

On 'beauty': flowers in postmodern art

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In this article, Umberto Eco's definitions of beauty from his recent publication, *On Beauty: a history of a western idea* (2004), are used to examine a selection of postmodern artworks that depict flowers either as their major subject or as an aspect of their content. These artworks consist mainly of paintings but also include photographs and an installation. The article aims to show that beauty has been revived as an aspect of postmodern art, and that the flower is almost always an expression of beauty. However, postmodern works also reveal other, personal intentions in addition to the exploration of beauty. A brief discussion of traditional flower paintings, specifically seventeenth century Dutch paintings, serves to provide a background to this discussion of contemporary art depicting flowers.

A propos de la beauté: les fleurs dans l'art postmoderne

Dans cet article, les définitions sur la beauté d'Umberto Eco dans la publication récente *On Beauty: a history of a western idea* (2004) sont employées pour examiner une sélection des oeuvres d'art postmoderne qui décrivent des fleurs comme sujet principal ou comme un aspect du contenu de l'oeuvre. Ces oeuvres consistent principalement par des peintures mais comprend aussi des photos et une installation. Cet article a pour objet de démontrer que la beauté a été raviver comme un sujet de l'art postmoderne, et que la fleur est presque toujours une expression de la beauté. Neanmoins, l'art postmoderne révèle aussi d'autres intentions personnelles. Une courte discussion sur l'art traditionnel de la peinture des fleurs, surtout celles du 17eme siècle des peintures hollandaises, servent à procurer un fond décrivant l'art contemporaine sur les fleurs.

Umberto Eco (2004) in his popularly acclaimed book *On Beauty: a history of a western idea*, investigated changing notions of beauty through western art and in its writings, aesthetic, philosophical and critical. Certain definitions and parameters for the idea of beauty remain more or less unchanged throughout western history: a beautiful thing is "something that would make us happy if it were ours, but remains beautiful even if it belongs to someone else" (Eco, 2004:10). Furthermore, it is pleasing to contemplate, and thus essentially possesses visual attributes. Qualities such as clarity of colour, luminosity of surface, smoothness and variety of colours are considered beautiful, and these qualities are reflected in paintings as well as in dress, decorations and jewellery.

A less tangible quality, considered important in many epochs of western art, essentially those in which a classicist spirit dominated, was truth to nature, for example "the faithful representation of what happens to the body in movement" (Xenophon in Eco 2004: 49). Another is proportion and pattern, or that which is "exactly perfected and harmonised in due proportion" (Plato in Eco 2004:51), or is mathematically and numerically proportioned. A kind of 'splendour', or reflection of richness, luxury and complexity, such as the richness of gemstones (Eco 2004:106), can also be beautiful. Ornament is a quality that provides visual pleasure, and it often derives from nature. Particularly in art, skilled craftsmanship, in relation to the purpose of the artwork, is often seen as beautiful (Aquinas in Eco 2004:89).

Apart from its visual qualities, beauty has certain psychological or emotive aspects. Part of beauty lies in the contrast of opposites, such as the contrast between the beautiful and the ugly. "There is an intimate connection between the beautiful and the ugly, inasmuch as the self-destruction of the former is the basis of the possibility that the latter, in its turn, may negate itself" (Rosenkranz in Eco 2004:136). The monster placed next to the saint, or the crone next to the virgin, chaos next to harmony or suffering besides peace, can enhance the perception of beauty (Eco 2004: 131). Beauty is always temporal: it is often of short duration, "more fleeting than the passing of flowers in spring" (Eco 2004:91). Beauty, associated with youth, woman and flowers, for example, is generally subject to decay and

corruption, and is thus fragile. Furthermore, beauty has both symbolic and moral qualities: for example, in certain periods, particularly with the development and dominance of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, beauty was allied to the good, the useful and the practical (Eco 2004:208, 244), and was to be found in spaces such as the home and in domestic life. It became an element of the intimate and the small, of their “variety, smallness, smoothness, the gradual variation, delicacy, purity and fairness of colour, and also – to a certain extent – grace and elegance” (Eco 2004:290).¹ The beautiful tends to be agreeable, and is, according to Burke (In Eco 2004:292) “a social quality” that engenders playfulness and freedom (Schiller in Eco 2004:297).

