

ENLIGHTENED BLOOMS

Brad Oliphant

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Solarized Diptych Floral Photographs

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foreword by Russell Hart

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Nature's most seductive invitation to a photographer is, without question, the flower. Yet flowers aren't easy. The simple qualities that arrest a naked eye—their color, whether it's pastel or fiery, and form, whether sinuous or spiky—are hard to translate into the language of dyes, pigments, and pixels.

Unfazed by that problem, countless amateurs have made untold photographs of flowers. When they look at the results, though, they see what they first beheld, stored in memory, rather than the meager representation they've created. A photographer who aims to do representational justice to flowers—or to interpret them with any kind of artistry—must understand the failings of his or her medium, and know how to overcome them. That task demands fastidious craft. It requires an ability not only to recognize the light that best renders a flower's rich and subtle qualities, but also to wait patiently for that light. And in the digital age, it has come to depend on expertise in postproduction—using Photoshop and other such tools to make the flower true both to itself and to the photographer's vision.

Precious few photographers have honed those skills as finely as Brad Oliphant. Yet Oliphant, a once-preeminent fashion shooter who has reinvented himself as a consummate photographer of flowers, is fervent in his refusal to take credit for them. When he says they are a gift, he means it quite literally, not as self-aggrandizement. "It's something that has been given to me," he insists. "I find that when I go out and try to capture beauty, I fail. But there comes a moment when, after taking lots of pictures that don't succeed, the effort subsides and a kind

of internal guidance takes over." In fact, the photographer says he can't remember the moment he has finally gotten a flower right. "It's as if I didn't even take that picture," he explains. "I just set up a framework, and when I step back to simply observe, the shutter releases. I lose all sense of self." In that moment, improbably, Oliphant becomes what the 19th-century American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson called a "transparent eyeball." As Emerson wrote,

"In the woods...All mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; I am part and parcel of God."

While no less spiritual than the ever-contemplative Emerson, Oliphant differs with him in that he doesn't consider beauty to be the exclusive property of nature. Nor is a flower the only exemplar of transcendent beauty. "I try to find and show beauty that the world simply misses," he says. "We walk down a city block fixated on our problems and our work, and all the while there's beauty passing by." While Emerson opined that "very few adult persons" have such ability, Oliphant, being less elitist, thinks you can see it for yourself: "You just have to take your eyes off what's in front of you and let the beauty that surrounds you enter into your perception." It may help that Oliphant possesses a charismatically childlike view of such things.

Emerson himself held that nature's beauty could only be appreciated by someone "who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."

Whether the experience of beauty is direct or vicarious, Oliphant is committed to sharing it with all comers. "I feel that I have to give," says the photographer, who left a lucrative career as a fashion shooter for such top magazines as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, and *Mademoiselle* to focus solely on nature, his first love. "I want to help others by making them pause to reflect and renew, and even inspiring them to consider a new journey." Oliphant asserts that if his work didn't have that altruistic purpose, he would have no passion for it.

There is no arguing with an artist's account of the experience of creation. The beholder has a say in the matter, though. As I see it, Oliphant's flower work displays a true artistic and technical mastery, one that stems from the very control he claims to relinquish each time he takes a picture. Given the images' technical perfection, in fact, I'm incredulous that nearly all of them are made in the field, where so many variables must be controlled. Light, as important as it is, is only the most obvious of these—and is controlled, if at all, by waiting with eyes wide. It might not even materialize. "Sometimes I'll hike a day to get to a location and never take a picture," says Oliphant, who tries to make three photo trips a year, having had considerable success in Arizona and Alaska. "The good news is that wherever you travel, flowers follow you."

Light notwithstanding, when a photographer shoots at the close distances flowers require in the uncertain circumstances of nature, simply achieving sharpness is a challenge. Even with careful focus, the depth of the front-to-back zone of sharpness (known in photography's intimidating lingo as depth of field) shrinks to almost nothing. To maximize it, Oliphant sets small lens openings (known to photographers as lens apertures, or f-stops). Those small openings reduce the amount of light that gets into the camera, though. To compensate for this, Oliphant must use a slower shutter speed, meaning that he increases the amount of time that light from the flower is allowed to enter the camera and strike the electronic sensor that records the image.

