



Full Frontal Flowers

Los Angeles photographer uses space-age technology to create otherworldly botanical images **BY ANN LANDI**

Images of flowers have a long and venerable history, dating back to the ancient Greek and Roman world, when *trompe l'oeil* paintings of still life graced the homes of wealthy patrons. Botanical prints showing the particulars of floral anatomy have both delighted the eye and appealed to our quest for understanding nature since the invention of the printing press. The Dutch mania for extravagant paintings of flowers, imbued with arcane symbolism, kept artists busy even after trading in tulip bulbs brought on economic disaster in the 1630s. And closer to our own age, Georgia O'Keeffe's gorgeous blooms have elicited all kinds of psychosexual readings in keeping with the temper of the times.

David Leaser's "Nightflowers" both continue the tradition and bring a very new dimension to the art of flower portraiture. And they are indeed portraits in the artist's mind. "Some of the flowers look like they have a personality," he says. "They look like they *want* to be photographed." Often full frontal and hyper-attentive to detail, the works fall into the continuum of photo-realist painting (think of a Chuck Close portrait, though the subjects are far less appealing). And although they are made

from a special, archival-quality process of transferring a print to gessoed canvas, they are unquestionably photographs of blooms Leaser finds in gardens or at the flower markets. Look closely, however, and you will see the weave of the canvas and an attention to detail that almost paradoxically seems to transcend photography. The large format—up to four feet across—also places the works squarely within the traditions of American art since the mid-20th century.

Leaser came to an affinity for nature and photography from an early age. Raised on a horse farm outside Hershey, Pennsylvania, he first began taking pictures as a child. The hobby evolved into a full-time profession after he studied photography in college and picked up a number of pointers from a pro working for National Geographic. His first published book on palm trees earned high acclaim and sold out immediately; he followed that with a volume on tropical gardens of Hawaii. But it was on a trip down the Amazon that he began taking close-ups of florals and first conceived the idea for "Nightflowers." After several months of experimentation, he developed a process called *dettagli* for capturing fine detail,

often right down to the obvious flaws (some are beginning to fade even as the camera records their glory).

The wonder of seeing them all together is that each of these flowers really does have a personality: there is something a little bit menacing about the calla lily of *First Blush* or the toothy bloom from *Under the Coral Tree*. The green orchid of *Queen* is indeed a regal presence, suggesting both an overdone dowager and a wise old lady. And *Shooting Stars* is like a burst of fireworks on a hot summer's night. The black background holds the flower "faces" in splendid isolation, the way Holbein often used to position his royal subjects against starkly unadorned backgrounds. But Leaser doesn't have the luxury of a portrait painter, who can return to touch up any accidents or imperfections. He can take his time examining each image pixel by pixel after the shot is taken, but the flowers won't wait for their close-ups (the hibiscus of *Hawaiian Sunset*, for instance, started to wither within hours of being picked).

Although the "Nightflowers" are up-to-the-minute contemporary in conception and execution, they nonetheless hold some of the allure of earlier flower paintings. Here are the closely observed details that make Flemish art and botanical prints so alluring, along with the showy exuberance van Gogh brought to his sunflowers. And like the innocent blossoms in works from the past, these dazzling beauties can contain darker notes. To those in the know, Leaser's *Flaming Parrot* is of the same family of bulbs that brought the Dutch economy to its knees centuries ago. As early as the 15th century, as the artist himself has noted, the passion flower of *Passiflora* was a potent symbol of the Crucifixion. And in their evanescence, all flowers are reminders of our own mortality. No matter how attractive or enthralling, we're all doomed to decay.

But that's not, of course, the primary message of these mesmerizing photographs. They seduce us as only an unforgettable work of art can: with an invitation to look, and look again. ■

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