Eco frequently mentions objects such as cloth, jewels and flowers in his text, but, strangely, he does not consider still-life painting nor flower painting as examples of the beautiful. The genre of still-life is surely the clearest expression of beauty as a quality of the intimate, the domestic, the pleasing and the agreeable, and never more so than in depictions of flowers. This genre Eco does not mention at all. It is the aim of this article to consider the depiction of flowers, particularly the depiction of flowers in postmodern art, as an expression of beauty, in order to see how such works manifest aspects of the beautiful but also how they reveal other artistic intentions. A brief consideration of traditional flower painting will serve to provide a context.

Traditional depictions of flowers

From the earliest historical and archaeological records, it becomes apparent that humankind brought flowers into their gardens and homes, cultivating them for medicinal uses and for food, and of course, also for their beauty. So powerful are the multi-layered meanings they contribute to human society, that there has hardly been a time during which they have not been represented in some way in cultural products and rituals. Floral motifs can be found on the earliest surviving jewellery, fabrics and murals. The anthropologist, Ralph Solecki’s interpretation of the Shanidar IV burials is that Neanderthals included flowers in their burial rituals (*Shanidar*, 2005). Seeds and pollen were found around an adult male grave dating back about 60,000 years, which suggests they were deliberately put there as part of a funeral practice. The plants used were grape hyacinths, bachelor’s buttons, hollyhock and yellow flowering groundsel. Phillips & Rix (1993:22) refer to Egyptian pictures of gardens, dating back to 2600 BCE, found on papyrus scrolls and stone reliefs in ancient temples.

Flowers eventually began to be incorporated into paintings, for example, during the Renaissance. These paintings generally contained a religious message or depicted a mythological or historical theme, to which flowers merely formed a background. However, during the seventeenth century in Holland, a shift took place in the depiction of flowers. The Reformation paved the way for the secularisation of art. In this context, it is important to note that before 1572, the largest and most important artistic commissions emanated from the Church (Israel, 1995:77). After the Reformation, this was no longer the case. For artists, there was no point in seeking patronage from churches, as Protestant iconoclasm in the north eliminated all religious decoration. In order to survive, the main concern of these artists was to build a new clientele. Artists therefore turned to prosperous merchants who appreciated luxury items and were open to innovation. This newly affluent middle class remained in touch with everyday reality and was sensitive to anything that influenced its lifestyle. Thanks to this clientele, the still life as a distinct genre in painting evolved, “featuring everyday objects such as tables laden with food, and of course, bouquets of flowers” (Donzel, 1997:53; Taylor 1995:1).

European trade with exotic foreign clients created the opportunity for varieties of garden flowers such as tulips, hyacinths and ranunculus to be introduced in the second half of the

sixteenth century.² Along with this interest in flowers, an interest in depictions of flowers developed.³ One example, among many, is *Flower piece* by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (figure 1), which includes detailed depictions of a mixture of flowers such as irises, lilies-of-the-valley, tulips and roses. Their beauty lies in the detail, clarity and variety of colour, truth to nature, as well as in their richness, a suggestion of luxury as well as of domestic intimacy. The flowers are clearly idealized and perfect.



Figure 1
Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Flower Piece*, 1620. Oil on wood, 64 x 46 cm.
Mauritshuis, The Hague (Taylor, 1995:136).

Brigstocke (2001:244) suggests that some seventeenth century Dutch flower pieces included elements that were intended to suggest symbolic and emblematic qualities. Few beholders of a seventeenth century Dutch flower painting could have “avoided entertaining the thought that the marvellous intricacy and beauty of the flowers were evidence of God’s power and goodness” (Taylor 1995:30), thus they were examples of the beautiful in its manifestation in what is good. Furthermore, “[t]he significance most commonly attached to flowers related to the fragility of their existence, seen as a simile for the transience of human life” (Donzel 1997:56). The comparison of the brief life of flowers with the brief life of humankind was pervasive, and reflects the fragility and temporality of the beautiful.

