

Stains of Color

by Diana Gaston

Our last moments together in Boston at Logan Airport are branded in my memory. I gave him a rose that I had cut from my friend's garden. The responsibility assigned to that delicate flower was too overwhelming for me to digest.

For some time he kept these pictures to himself. He did not even share them with the person who inspired their making. These were private exposures, frames filled to brimming with emotion.

Frank Yamrus made his first flower photographs in 1996, shortly after he and his lover went their separate ways at the Boston airport. The photographer returned home to San Francisco, and his lover returned to Germany. During the months that followed, they often sent each other flowers, and Yamrus found this subject surprisingly compelling. The early photographs in the flower series were spontaneous, painfully honest images, the photographer's equivalent to his intense longing for a lover living elsewhere. He knew at the time that flower photographs were nothing he really wanted to make public. Even now, in its effusive color and abstraction, the extended series stands apart from his overall production as a photographer. This is an indulgent group of pictures, untempered by his keen critical sense or the intellectual rigor he generally applies to developing a new body of work. These first images were made in unguarded moments, with the idea that they would remain private.

Flowers have long served as surrogates for the human form—their muscular perfection and tireless grace serve the photographer well. Few photographers working at this point in our history could muster the courage to make such sensuous, emotional photographs of flowers. Those who do must shoulder the historical weight of earlier photographers—such as the angular and verdant plant studies of modernist photographer Imogen Cunningham or the fleshy blossoms photographed by Tina Modotti in the 1920s. Even within the last quarter century there are scores of heroic flower studies to absorb—such as the erotic intensity of Robert Mapplethorpe's still lifes or the cool, restrained elegance of Kenro Izu's platinum prints. It's crowded territory. It is a difficult subject to handle with new insight, and even more difficult to give such exquisite forms an edge. This is precisely why Yamrus kept these images to himself—for fear that his intensely personal flower studies would be dismissed as too gorgeous or too sentimental. Perhaps what gives these secret images their strength is that they were made with complete disregard for historic precedent; he shirks the modernist treatment of flowers altogether, abandoning its mantle like a discarded dress on the floor.

Flowers are swift emotional triggers. As the photographer points out, they are often associated with celebratory events—weddings, anniversaries, birthdays,

funerals—and frequently they serve as a means of communicating when words are inadequate. Cut flowers in particular carry the association of a luxurious gift, a natural object cultivated to express pleasure, sympathy, and gratitude. Yamrus' emotional treatment of flowers is of course integral to the series' making; it started with his desire to preserve the gifts he'd received from his lover. But as the series progressed, it became less intimate and more symbolic of the language of flowers and the challenge of responding to them photographically. He began photographing all the flowers he received—flowers from friends, neighbors, dinner guests, first dates, his printer—with the same degree of attention. Each flower demanded his prompt response, and the photographer soon became absorbed by the visual problems of color and the conceptual parallels of photography and memory. These photographs are, in a sense, a means of fixing memory, permanent markers of time and the generous exchange between friends.

Despite the personal narrative associated with these images, what clearly distinguishes them from other botanical photographs is Yamrus' aggressive use of color and abstraction. Here, subtle, even delicate hues are pushed to saturated, sometimes harsh stains of color. His treatment moves from passionate to whimsical to dark and brooding fields of color. He deliberately obscures and flattens the flowers' distinctive form, pushing them just to the edge of abstraction. Focus is selective, forcing a stem, a leaf, or the vibrating edge of a bloom to represent the entire flower. His images waiver in and out of clear focus, suspending our perception between recognizable form and pure abstraction. The final form of the print often veers toward an exaggerated grain, a quality he likens to the "gritty earthiness" of his subject.

Collected here in book form, the photographer is making the work public while maintaining a certain intimacy in its presentation. Books lend themselves to quiet introspection and private viewing. Here, the reader can pore over the body of work page by page, studying the photographer's unique response to each flower. Each image prompts a complex range of emotional responses, associations of color, and disorienting shifts in perception. These images remain carefully veiled, as though floating in our deepest memory or subconscious; they trigger our emotional response as much as they contain their own symbolic meaning. The reader will soon discover, as did the photographer himself, that the perfect form of the flower is only a starting point.

Diana Gaston
@2000 Diana Gaston