



Zachary Kaplan

Doc got out his lens and gazed into each image 'til one by one they began to float apart into little blobs of color. It was as if whatever had happened had reached some kind of limit. It was like finding the gateway to the past unguarded, unforbidden because it didn't have to be. Built into the act of return finally was this glittering mosaic of doubt.

—Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (2009)

To be honest, the best dinner parties end — or at least near their end — with a conversation about death. It's the liquor, of course. And the yawning night. But it's also the effect of the cresting sensorial (taste, touch, smell, sound, sight). When that apex is hit, the come-down is where the *real* socializing happens, when attitudes are set aside and conversation grows shaggy. Perhaps it's all an illusion, but it's the closest I get. Anyway, I'm beginning to tease out a logic operative across this body of work by Marco Braunschweiler. (Marco. We know each other well. We've had one of those end-of-dinner conversations.) Right now, he's chasing those peaks and valleys, or, in shorthand, bodies and their limits.

For 18 months, Marco has been considering the consumer life-cycle of wholesale flowers (that is, from already-picked-and-wrapped to alley trash). He buys lilies. To be precise, *Lilium Oriental Stargazer*, a sub-species hybridized by a Midwesterner, Leslie Woodriff, in the mid-70s. Marco's a Midwesterner, too. From Omaha. His earliest videos were those DIY skate videos, but I've never seen one. This work is his first Los Angeles work. It's an occasion.

Stargazers — their general hardiness returns generous yields, their canary yellows, pale whites, and hot pinks, fragrance, and hale posture are paradigmatic. As they open, their styles reach towards the sun. They'll linger in a vase a while, too, over a week. Even when they're at their end, they never look *that* bad. I think it's because their flesh is almost leathery. In demeanor and circulation, in their very name, Stargazers are a commodity ideal. And, in spirit, Marco gets them cheap — wrapped not even in bodega plastic, but in disused newsprint, often Korean weeklies or back issues of the *LA Times*.

The lilies go to his studio, which is near to the flower district in Downtown Los Angeles, where the stems are purchased. Marco's been an advocate for flowers in the home and the workplace for some time. I remember conversations way back (late dinner ones, even) between him and my longtime partner about their stimulating effervescence. At the time, I didn't really care for plants. No matter. In this new Los Angeles studio, where he'd then only been for about six months, he began to appreciate the lily's life span: tap water-fueled last-gasping reaches into leprotic peeling, chalky fuzz stamen then fading style then wilting petal.

Time-lapse video provided his most immediate path of entry. Second came the still-photographs of clippings and sundry workday refuse piled on the same newspapers in which the flowers had been transported, and which then served as makeshift dustbins for the trashcanless studio. The videos are defined by their crisp digital image (*retina*, if you will) that captures so lucidly shifts in color and luster in light vacillating minimally, then dramatically. Oh, man, that light. Sun up and down, purple hued by the window treatments — it's a warming blanket. Though only a minute or two in length, these are intensely patient documents of decay, rejecting the well-known pulsing, hyperspeed corrosion of those science class 16mm films. You know the ones that British director Peter Greenaway so expertly deployed throughout his amputation psycho-drama *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985).

Actually, Greenaway is an apt reference-point for the artist as his cinema work drew, not unlike Marco's practice, from deep engagement with art history. While Greenaway was a painter entranced by 17th century Flemish oils, Marco was a bookseller paying specific attention to artist books, working out of a Chicago-based gallery and shop called, ahem, Golden Age. Back in the day, Marco would from time to time speak semi-seriously of seeking a purity in art (again, late night!). His shop was made up of things like neo-De Stijl pamphlets, aging minimalist tracts,

and, always in stock, Stephen Prina's classifications of the aspect rations of monochrome paintings. What focused initially on aesthetic reduction moved with time toward a more nuanced study of creative labor, its commodification and exploitation. Now, with this project, he's taken up a purposefully modest practice: place-limited production (the flowers from his neighborhood), uniform shots, even lighting. The conceptual and aesthetic register verges on calvinist.

So it figures that here we are in 2014 with this body of vanitas, art works distilled to the form's object par excellence — the domesticated flower. And what an object! The Stargazer struggling from the Earth, reaching toward the Heavens, then its great chain of being severed so as to be carted off to (if we're being strict here) the idolaters atelier for his displaced worship. Heavy. But, of course, Marco's not an actual, real-live calvinist. Rather he's an actual, real-live aesthete. And the concern here is as much inherent vice — what the connoisseur in him might call the entropic nature of objects, the fundamental instability of all matter — as memento mori.

Like On Kawara's paintings with the dates, the videos articulate the inexorable, only intermittently-relevant, and never strictly memorable march of time. The photographs, in contrast, carry a messy vigor that denies all that, death included. In that they are more effectively a vanitas, the videos lay a ground upon which the stills reach for something beyond. Their casual precarity (rubbish strewn and print crinkled) and material promiscuity (from petals to plastics), offer, well, some humor. In the cosmic sense. Or at least the generative instability of the likes of Fischli/Weiss, a frequent reference for Marco, and, not coincidentally, the creators of a monumental artwork comprising an installation of flowers at Munster Sculpture Project 1997 and a later set of photographic documentation exhibited as a pacing slideshow with blurring transitions. Fischli/Weiss found lankiness and gawkiness in these objects of natural beauty. The stackedness. The randomness of their and our sense of proportionality. The kaleidoscopic excess. A vanitas for a sense of aesthetic objectivity.

Marco's photographs maintain that wry wet-blanketry, even as they deemphasize their intentional sculpture qualities. Rather, he mines to sly effect the encroaching *real* world by way the Stargazers' commodity status. Again, these are workhorses, easy to grow and show. I think they're bland. They're kinda corporate. In Marco's use they're dumb, in the Kenneth Goldsmith sense of a brusquely defined, fully flat, non-allusionary, wilfully amnesiac character.

In their dumbness, these flowers weave Marco's inquiry with those of people like Hans-Peter Feldmann and Isa Genzken. Both have used interchangeably the agribusiness flower and its synthetic analogue, the factory-produced plastic flower. For Feldmann, the stems are the generic consumer product incarnate; for Genzken, more obliquely, an instance of the organic incorporated; for both, aesthetic beauty reduced and struggling against its reduction to one decorative accoutrement of a bourgeois typology. All three — now, Marco included — deploy the flower for its inherent vice, its vulnerable position at the nexus of those socially-determined fields of aesthetics and economics, its suspect naturalness soaked in original sin.

When I think about flowers, I think about my eventual death. When I see this work by Marco, I'm brought not to that gesture toward the end, however, but to the incidence of my forging connection between the two.

Anyway, it's getting late.

Zachary Kaplan is Community Manager at Rhizome, where he also a contributing writer and editor.

Marco Braunschweiler (b. 1985) is a Swiss-American artist, curator and lecturer based in Los Angeles. He was the director of Golden Age, Chicago; has presented programs at the Art Institute of Chicago and White Flag Projects, St. Louis; and has exhibited at the Swiss Institute, New York, the Green Gallery, Milwaukee, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.