These are generally called *vanitas* paintings, and are the type of still life painting that “warns against the transience of worldly pleasures and of earthly power and glory”

(Brigstocke, 2001:766). Although all still lifes of flowers, fruit and food carry overtones of transience, additional objects, for example precious shells, flickering candles, history books and skulls were included to suggest both transience and the insubstantiality of wealth and knowledge. Reference to death and mortality were not considered inappropriate in these paintings, but were a “cause for celebration” (Moore & Garibaldi, 2003:70), introducing thematic as well as visual contrasts between the beautiful and the ugly, or at least the ‘not beautiful’. Ambrosius Brueghel makes the meaning clear in his painting called *Vanitas* (date of painting unknown). He adds a couplet, as if the objects in the picture did not make the point sufficiently. The words at the foot of the picture read: “beauty, riches, pomp, joy, art and the fame of majesty, indeed all things that are worldly, pass like a flower: Psalm 103, verse 15 (‘as for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth’)” (Taylor, 1995:45).

After this period, flower painting declined in importance, and this tendency was exacerbated by modernism, when the retreat of traditional subjects and the ascendancy of avant-gardism and abstraction saw the virtual demise of flower painting other than as an amateur art or a kind of ‘Sunday painting’. This is true in spite of some notable examples of flower painters such as Claude Monet and Georgia O’Keefe. At the same time, beauty came to be seen as an old-fashioned, clichéd, sentimental and undesirable quality in art, and was replaced by notions of originality, experimentation and visual or formal effects, which precluded any traditional ideas of the beautiful.⁴

Postmodern depictions of flowers

The postmodern era has seen something of a renewed interest in beauty, as evidenced in a book such as Eco’s, but also in the work of other theorists and artists. The painter Balthus (In Wright 2001:51-52) states that most artists have forgotten that painting is, above all, the “love of looking at everyday beauty ... of seeing ordinary things as enchanting and seductive, and letting them switch on the imagination and connect to memory”. The aim, as well as the necessary skills, of making art that expresses the beautiful, is however, still relatively rare today, as critic Peter Fuller (1985:9) points out. Such endeavours assert values which are more often found in traditional painting than in much contemporary art, qualities such as mastery of means, individual creativity, accountability and uncompromising commitment to quality.

Nonetheless, there are signs of a renewed interest in the beautiful. As art critic Dave Hickey (1993:11) argues, beauty might well be the major issue of art since the 1990s. He suggests that beauty has been inconsequential since the advent of modernism, and that most contemporary art uses beauty, if it is present at all, only as critique. This ignores the potential of beauty as celebration and, furthermore, as “the image’s single claim to be looked at – and to be believed” (Hickey 1993:18). Hickey wonders how we have come to do without beauty in contemporary art, which is so often theoretical and didactic rather than visually appealing.

In this postmodern climate, the reputation of flowers as one possible subject for “serious” art has been rehabilitated. Postmodernism embraces the diversity of the human experience and turns its back on the monolithic structure of an elitist, rational, masculine world, embracing instead the feminine, figurative, narrative, decorative, playful or sentimental.

In the sixties and seventies, Pop Art was at the forefront of postmodern art. By embracing popular culture, the Pop artists rejected the “idea of an avant-garde, of art as the most serious and truthful of cultural occupations and the idea of abstraction” (Cahoone, 1996:8). They opposed the heroic distinction between high and low, fine and commercial

art. Andy Warhol constructed large canvases replicating images from popular culture, flowers amongst other images. In *Do it yourself (flowers)*, painted in 1962 (Figure 2), he produced the work from an actual paint-by-number hobby kit (Bourdon, 1989:114). He copied the entire composition directly onto canvas with the aid of a projector, subsequently filling in only a portion of the colours with hues of his own choice, and then using press-on type for the numbers, not always with regard to the actual numerals on the models. As Bourdon (1989:114) states:

Only an artist as irreverent and ironic as Warhol could have dreamed up the idea of transposing these kitsch, mass-produced images into “originals” for an affluent audience, which prizes them for being among his wittiest and cheekiest artworks.



Figure 2
Andy Warhol, *Do it yourself (flowers)*, 1962. Acrylic and prestype rub-off numbers on canvas, 175 x 150 cm. Location unknown (Herzog, 1992:11).

