

WETTERLING GALLERY

To transcend and invoke

On Marjolein Rothman's painting

In the angel's mind an image of a flower appears. Just an image, just a flower
Erik Bergqvist, from *En ängel*

There are countless flowers that fill their own chapters in art history. Claude Monet's famous water lily pond with weeping willows reflected in the water in his Giverny garden. Vincent van Gogh's smouldering sunflowers and his somewhat lesser-known yellow irises, blossoming almond trees and oleanders. Georgia O'Keefe's sensual floral creations, unmoored from their natural habitat, like a boat drifting from its berth... The list is endless. Innocent flowers can thrive on the minefield of art. Emil Nolde's paintings were once classified as "degenerate art". His watercolors of flowers, created in solitude during the war years in Sebüll, were dubbed "unpainted pictures", as though they had never existed.

Flowers have figured in art since time immemorial. They were particularly favoured in the still-life tradition, which flourished in the 17th century. The still life was the most specialised genre in Dutch painting. Compositions of beautiful plates, jugs, wine glasses and precious porcelain bowls reminded viewers of the sumptuous pleasures of dining and looked good in wealthy homes. In those days, a tulip bulb could cost as much as a diamond. The fervour with which flowers were immortalised on canvas was simply a logical consequence. Flower-painting, in all its symbolically-charged complexity, could also signify status. That sort of art therefore practically sold itself. But still-life painting was also an experimental field for artists. It gave them opportunities to study reflections and refractions in full and empty glasses, to try their skills in depicting a clear drop of water on a petal, and to develop their color palette.

17th-century still lifes almost always contain some symbol of life's transience, often cleverly hidden, as a cautionary *memento mori* – a reminder of our own mortality. *Vanitas vanitatum – Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.* Those words in Latin from *Ecclesiastes 1,2* in the Old Testament provided the name for a particularly subtle subcategory: the vanitas still life, where death and transience were the overall theme, with details such as skulls, bones, an extinguished candle, a broken blade of grass, a musical instrument, a bubble, or – yes – a wilted flower. Flowers were an obvious choice in this context. In their prime, they represent life itself. But life is short. And thus, the blossom also warns us of life's fragility. Beauty is fleeting, soon all that remains is

WETTERLING GALLERY

darkness. That a drooping flower is more symbolically poignant than one that is already beyond hope is easy to explain. The greatest threat is always that which might happen, not the inevitable. If it is already over, then we have nothing to lose. The worst agony arises when we are about to lose what we hold dear.

Marjolein Rothman comes from the Netherlands. Thus, far from being remarkable, it was only natural that she would one day look back at the great era of Dutch art, the 17th century. Her latest paintings with floral motifs are both a homage and a form of absalonism, both embracing and rejecting the long tradition. Rothman's art "does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible", to use Paul Klee's words. Her works have previously explored emblematic subjects such as monuments, portraits of public figures and symbols. Emblems often retain their enigmatic quality. It is in their nature to defy any immediate interpretation. They signify both groups and individuals.

With a background in photography, Marjolein Rothman's paintings are based on, or rather, inspired by, her spontaneous photos. Rothman aims her camera at whatever moves her. Despite their photographic origins, the paintings blossom as autonomous creations. The time and place defined by the photograph is erased and becomes a riddle. From their origins in reality, Rothman's flower paintings transform into something emblematic, thrilling and universal – like the flowers in vanitas paintings. The subjectivity of the photograph dissolves in the paintings, giving way to the essence of the flower. Each plant hovers in an undefined ether, with no links to place, ground or horizon. Sometimes, they seem to slide past the edges of the picture, as if yearning to get closer to or away from the light. For light is as crucial to Rothman's paintings as it is for photographic images. As if light had stepped over the threshold of darkness, rushing up stalks, blades and grasses, and as if it had the power to fold time, to paraphrase Tomas Tranströmer.

Many of Rothman's works are monochromes. They give the impression that the motif has been illuminated momentarily by a special ray that usually flickers past but was captured in painting this once. A color takes over everything here. Occasionally, it tries to swallow itself but fails. It embraces and taints anything that comes in its way. Rothman's paintings evoke memories of photography in its infancy, when, for instance, William Henry Fox Talbot and Anna Atkins tried to find a way of creating permanent images of nature by placing plants on photosensitive paper and exposing it to direct sunlight. We are also reminded of James Welling's photograms, *Flowers* (from 2004–07 and 2014), and the master photographer Irving Penn, who was fascinated by still lifes and transformed dying flowers into majestic creations, tightly interweaving strands of hope and gloom.

WETTERLING GALLERY

But let us return to painting. Rothman replaces the usual canvas with plates of aluminium, in defiance of tradition and with a desire to challenge the material. Oils behave differently on the slippery surface than on a rough canvas. This material is both demanding and generous. The artist needs to have a steady hand. But she can also wipe, rub out and polish colors to shift from gossamer veils to thick impasto. Marjolein Rothman creates with a characteristic palette – in so-called *false colors*. The definitions are complex.

According to a simplified explanation, *true colors* give a truthful depiction of what the naked eye perceives in reality, whereas *false colors* are used in images to represent a color that lies beyond the part of the spectrum that is normally visible to humans. A photographic negative, which is what some of Rothman's paintings resemble, could be described as an image in *false colors*. Her pinks, oranges and greens come in a variety of murky shades. But the artist always begins in the same way. She mixes black using different colors, and then fashions the entire palette based on that black. The powerful drive to conceptually develop a technique, to try out different light effects, and to create new styles is like a hereditary experimental urge passed down from her predecessors in the field of still-life painting.

Painting on the shiny aluminium surface is a rapid creative process – a few gestures are all it takes. At others, many retakes are required before everything matches the painter's intentions. It is hardly about "getting it right", in the conventional sense. However, it needs to "feel right", according to Rothman's aesthetic positions. The motifs transform and come alive, multiply and mutate, shift and repeat. Lines crouch. Inwards and outwards. Down and up. The surface is taut and trembles. Volumes arise in the play of light and shadows. Instead of meticulous brushwork, Rothman relies on the sweeping gesture. Her works are the opposite of detailed botanical charts. They capture the soul of the narcissus, agave or sunflower.

The motif occasionally dissolves to the degree that figuration ceases entirely and becomes abstract. How much information does the eye need to recognise the shape? The tension between the stated and the obscured, between how the light co-creates and the shadows camouflage, is thus a key device in Rothman's practice. Some of her paintings convey a sense of being on the border. Shapes grow hazy, merge and separate from one another. They veer between clarity and vagueness, as though anticipating a breakdown. The eye clammers for a foothold while oscillating between bewilderment and familiarity. It is impossible to discern whether the motif is in the process of emerging from the shadows or actually disappearing into them. Here, the old *memento mori* reminder is especially apposite. Life, in its ephemerality, passes through the vale of shadows to enter death's door, only to repeat the cycle in all eternity.

WETTERLING GALLERY

Likewise, every work of art, regardless of the artist's intentions, is reborn in the eye of the beholder. Painting, and especially in the form that Marjolein Rothman works, is forever in a state of becoming. It is never entirely static but unfolds before us. What is being described is also on the verge of crumbling. Rothman returns, wrestles, reconstructs and deconstructs tradition. She is drawn to, and affirms, the fragmented. Far from seeking out any metaphorical meanings, she cultivates a kind of private garden, picking out details and creating her own herbarium. Her paintings command poetry's capacity to invoke and transcend boundaries.

Text by Joanna Persman