

ARTS + ENTERTAINMENT



SPENCER FORDIN
A+E EDITOR

William A. Ewing has spent a good portion of his life thinking about photography, and he literally wrote the book on the history of flowers in photos. So you might imagine what a shock it was for him to realize that the art form had come a long way since he'd studied it.

Ewing, who delivered "Flora Photographica," in 1990, was recently chatting with a woman who had enjoyed his work. And she stopped him cold by asking him what had happened in floral photography since his book.

Ewing had to admit he didn't know.

"I was stunned," says Ewing. "Because I realized that for 30 years, I don't know. I hadn't followed it. So I quickly did a survey and decided, 'Yeah, this is worth redoing.'"

Ewing drafted a Swiss curator, Danae Panchaud, to help him reassess the art of floral photography, and the result was a brand new book and a brand new museum exhibit. Ewing and Panchaud brought their work, entitled "Flora Imaginaria: The Flower in Contemporary Photography," to Marie Selby Botanical Gardens for a summer exhibition, and the result is dozens of photographs from celebrated artists in a number of styles.

You'll see some images that come from electron microscopes and others that beautifully portray the flower or plant in full bloom. Some of the exhibits are inside and some are outside, and Selby Gardens CEO Jennifer Rominiecki says that's in keeping with Selby's mission.

"The whole idea of the living museum is that as a botanical garden, we're operating just as museums do with changing exhibits," she says. "And this one in particular, I think, really underscores the whole concept because we have works of art outdoors and indoors."

Before you get to the exhibit, it helps to know some of the history. Ewing says that from the beginning of photography, artists were pointing their lens at the natural world.

In fact, Ewing says the first photograph from Henry Fox Talbot — whom he identified as the inventor of photography — may have been of a flower. He also cited the work of Anna Atkins, an early photographer who gained distinction in the field of botany.

Photography, though, has had to fight for its place in the field. When photography burst on the scene, says Ewing, other art forms were much further ahead in their development.

"For botanical work, photography was rejected at the beginning," he says. "Painting, watercolor, drawing, etching, engraving and lithograph were highly developed. Just think of the Dutch still life tradition; still lifes were so realistic you were tempted to brush a fly off a petal."

Photography, by contrast, was still figuring out its own technology and how it could differentiate itself from other artistic genres. Early photography methods, says Ewing, yielded only black-and-white studies, and truthfully, photos were closer to a muddy brown-and-white.

How, then, could they expect to fully render the colorful world of

Flowers for Lisa #30 by Abelardo Morell

Photo courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery

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THE ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Some statements are edited for brevity.

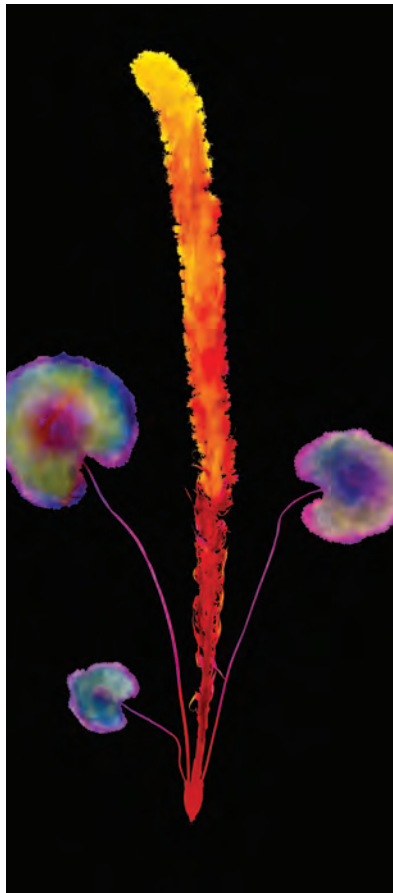


Photo courtesy of David Lebe

DAVID LEBE

"Photograms are a simple photographic process, but my workflow was mostly complex and layered, often culminating in the hand-application of color. I had many successes but also frustrations; there were times when the medium was not flexible enough to allow me to go where I wanted, evolve the image, or create the variations I wanted.

Twenty-five years later, learning digital photography, I realized those limitations were gone, and I couldn't resist going back, reworking, and reimagining some photograms—resulting in pictures with two dates."



Photo courtesy of Stevenson Gallery, SA

VIVIANE SASSEN

"Some of my earliest childhood memories are of flowers. I spent my years as a toddler in Kenya, where my father worked as a doctor in a local hospital. I vividly remember the gorgeous smell of the frangipani tree, which releases its scent in the evening when the sun has gone down. I remember the bright orange-red of the flamboyant tree in our garden, where the 'banana birds' used to nest. And the lovely lilac flowers paving the road when it was jacaranda season."



Photo courtesy of Pedro Almodóvar

PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

"Since I began my brief life as a photographer, I have always tried to imitate painting, not photography, without resorting to any special technique except waiting for the light that comes through the windows.

My only task has been to wait for the exact moment, which varies depending on the season, and at times it's a matter of a very few minutes. Without intending to, I was photographing the passing of time, in the light and in the flowers."

Full bloom

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flowers and plants? And even if they succeeded, says Ewing, there was no way to get their work to the masses.

"There were people who tried to photograph and more or less succeeded even though it was black-and-white," he says. "There was no means to reproduce photography in books until the end of the 19th century. So there was kind of a double jeopardy thing there."

Now, in an age of digital technology, the genre has grown by leaps and bounds, and in many respects, it has become the default art form.

Now, anybody with a smart phone can indelibly capture an image.

IF YOU GO FLORA IMAGINARIA

When: Runs until September 25

Where: Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, 1534 Mound St.

Tickets: Free with admission
Info: Selby.org

It also means that black-and-white photography of flowers is largely a relic of the past.

There are some black-and-white images as part of the Flora Imaginaria exhibit, but Ewing estimates it's only about 10%.

And that's a sea change from his show from decades ago.

"The first project in 1990 was about 90% black-and-white," he says. "That was the reality of photography. Anybody of note 30 years

ago was working in black-and-white ... but this time around, the project is 90% color."

The interesting part now isn't just how perfectly rendered a flower can be in photos. It's the many techniques an artist can employ in their work, including computer-generated effects.

So as you wander around Selby Gardens and ponder how certain images were created, you'll also have the opportunity to appreciate the simple beauty of nature.

The outdoor exhibit of the photographs is colored by shadows and sun, and you might get a different sense if you arrive early in the day as opposed to sunset.

"Like I always say with exhibitions, it's haute couture," says Ewing. "It's not pret a porter. If you're doing the job well, you develop the project for the space."



Photo courtesy of Robert Walker

ROBERT WALKER

"When looking through the viewfinder, I ignore the literal subject matter and compose the picture on the basis of purely abstract elements of form and color.

Forgetting the countless metaphorical significances usually associated with flowers, I compose my images as if on a blank canvas or flat surface.

This often enables me to conjure up relationships between styles and techniques evocative of abstract painting."