With his appropriation of a banal, mass-produced image, Warhol brazenly brought the previously trivial, considered unworthy of notice, to the hallowed ground of high art. Nothing was sacred and the cheaper and more despicable, the better. Thus, these flower images are kitsch and mass-produced clichés of the beautiful. This example illustrates Hickey’s point that beauty is often a critique or a mere parody of the traditionally beautiful in recent art. However, whether satirical criticism was intended is debatable. According to Lippard (1966:86), Warhol was apparently asked whether he *liked* his subjects. His reply was that “Pop Art is liking things”. Lippard is of the opinion that parody in Pop Art largely depends upon the viewer’s response, and is seldom the artist’s intention.

In 1964 Warhol had an exhibition titled *Flowers* (Figure 3). The artist filled the main gallery with silk-screens (with paint added) of flowers, covering entire walls.

Warhol derived his flowers from a colour photograph that was printed in a photography magazine. He sent the colour photograph out to be converted into black and white silk-screens in varied sizes. He did, however, crop each picture so that it fitted into a square

format. The actual flowers in the painting were then hand painted, not only by Warhol, but also by the friends who came over to his studio (called the Factory) to help him (Bourdon, 1989:193).



Figure 3
Andy Warhol, installation view of *Flowers* exhibition at the Castelli Gallery, November 21 – December 17, 1964. (Bourdon, 1989:193).

Warhol's *Flowers* seem detached and are devoid of the sublime nature of the subject. They become decorative, playful images, which are terms associated with postmodernist art. These flower paintings allowed Warhol to combine abstract procedures with images from popular mass culture, thus providing ordinary people with images with which they could identify. One can say that Warhol's art embraces different kinds of representation and respects the plurality of different visual experiences, thus giving pleasure to differing audiences. Warhol therefore brought the flower back from its relegation to popular culture into mainstream art, by applying a commercial graphic medium. In this way he uses the flower to allude to a world full of artificiality and imitation, and makes an ironic reference to notions of the beautiful.

In contrast to the work of Warhol, whose depiction of the flower stripped it of all sensuality and beauty, American painter Janet Fish's depictions are engaging and traditionally beautiful. She has been including flowers in her work, often as the main focal point, since the 1980s. The art critic Vincent Katz (2002:25) links the work of Fish to that of Dutch seventeenth century still life and flower painters. She paints the traditionally beautiful subject of the flower with close observation and skill. The flowers are filled with life and light, colour and detail. *Orange cloth/orange poppies*, (Figure 4) painted in 2000, reflects a preoccupation with everyday life. A vase with orange poppies is placed on a tray. Other objects, such as a glass, bowls and what would seem like glass miniature masks are placed alongside the poppies. Because of the window and soft flowing curtain in the background, it appears as if these objects form part of a domestic scene. Fish's subject matter and her style of painting reflect a nostalgic, domestic, charming and sentimental mood. The effect of her painting is decorative, and she depicts the beautiful as intimate, ordinary and small.



Figure 4
Janet Fish, *Orange cloth/orange poppies*, 2000. Oil on canvas, 48" x 60". Private collection, New York (Katz, 2002:142).

Fish's floral paintings mark a departure from modernism, when sentimentality and decorativeness were considered inconsistent with serious art. In the same way, domestic subjects – indeed, any preserve of the traditionally feminine – are embraced in the postmodern era. Fish's work in effect places such previously scorned domestic, feminine and autobiographical subjects firmly within the preserve of mainstream postmodern art.

Ben Schonzeit is an American painter whose flower paintings affirm his “unabashed devotion to beauty” (Riley, 2002:17). Schonzeit's flower paintings are beautiful in that the colours he uses appear to be lush; beauty is achieved by the sensuousness of the flowers themselves and also from the fact that the flowers are depicted with intensely realistic detail. The artist said that he painted his flower pieces after his mother died because he had a “desire to make something beautiful for her” (Riley, 2002:17). Schonzeit's need for the aesthetic is “an act of defiance” in the face of modernism's rejection of traditional notions of beauty. His use of the flower to explore beauty is noteworthy as it explores the possibility of beauty as celebration. His works seem to bear out Hickey's plea for art that is looked at and is convincing because it is beautiful. In addition, his work is beautifully crafted.

