovering new plants," she says, and the fact that the mural would be displayed as a centerpiece where people from around the world convene and connect.

Ultimately, what drives LeMay's work is a reverence for nature. "I am so fascinated by the details of plants," LeMay says. "There is so much magic in finding a new plant." In her travels, she photographs both thriving plants as well as those in decay, documenting "the beauty of the life cycle." There is divinity in nature's detail, Lemay says. "That is what inspires me." There is also divinity in the making of art. What we consider mundane, like a dying branch, can take on new relevance when it is applied to art, she says. "You give it new life." •