That longer exposure, together with the fact that at such close distances any twitch of the hand is magnified and could easily blur the subject, means that Oliphant must go to the trouble of mounting his camera on a tripod. The tripod also locks in his precise framing, which would be hard to keep steady if he were holding the camera in his hands, and his focus, which otherwise might shift to the wrong stamen if he were to lean the slightest bit forward or backward. Even with a tripod, though, Oliphant's slow shutter speed elevates the risk that, should a seemingly inconsequential breeze sway his subject during the exposure, his composition will be ruined or the whole shot blurred. A little wind might also blow the flower forward or backward just enough to put Oliphant's careful focus in the wrong spot at the very moment of exposure.

It isn't the place of this foreword to explain how Oliphant solves these problems. My point is that the task is more

complicated than the photographer, in his creative rapture, would have us believe. He concedes that the camera is his *instrument*, in a musical sense. "I understand my camera very well," he says. "At this point, I feel as if I could play in an orchestra." Like the best symphonic musicians, Oliphant has been playing his instrument since childhood, which he spent on the family horse ranch. "I always had a camera in hand," he remembers. "If I wasn't taking pictures of newborn colts, I was up in a tree photographing baby birds in their nest." Moreover, all of that technique in the field is a prelude to extensive post-production—the computer work that goes into each of Oliphant's flower photographs once he's back at home.

In the digital age, one of the temptations of photography is to try to improve on nature's sophisticated palette. Computer software such as Photoshop is routinely used to amplify it. Nature ordinarily doesn't need the help, though, and it can be injurious to a flower, destroying its delicacy and even visibly reducing its intrinsic texture and detail. "I oversaturated my color at first," says Oliphant, a Photoshop wizard. "But everyone in the business who saw my work complained about it. And I realized, finally, that oversaturation is just ugly and unnatural." Chastened, Oliphant turned in the other direction. "Now I always try to make the color less strong than my first impulse would dictate," he says. "Then I wait a day and study the image again. At that point I might bump up the saturation, maybe not. But I try to approach it in a way that I never have to lower the saturation." (Look at the coloristic restraint shown in the water lily on pages 40–41, still delicate despite heavy manipulation.) Oliphant keeps himself in check by continued reference to his raw file (the unmanipulated image), as

well as to his visual memory of the flower, which presumably is more reliable than an amateur photographer's.

Given such attention to truth, which the poet John Keats said was the same as beauty, why did Oliphant start "solarizing" his flower photographs, propagating the exotic specimens found in this beguiling book? He cites an impulse that exists in any great artist, yet one that seems at odds with his devotion to floral verisimilitude. "I'm always thinking how I can go outside the box," he declares. "I try to figure out how I can stay within my style, my palette and process, but create something that will attract a new audience." This book will surely succeed in that endeavor, though Oliphant allows that it might not engage flower-loving viewers who want his images to conform to their own experience. For me, the creative manipulation showcased here is no different, fundamentally, than the essential aesthetic experience afforded by a flower. Its intriguing colors are really no more eccentric or improbable than the winsome hues of a real flower. And it still relies on the received line and tone and texture of the flowers on which it is based. Whether "straight" or solarized, Oliphant's flowers are animated by a powerful abstraction.

Oliphant's manipulated flowers are aesthetically far removed, however, from the one-click computer effects that afflict so much current photography. Very few of his raw flower photographs suit the purpose or process of solarization, which is Photoshop's binary approximation of a classic technique in which light-sensitive film or paper is re-exposed to light during development to cause a partial reversal of tones and colors, an effect made more interesting by linear and textural artifacts in the subject's out-

lines. (Look at the budding gold finger blossom on pages 66–69 for an example of these “edge effects,” as they are known to photographers.) Just as attentively as he adjusts his representational flowers, Oliphant applies this process with a restraint that only an experienced artist could summon. He starts his work, in fact, by *removing* all color from the flower—“desaturating” it, in post production. (See the dahlia on pages 114–115, or the rose on pages 142–143, for examples of how this looks.) Working with a black-and-white image lets him make exacting adjustments to pure tone, or shades of gray, without color’s overwhelming influence. It also allows him to emphasize and enhance textures more selectively. Black and white makes it easier, too, for Oliphant to evaluate how well a photograph can be used to create the mirror image that is this work’s leitmotif. (Generally the same flower is “fopped” to create a symmetrical diptych, but Oliphant takes great artistic license with this mirroring.)