In his depiction of flowers as objects of beauty, Schonzeit employs the traditional format of a vase on a table. However, in line with other postmodern artists, he creates a pastiche by copying the works of artists such as Picasso and Degas in the backgrounds. In his painting, *Floral with self-portrait* painted in 1988, (Figure 5) Schonzeit uses a painting by Picasso, painted in tones of black, white and grey, as a backdrop for his vase with brightly coloured flowers. Schonzeit contrasts the flat background to his own overtly modelled, three-dimensional flowers. He uses the same construct in his painting, *Cut glass Degas* painted in 1997. Painted with meticulous detail, a cut glass vase filled with beautiful pink and peach-coloured roses is superimposed on a Degas ballerina painting. Degas' painting technique of loose brush marks contrasts strongly with Schonzeit's flowers that are painted in a photo-

realistic manner. These works ironically play one time reference against another to create anachronisms in paint (freshly cut flowers in a twentieth century vase set against a backdrop of a Degas or a Picasso).



Figure 5
Ben Schonzeit, *Floral with self-portrait*, 1988. Acrylic on linen, 66" x 72". Private collection (Riley, 2002:85).

Schonzeit's flower paintings therefore not only bring the celebration of beauty into the preserve of mainstream art, exploring the beauty and visual effects of contrast, but also explore the concept of the relativity of time, and use a typical postmodern appropriation of historical works.

The concern of the modernist era with the "abstract, pure and aesthetic" excluded the 'ordinary' existence of flowers, the world of women and the celebration of beauty. By late modernism, the human body with its frailties, mortality and sexuality was also excluded from the visual arts. The modernist world had no room in it for the human body. It was only the more abstracted, spiritual aspects of the human condition that were relevant. It is against this context that the work of American artist Jeff Koons brings the flower into prominence. His flower pieces form part of an installation titled, *Made in heaven*, 1991 (figure 6).

They are manufactured commercially from polychromed wood (*Large vase of flowers*) and glass (*Mound of flowers*). The installation juxtaposes different media – porcelain and glass with photographs – to depict sexuality both overtly and more obliquely. In the huge, high-coloured photographs, Koons and the Italian porn-star and Member of Parliament, La Cicciolina, re-enact the corniness and kitsch of pornography. The porcelain and glass figures are sickly sweet renditions of the same obscene and overtly explicit poses captured in the photographs. Koons then juxtaposes these pornographic poses with kitschy flower arrangements. Coles & Violette (1992:26) describe the effect of such flowers:

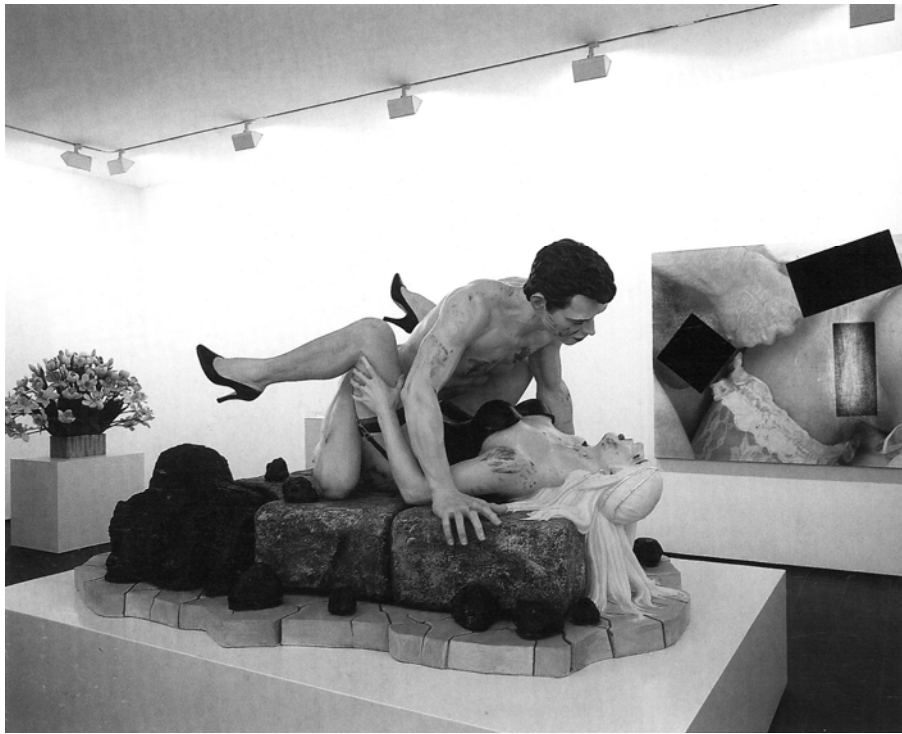


Figure 6
Jeff Koons, *Made in heaven*, 1991. Installation. Location unknown (Muthesius, 1992:156).

