

FLOWER POWER

Curated by Andrea Busto

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Catalogue texts by:

Andrea Busto, *Flower Power; Silent Life 1 and 2; Mythology: Eros and Thanatos; Herbaria; Genetic Modification: from Exaltation to Ruin; Abstraction; Geometry, Decoration, Pop; Installations*

Anna Bondi, *Fashion*

Roberto Carretta, *Mythology*

Pierangelo Cavanna, *Photography*

Luca Morosi, *Decoration*

Margherita Zalun Cardon, *Flower Passion and Culture in 17th and 18th Century Europe*

Introduction

The exhibition comprises eight sections with a focus on the many diverse representations of the flower as an “object”. The thematic, stylistic and symbolic excursus spans over five centuries of Italian and international art, showcasing more than 160 works by artists from the Baroque period to the present.

Each theme-based section spotlights the symbolic use of the flower, which our culture has deemed messenger and expression of grace, allure and seduction.

Flower Power

The first section of this exhibition takes a look at the flower as a symbol of peace and social transformation, and starts off with the 1967 Bernie Boston photograph taken in Washington, D.C., entitled “Flower Power”, which shows a Vietnam War protestor shoving carnations into the rifle barrels of National Guardsmen during a march on the Pentagon. The use of non-violence as a recurring theme in protest slogans of the 1970s and their “floral” representation led to a broad-based political and esthetic revolution. Fashion and design of those years underwent radical change. The abstract forms of the 1960s would be contaminated by phytomorphic forms, gathered from parts of flowers such as pistils and petals; colors grew brighter, dazzling, loud, inspiring a perception of freedom and joy. Sexual freedom as well was ushered in by this movement, while the proliferation of psychedelic substances and rock music melded a lifestyle, a political philosophy and a revolution in social customs. The encounter with eastern religions, the emergence of self-sufficient communes, the concept of a broadened version of the family as a group in which private property is reconsidered in confused terms ranging from a Franciscan model of Christianity to Buddhist poverty, spurred in the flower power movement a philosophy that considered nature an immense cosmic mother, in which one is overwhelmed during participation in the grand mystery of the cosmos. The flower, and in particular the lotus flower, ascends to this symbolism in which, beyond the representation of the various phases of plant life, it takes strength and vitality from water (the great mother of all worlds) and from beauty – cure and alleviation of fears and anxieties which vaporize in an oblivion whose roots are clearly Indo-European (the archetype being Homer’s Lotus-eaters). In this section, invited artists represent with their works the point of contact between awareness of their freedom, their political stance and their philosophy regarding human existence.

This section features works by: Bernie Boston, Paolo Mussat Sartor, Rodney Graham, Heather & Ivan Morison, Howard Sooley, Pipilotti Rist, Hsia-Fei Chang

Silent Life 1 and 2

Floral compositions, invented in the final quarter of the 16th century as representations in and of themselves – by Caravaggio in Italy and the Flemish in northern Europe – were a huge hit among the public. Collectors of the period increasingly demanded pictorial compositions featuring everyday objects, with fauna and flora duly included in the formation of decorative compositions or symbolic representations of the cosmos, mythology, or more simply, of nature and everyday life. Collectors at that time acquired specific core groups of works,

which focused on a single theme. As a result, artists would tend to specialize in such themes. What's more, the importance of several species of flowers – tulips in the Netherlands, for example – drove artists to use flowers as a specific theme. Flowers became veritable “cult” objects. Representations of floral compositions, whether simple or extravagant, sparked a true flower mania in a slew of different decoration applications, from furniture to objects to clothes. Then there was still life – an accurate representation of the artist's mood and the tastes, forms and esthetics of the period.

This section features some of the many extant works which represent the evolution of the taste for still life paintings of flowers, from the Baroque period to the present.