Oliphant often leaves parts of this black-and-white tracery in the final image. For example, the petals of the parrot tulip on pages 56–57 start out as a deep magenta, then revert to black and white at their fringes—as if to rein in their urge to turn rococo. On pages 36–37, an anthurium, one of the flower world’s gaudiest, most vividly colored creations, explodes from a stem that looks as if it were made of polished silver. And in the mirror image of a dahlia on pages 82–83, the left side is a desaturated double of the churning yellow and blue version on the right, black and white except for the molten glow at its center.

It is only when Oliphant shifts into Photoshop that he puts the color back into the picture, then solarizes it. From

there the work continues, as the photographer peels back layers of the effect in order to *restore* portions of the flower’s natural color and other qualities. “I always want to keep a touchstone to the original,” he explains. Take the gerbera daisy on pages 52–53; it isn’t much more than an intensified version of the real thing. The ginkgo leaves behind it, however, have been glazed in silver and blue.

Brad Oliphant says he doesn’t pay much attention to what other photographers have done, or are doing, with flowers. Yet his work takes on, if only by default, a vast photographic history—one in which flowers have been interpreted in every conceivable way. The first such images were created at the dawn of photography by the very inventor of the negative-positive process, William Henry Fox Talbot, who artlessly placed plant specimens against sensitized paper to obtain a crude whitish outline on a darker background. Later in the 19th century, the amateur photographers who gave photography its first artistic credibility did likewise using cyanotype, a kitchen-counter process that surrounded the flower’s shape with the intense blue of oxidized iron salts. Pictorialists and modernists, battling in the early 20th century over the basic tenets of art photography, found common ground in flowers as a subject. And in more recent history, flowers have been a preoccupation of photographers as dissimilar as Robert Mapplethorpe, whose black-and-white studio still lifes of lilies, tulips, and orchids have a classical sensibility, and the unheralded Tony Mendoza, whose tangled, insect-eye color views of wildflowers are nearly surreal.

My own background burdens me with that history when I look at Oliphant's flower photographs. It is one measure of the images' success, though, that this knowledge makes them no less beautiful to me. And while I remain naive when it comes to the botany and cultivation of flowers, the photographer's imaginative transformation of them makes such knowledge less important to my experience of floriculture's glory.

Photographers often claim a special affinity for music in their work, and even in the medium at large. I wonder if they profess this bond simply because they love music so much or, perhaps, even because they are frustrated musicians. While I'm circumspect about the connection, I do believe the observation of critic Walter Pater, Ralph Waldo Emerson's English contemporary and fellow aesthete, that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." In the simplest terms, what Pater meant was that unlike the visual arts, which rely mostly on reference to physical reality—none so much as photography—music refers to nothing but itself, existing in its own abstract landscape of sound. I think Oliphant's new work aspires to that condition, even if its reference point is the familiar flower.

If that sounds vague, let me offer a more specific musical analogy. One of the cherished devices of jazz players is to take a beautiful, familiar melody—it can be a popular song, a folk tune, even a Broadway chestnut—and use it as the starting point for musical exploration and elaboration. They invert it, change its rhythm and meter, throw in speedy arpeggios, and even shift it from major to minor. I think this is what Oliphant is doing, in essence, when he

takes a flower that's rooted as deeply in the mind as a melody and applies his brilliant solarization process to it. Just as a jazz riff on an old song depends on our recognition of a beautiful melody, our appreciation of the photographs in this book depends on the pure, abiding grace of flowers.

— Russell Hart