...with exposed pistil and stamen, in the midst of a display of usually secret human orifices and projections, Koons was eager to underline the biological equation between the world of botany and our own private parts.

Koons (In Coles & Violette, 1992:126) points out that the one hundred and forty flowers in this installation are “very sexual and fertile, and at the same time they are one hundred and forty assholes”. Stevens (2000:55) states that the images that Koons chooses for his artworks are “seemingly interchangeable”. He appears to find no difference between pornography and flowers. His flowers therefore become genital symbols and he depicts the flower not just as a subtle symbol of sensuality and beauty, but as an overt sign of sexuality.

At the same time, Koons’ flowers have elements of “gentle domesticity and the desire for sweet, decorative, sentimental and Disney-world fantasy” (Stevens, 2000:54). Koons affirms that the flower piece, *Mound of flowers*, reflects an “animated Disney style” (Muthesius, 1992:30). He claims that he wants to work for a mass audience and that he wants to communicate with the general public, reflecting their dreams and desires. In an interview he was asked why he included flowers in the *Made in heaven* show. He replied that:

The flowers were to let people embrace their own pasts – to show beauty in simple things lets people embrace their own history. It was not to let art segregate people from their past because if you do that, they’re impotent. I was trying to give people back their life because that’s their foundation (Muthesius, 1992:29).

The traditionally beautiful flower is thus placed in an unusual context: in an installation, alongside pornographic images, in a way that reflects kitsch and popular culture. Thus these flowers, which can be seen as beautiful in themselves, become a parody of the beautiful, and, like Warhol’s earlier flower works, can be seen at the same time as a critique or a

mockery of beauty. Koons' representation of the flower differs radically from other, more traditional approaches. He uses the beauty of the flower as a parodic, overtly sexual symbol within popular culture.

The postmodernist concern with sexuality and the body as part of the expression of sexuality is interestingly explored by the flower photographs of American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. His delicate photographic flower studies, made in the 1980s, display a powerful sensuality, even sexuality. In his black and white photograph, *Calla lily*, 1988 (Figure 7), he emphasises the flower's phallic stamen.

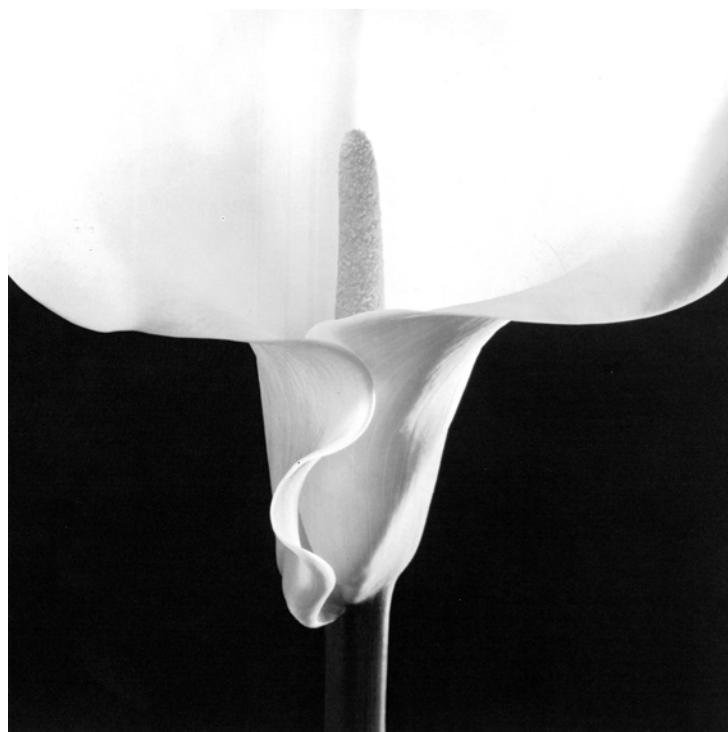


Figure 7
Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla lily*, 1988. Gelatin silver print, 24" x 20". Location unknown (Marshall, 1998:194).