This section features works by: Andrea Belvedere, Juan Van Der Hamen y Leon, Baldassarre De Caro, Nordic Painter XVIII century, Massimo Tapparelli d'Azeglio, Luigi Serralunga, Giacomo Balla, Felice Casorati, Piero Martina, Henri Matisse, Filippo de Pisis, Giorgio Morandi, David Salle, Donald Baechler, Michael Raedecker, Glenn Brown, Mat Collishaw, Laetitia Bourget, Jean-Luc Moulène, Guillaume Janot, Wolfgang Laib, Bruno Pelassy, Yinka Shonibare, Letizia Carriello, Franck Scurti, Tobias Rehberger, Pae White, Tony Matelli, Mark Garry, Keith Edmier, Emmanuelle Dupont, Giuliana Cuneaz, Jiri Kovanda, Joseph Beuys, Jeroen de Rijke & Willem de Rooij, Markus Karstiess, Wieki Somers, Marcel Wanders, Corinne Marchetti, Diego Perrone, Shigeyuki Kihara - Leilani Salesa - Ema Tavola.

Mythology: Eros and Thanatos

Eroticism, sexuality, passion, life and, as a result, death all found in the beauty of the flower a constant specular quality for representation. From Ovid to Proust, the greatest writers have brought us the allure, the sensuality and the human desire – from the body to the flower. The Narcissus and Hyacinth myths represent the profound desire of man and his sexuality, which in the flower find the continuation of their existences after death. Even Ovid, in the *Metamorphoses*, recounts the story of the handsome Narcissus, who out of self-awareness, perhaps more than self-love, does not hesitate to seek out death and expiation in the sacrifice of his body for the sake of his spirit. For Hyacinth it was Zephyrus's blind jealousy that prompted his transformation from demigod to flower, and symbol of a crushing, overwhelming passion.

A secret, suffering love often takes on the name of a flower. For Baron de Charlus in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, it becomes physical love for the beautiful courtesan Odette de Crecy, whispered in this symbolic phrase: “Do a Cattleya,” which, like the camellias of Violetta Valery – from Verdi's *La Traviata* – was used to communicate her willingness to partake in sexual intercourse.

The name of a flower may at the same time be a painful memory or an invocation, as in the forget-me-not. Some flowers take their names from peculiar characteristics, such as sunflowers, which follow the trajectory of the sun, or colors (violets and lilacs, for example). Others may express feelings or solar time (the sensitive plant, the night flower). People become flowers, flowers become human through a game of mirrors and reflections, in which the thin lines that separate things get lost in the vast world of desires that become reality.

This section features works by: Abrahm Brueghel, Bernardo Strozzi, Luigi Miradori called “Il Genovesino”, Roman Artist XVI century, Jacopo Ligozzi, Jim Lambie, Angelo Filomeno, Mario Airò, Rà di Martino, Marc Quinn, Giorgio De Chirico, Luca Rento, Cristina Lei Rodriguez, Andrew Dadson, Grazia Toderi, Chen Qiulin, Gilbert & George, Sonia Delaunay, Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Lacroix, Baya, Ana Mendieta, Johan Creten, Takashi Kashiwagi, Kim Joon, Kishin Shinoyama, Silvestro Lega, Federico Zandomenighi, Domenico Gatti, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Sue Williams, Zima Kaoru, Nabuyoshi Araki, Gregory Crewdson, Yasumasa Morimura, Abetz & Drescher, Ruud Van Empel, Jeanine Woollard, Luigi Ontani, Giulio Paolini, Filippo La Vaccara, Chino Aoshima.

Herbaria

These floral collections hark back to the Middle Ages and early use of medicinal plants in monastic convents and the first Galenic pharmacies – suspended in the throes of esotericism, science and alchemy. The flower in and of itself began to be sought out, cultivated and studied for its therapeutic qualities and its beauty. The herbaria were the first documents left by a science that relied on the observation and study of nature. Natural elements were collected, dried and arranged on panels to allow a direct examination. The process accompanied the birth of the scientific laboratory and related documentation. Artists as well have their own “laboratories” – where painters and photographers create non-interpretive works, or objective representations of nature's original productions. Flowers, in their pure simplicity, are for the artists in this section an expression of essentialness, minimalism and purity, teetering between science and pure forms in space. The “complex simplicity” of floral nature – and its fragility – expresses archetypal oxymorons in which concepts like strength and fragility, beauty and scientism, coexist in harmony.

This section features works by: Francesco Gonin, Karl Blossfeldt, Georgia O'keeffe, Tina Modotti, Walker Evans, Robert Mapplethorpe, Thomas Struth, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Bill Beckley, Guido Anderloni, Sarah Jones, Herman De Vries, Urs Luthi, Helen Mirra, Rolf Graf, Sabrina Mezzaqui.

