Irving Penn
Flowers

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“A combination of intensity and restraint set apart Irving Penn’s photographs… A framed print or page of Penn is an oasis of calm, a rectangle for the untethered eye to wander and contemplate.”
David Campany

Penn’s Flowers series was initiated from an assignment by American Vogue for the 1967 Christmas edition. This became the first of seven annual assignments that Penn would photograph flowers for Vogue, each year devoting himself to one class of flower. The photographs were collectively published as a book Flowers in 1980: 1967, Tulips; 1968, Poppies; 1968, Peonies; 1969, Orchids; 1970, Roses; 1971, Lilies; 1973, Begonias (Penn also photographed wildflowers in 1973 which appeared in Vogue’s 1974 Christmas edition but were excluded from the Flowers book). Thereafter, Penn returned to the subject right up until his death in 2009.
Penn’s approach to the still life evolved over decades; from the 1930s onwards, he arranged everyday objects to create assemblages, which transcended their origins and original purpose to become conceptual works of art. His apparently simplistic compositions are void of sentimentality and focus on the detail, form and wonder of each specimen. In his Flowers series, Penn presents us with an exceptional vision of forms, tones and patterns, entwining the beauty of nature with his photographic genius. Photographing each flower slightly differently and with meticulous attention to detail, each of Penn’s flower portraits are captured in his signature minimal and elegant style, against a plain background (Penn was one of the first fashion photographers to photograph his subjects against a plain backdrop). Penn’s aesthetic approach to his botanic work is similar to that of his fashion photography; the flower portraits are intensely beautiful and likewise surprising, rife with unusual angles and unexpected focal points, providing the viewer a rare vision of the patterns, colours and forms of the flowers.

“A Penn flower from the 1960s and a Penn flower from the 2000s can be almost indistinguishable. Like the still-life painters Chardin and Morandi, this was an artist who circled around his cherished motifs, finding worlds in simple forms.”

David Campany

In contrast to his fashion work, Penn had an interest in the temporal nature of life and would often record the impending prospect of death. This subject is evident in Cranium Architecture, Archaeology, and also in Flowers. As Penn documents the beauty and patterns within the flowers, and draws attention to the reproductive elements within, he is also viewing them as they slowly break down and wilt. Often Penn deliberately chose flowers that “have passed the point of perfection, when they have already begun spotting and browning and twisting on their way back to the earth.” Thus, Penn chose to focus on moments of unlikely beauty, revealing the mortality of flowers, whilst also celebrating the sensual beauty of each specimen.

“Penn’s photographs can be so lucid, so crystalline they are almost hallucinatory. Dreamlike.”

David Campany

Widely recognised as one of the world’s most important photographers, in the 1950s Penn founded his own studio in New York and continued to develop his fashion, commercial and personal work for the rest of his life, exhibiting internationally throughout the later decades of his career and publishing over 25 books including Moments Preserved (1960); Worlds in a Small Room (1974); Passage (1991); and A Notebook at Random (2004).

Mr. Penn’s next major museum retrospective, Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty, is opening this month at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 23rd October 2015 – 20th March 2016. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has announced it will present a major retrospective exhibition of Penn’s photographs, opening in April 2017, to mark the centennial of the artist’s birth. The Irving Penn Foundation will make a monumental gift to the museum of more than 150 photographs, representing every period of Penn’s dynamic 70 year career, which will be central to the exhibition.