In another black and white photograph, also titled *Calla lily*, 1986, the flower is a reminder of female genitalia. Mapplethorpe's skilful use of light and his immaculate consideration for positioning the flower give rise to these associations. Osborne (2003) points out that Mapplethorpe drew a direct line between the sexuality of humans and that of flowers, recognising the fact that flowers are the genitalia of plants.

Concerning one of Mapplethorpe's coloured photographs, titled *Poppy*, 1988 (Figure 8), Deborah Levinson (1990) claims that the green of the stems and the red of the petals are so vibrant that "they draw the viewer in, forcing him to acknowledge their primitive sexuality".

Levinson's view is that *Poppy* is erotic in the sense that "the stems of the poppies curl around each other, intertwined like lovers' legs, the phallic bud hovering over the opened flower with palpable malice". Whether this blatant sexuality was actually intended is debatable, but it would match Mapplethorpe's better-known and overtly sexual images.⁵ In any event, one cannot deny an element of eroticism that lies in the beauty of detail, the clear colour, the softness and smoothness of surface of the flowers, all of which can be seen to refer to the sensuality and tactility of the body.



Figure 8
Robert Mapplethorpe, *Poppy*, 1988. Dye transfer print, 24" x 20". Location unknown (Marshall, 1998:191).

In South Africa, an example of postmodern art that includes studies of plants and flowers is Marion Arnold's exhibition titled *Red data AND etc.*, held in 1998 in Johannesburg. According to Arnold (1997-1998:1) the title of the exhibition refers to the *Red Data* books, which are scientific publications that alert us to our threatened environment. A concern with this threatened environment is the focus of these works. Arnold explores this by including images of flowers that are close to botanical studies, which carry many meanings:

Flower imagery can no longer be seen as merely decorative or innocent of anything other than formal considerations. All images of nature carry new moral imperatives and ask for a heightened consciousness of the threatened environment (Arnold 1996:66).

The work *Red Data: stigmas*, executed in 1997 (Figure 9) includes images of flowering plants and bulbs.

The plant on the left hand side is placed in a pot, with a garden fork next to it. This signifies the act and love of gardening, and also refers to beauty as a social expression of the domestic and the familiar. The botanical details satisfy the sense of the beauty of accuracy, of a truth to nature. Arnold (1992:3) says that ultimately the fine artist as well as the botanical artist "observe, interpret and render"; they persuade the viewer to "believe in a representation and to respond sensuously and cognitively to the authority of the likeness".

Although commonly conceived as being in opposition, the aims of art and science need not be polarized as a conflict between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' and, in plant imagery, art meets science (Arnold, 2001:20).

The work juxtaposes the beautiful with darker, uglier aspects. Arnold uses the strongly contrasting complementary colours, red and green. She (1997-1998:1) points out that the colour red symbolically and traditionally evokes signals of danger, destruction and death. In this contrast, "[t]here is a visual dynamic, an optical fight or accommodation of extremes,

and a symbolic life/death dialogue between ‘red data’ and ‘green issues’” (Arnold, 1997-1998:2). Furthermore, the plants appear against a dark, bleak background. The work is in essence about the destruction of the environment.



Figure 9
Marion Arnold, *Red data: stigmas*, 1997. Pastel on paper, 75 x 110 cm. Location unknown (*Red Data AND etc.* exhibition brochure).

