Notes on Looking at Flowers: visual pleasure and the vernacular of beauty in T.M. Glass' photographs

Like the chambers of a nautilus shell, when looking at T.M. Glass' oeuvre both my eye and mind spiral in and out of focus. These notes begin to survey the visual pleasure induced by Glass' work as well as what it means to look at looking, closely.

To begin, I concentrate on process. Glass' images are persuasive studies of process turned beauty: flowers are cultivated, selected, cut, positioned, photographed, painted in the digital realm, and printed at tremendous resolution—a painstaking process using cutting-edge technology. This process, which Glass develops carefully over much time, describes the images' power: each bloom is rendered unique, complex, exquisite, *emotional;* both natural and supernatural; both still and alive.

Temporarily lost in a consideration of the immensity of data contained within an image comprised of one hundred million pixels, I zoom out and begin to decipher structural decisions at play. Employing radial symmetry, Glass' compositions reflect universal principals of aesthetics relative to the 'Golden Mean'—a philosophy that understands beauty to contain three essential ingredients: symmetry, proportion, and harmony. Described mathematically as the Fibonacci sequence or fractal geometry, the ratio portrays a simple recurrence pattern of relation in which each number equals the sum of the two numbers before it (0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,144).

I am reminded of the fractal when I read Baudelaire's statement that "The beautiful is always strangely familiar and vaguely surprising." Herein lies why it is so easy to call flowers beautiful, for what could be more recognizable, more common, pervasive than the prettiness of flowers and yet who can deny the wonder—that special love—of seeing the first snowdrops or crocus after the hard dryness of winter?

It is within the beauty of flowers that I understand the beautiful to be a thing. I fall into a state when I look at the beautiful. A state of pleasure. Art critic Dave Hickey is credited with jumpstarting a conversation on beauty in relation to contemporary art with an in-depth analysis of the political implications of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, both botanical and other. In his initial statement on the necessity of beauty, he contends "any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of art's efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence!" Pleasure, Hickey believes, is the truest reason for looking. Beauty acknowledges the viewers' ultimate authority. We do not turn towards beauty because it is good for us; we turn towards beauty because we cannot help ourselves.

I bring to mind my favorite flower, imagining the intimacy of looking at a newly blossomed red poppy. Reflecting upon the special love the eye has for the concave and

the convex, how effortlessly, sympathetically, with pleasure, my eye falls into and around the curved shapes of the flower. The shadow of my pupil captures the poppy's crimson edges that deepen to an inky center, like black silk. My round eyes fall into the concavity of its cup-like shape. I linger on the rarity of its petals, paper-thin. The image floods my mind as if through an act of actual perception. How easy it is to fit a flower into the space of my third eye—the body's natural space for visualization. As essayist Elaine Scarry affirms, "Flowers can be taken as the representative of the imagination because of the ease of imagining them." As if we were made for one another. Like the bee and its orchid.

Feeling dizzy, I stand back and pivot towards the persistence of still life. Flowers hold a special place in the history of the still life and in our imagination. History tells us that in 1883, during his last months, Manet painted mostly sprigs of lilac in a water glass and that on the last day Renoir's life he painted a small study of anemones. These examples describe a natural sympathy between flowers and representation. Nevertheless, despite wild popularity with both viewers and artists, for centuries the still life was deemed a lesser genre. Lesser than history painting, portraiture, and landscape. It was regarded a 'petit genre'. Rather than describe the giants of myth or the narratives of famous men, still life told the story of the everyday. And like women, children, or scenes of domesticity, the everyday was *not* deemed noteworthy.

Though with modernism came the ready-made and, with it, the still life found its time. Like Glass' practice, it spanned media, from painting to sculpture to photography. Essentially, the still life's story is the story of things animated through an act of perception. For our post-modern, post-internet age, the still life rejects a purely human-centred understanding of the world and way of being. It guides us towards stories that exist in the space between objects and subjects.

Glass' work depicts an illusory moment of perfection, a flash of time in which each and every flower is either at, or near, its height of splendour. Suspended in an impossible state of presentness, a type of caesura is depicted in which the eventual reality of mortality has been paused. At first glance, the vases in Glass' imagery seem to stand in stark opposition to the flowers' fleeting ephemerality. In contrast to the flora (which seem to rest between the material and immaterial), the containers are rigid, heavy, sturdy, and either encumbered or exalted by decades, even centuries, of history. A complicated history that recalls migration, globalization, trade. A massive movement of people and their things. Things that through the course of time and attention have reified to become artefacts.

However, with further analysis, similar narratives underwrite the plants' natural grace. A chronicle of events that includes cultivation and aspiration, even homesickness, in which settlers a so-called old world left a lasting biological footprint on what it

determined to be a world found new. Each variety describes a complicated flow of species moving across space and time. As example, the Japanese anemones that have found their way back to an Imari porcelain flask made in Arita Japan around 1660 that now belongs to Toronto's Gardiner Museum or an arrangement of vibrant tulips displayed in a Turkish vase. The latter remembers the sixteenth century plant hunters who brought tulips from Turkey and Mongolia to Austria and Holland. These stories, coupled with photography's arresting gaze, lend the flowers and vases in Glass' compositions a sense of monumentality. The past and the present moment crystallize to form a type of constellation of meaning greater than the sum of its parts.

Again, I move in close. My eyes lay down into the wavey strokes of digital colour: vivacious red, milky cream, a flush of pink. I lose track, thankfully, of what I was thinking and imagine magenta light pouring from multiple phials of foxglove at summer's height.