Genetic Modification

Mankind has always been fascinated by the personification of nature, and since the days of the Renaissance the "fusion" of that which is human and that which is natural has been expressed in hybrids and fantastical forms. Man's imagination has made up for a lack of scientific knowledge through inventions and irrationalism, as in the case of the ginseng root, which, thanks to its anthropomorphic guise, gave life to beliefs in the root's magical powers and a series of conjectures on the heavenly origins of ginseng. Then there is the Seychelles coconut, whose male and female plants so amazed the British surrealists that they became avid collectors. Today, with the advent of genetic modification, the world of flowers as depicted by twentieth-century avant-garde artists in works such as *The Little Shop of Horrors* or the tale "Jack and the Bean-Stalk", the world of flora has become a monstrosity, one in which beauty and enjoyment are replaced by deformities and horror, a world in which flowers and plants dominate man, tower over him as Gulliver loomed over the inhabitants of Lilliput, transforming into unnatural elements composed of plastics and polymers.

This section features works by: Sandra Bermudez, Enrica Borghi, Stéphane Calais, Wim Delvoye, Dianne Hagen, Hitomicro, Raqib Shaw, Kiki Smith, Eliezer Sonnenschein, Kate Street, Thukral & Tagra, Janaina Tschäpe, Antonio Rasio.

Abstraction

The point of departure is Monet's Giverny garden and the slow but inexorable decline of nature with his optical decomposition into pictorial particles. The Nymphs and their reflection in immobile ponds, or the rippling of marshes' liquid surfaces as they refract sunlight, would lead painting and all that which is conceptually behind painting to create chromatic backgrounds and pictorial spaces that were increasingly indistinct, barely comprehensible and daring definition. Flower forms exist only as a cue for unclassifiable shapes and colors, where sentiment and sensation – called "impression" at the time – were the key factors throughout a work's expressiveness. From Monet to Twombly, and from the photography of Pierson all the way to Schiess, the world of flowers participates in the deconstruction of space and time, holding the work and the image suspended in a timeless, undefined location.

This section features works by: Guillaume Viaud, Jack Pierson, Sam Samore, Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Thomas Flechtner, Adrian Schiess, Ori Gersht, Jennifer Steinkamp, Gelitin, Joan Mitchell, Cy Twombly, Raoul Dufy, Nicola De Maria, Jacques Nimki, Lorenz Spring, Stefano Arienti, Pia Fries, Ross Bleckner, Tomas Saraceno, Thierry Feuz, Christoph Steinmeyer, Dominique Gauthier, Andy Goldsworthy, Nils-Udo

Geometry, Decoration, Pop

The scientific compositions of the herbaria provide a wealth of classifications, which out of schematism and rigor, lead to the geometric and formal reconstruction of the flower. A rationalist world, in opposition to the irrational natural world, has been in the making since the days of ancient Greece. The shape of the column took its cue from the tree and inspired phytomorphic decorations which, for the sake of simplicity, would be minimalized and geometrized. A palm leaf, an acanthus leaf, a papyrus leaf for the Egyptians, determined the stylistic elaboration of decoration of capitals, while other leaves and elements inspired production of architectural ornamentation. The world of flowers, stylized through art, went on to influence the creation of new styles and patterns. Fabrics, architecture and design would make use of decorative elements of the past, in which the flower element is poised in forms straddling reality and geometry.

This section features works by: Fortunato Depero, Paul Klee, Robert Delaunay, Emil Nolde, Pierre Alechinsky, Beatriz Milhazes, Chris Ofili, Christine Streuli, Jessica Stockholder, Louise Bourgeois, Andy Warhol, Ugo Mulas, Alex Katz, Jose Maria Sicilia, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Christopher Wool, Lily Van Der Stokker, Ryan Mcginness, James Welling, Giuseppe Gabellone, Gary Hume, Cerith Wyn Evans, Amy O'Neill, Miguel Chevalier, Fabrizio Corneli, Michael Lin, Ma Jun, Takashi Murakami, Anonym XIX century.

Installations

This section features works by: Chen Zhen, Luisa Valentini, Andrea Caretto & Raffaella Spagna, Alice Maher, Gerda Steiner & Jorg Lenzlinger, Paul Morrison, Sergio Perrero, Pilar Albarracin, Rina Banerjee, Anya Gallaccio, Margherita Leoni