Arnold incorporates the words, *Red data* and *stigma* in the artwork. Arnold (1997 -1998:8) states: “I’m interested in the image that co-exists with language, and in words that are simultaneously visual and verbal signs”. *The Reader’s Digest Oxford wordfinder* (Tulloch, 1993:1529) defines ‘stigma’, especially in the sense of the ‘stigmata’, as “a mark or sign of disgrace or discredit”. The word also refers to “part of the pistil that receives the pollen in pollination”. In addition, the word describes (in Christian belief) “marks corresponding to those left on Christ’s body by the Crucifixion, said to have been impressed on the bodies of St Francis of Assisi and others”. In the context of this artwork, it is obvious that the interpretation of the word is multi-layered. The botanical meaning is directly relevant to the flower, while a mark of disgrace points to the destruction of the environment. The marks corresponding to those left on Christ’s body by the Crucifixion can be seen as a metaphor for the marks that the human race leaves on the environment and how we are responsible for the destruction of nature.

Thus Arnold’s flower piece is multi-layered in terms of its references. Although her work uses the beautiful to suggest serious concerns regarding a threatened environment, Arnold (1997-1998:3) feels that “plant depictions continue to occupy the lowest rung of the art hierarchy”. She is of the opinion that “We need to teach people how to interpret nature, how to value it, how to connect with it”.

Kevin Roberts is another South African artist who regularly includes flower paintings in his body of work. In *Muffin’s roses I*, 2002 (Figure 10) and *Muffin’s roses III*, 2004, a rosebush is central to each work. In the former work, it has a label attached to it and it is placed in a plastic bag, while in the latter it has been newly planted in a carefully dug and watered hole, against a dry landscape.

These contexts suggest that the rosebush is an object that has been sold and bought, and points to nature as artifice, as the construction of a tamed, domestic and familiar beauty.



Figure 10

Kevin Roberts, *Muffin's Roses I*, 2002. Oil on panel 97 x 60 cm. Location unknown (Stevens, 2004:35).

In both paintings, Roberts's roses are not painted naturalistically. In their regularity and layering, they form part of a carefully constructed pattern that covers almost every centimetre of the painted surface. Pattern and decoration, eschewed in much modernist painting, are now recognisable postmodern strategies, as well as signifiers of visual interest and beauty.

According to the art historian, E.H. Gombrich (1997:96-163) pattern is a vital component of visual art, providing visual stimulation and selective focus, leading the viewer's eye through the painting and giving intense visual pleasure. Gombrich (1979:163) describes decoration as the superimposing of one pattern on another. The creation of these patterns and images must have been extremely time-consuming for Roberts, requiring consummate craftsmanship, which in itself can be a constituent of the beautiful.

These examples of flowers in postmodern art indicate some renewal of this subject as one theme within postmodern art. The different approaches of individual artists, whether in painting, installation or photography, may all be described as beautiful, or make some reference to beauty in its various guises and with various attributes, such as pattern and decoration, ornament and truth to nature, sensuality, in the domestic, small and familiar, in visual qualities such as smoothness, clarity of colour, luminosity, complexity and convincing detail, in skilled craftsmanship and in symbolic references to femininity, temporality and contrast. Beauty seems to be almost embedded within the very subject of flowers. But all the works have, in addition, personal intentions, concepts and meanings, and use a variety of postmodern strategies which situate the works within a postmodern culture.

Notes

1. The sublime, in contrast with the beautiful, has qualities of grandeur, greatness, fear, the dynamic, the transporting and the awe-inspiring (Eco 2004: 278-297).
2. A great number of tulip books were produced during the "tulip mania" period. Essentially,

these books were collections of botanical studies of tulips that acted as inventories. One type of compendium, the *florilegium*, was essentially a catalogue commissioned by wealthy aficionados who wanted a permanent record of the valuable flowers that spring brought to their gardens (Donzel, 1997:49).

3. This may have resulted from the enormous cost of certain flowers. According to Moore and Garibaldi (2003:12), the Dutch master of flower painting, Jan van Huysum, was usually paid about 5000 guilders for a painting. Yet, a single bulb of the tulip *Admiral Liefkens* cost 4400 guilders at an auction in Alkmaar on 5 February 1637
4. See Greenberg, C. 1986. *The collected essays and criticism, Volume 1: perceptions and judgements: 1939-1944*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, for more on the visual effects and the retreat from 'beauty' in modernist art.
5. It is of interest that *Poppy* was perceived as so erotic that the *Washington Project for the Arts* displayed it alongside the graphic X, Y and Z portfolios that consist of Mapplethorpe's famous photographs of explicit homo-erotic images (Levinson, 1990).

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