At the Edge Between Beauty and Decay

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Writing in his failed *Herball* of 1597, John Gerard - English surgeon and master of flower knowledge; cataloguer of factual and fanciful aspects of plant like; superintendent of gardens for Lord Burghley, Elizabethan chief secretary of state - urged the countrymen of his time and others of ripe wit and deep judgment thereafter to ponder the question: *Who would look dangerously up at Planets that might look safely down at Plants?*

Now, living in an age which has virtually cultured extraplanetary adventures and human yearning for the extraterrestrial, photographer Chris Enos is obsessively attentive to Earth's botanic forms. She admits in her pictures not the ingratiating bloom of prime of such forms, but stages of their demise. For several years the major concentration of her photography has been to portray individual specimens of fruits, vegetables, and flowers originally obtained, fresh or failing, from open-air or wholesale markets. Such specimens either were or became what she identifies as her primary subject matter: *dying plant life*. Captured on dimensionally varied Polaroid Polacolor and SX-70 films, her subjects are each pictorially reconfigured in a unique photographic image, revealed as light-obtained, full-colored selectively detailed stages in the disintegration of a natural form. Such particularized images complement Eno's earlier black and white photographs of wild grasses, weeds, and vines -- referred to by her as *plant life survivors* -- that once greened the sour grit of construction sites near her studio building, devoured chain link fences around such sites, and still maintain miraculously tenacious presence in the concrete urban setting in which her life and work continues to evolve.

In a 1980 profile by Linda Matchen, correspondent for the *Boston Globe*, Chris Enos stated that she was concerned with photographing a series of flowers, *flowers at the edge of decay*. She spoke of the disturbing but also sensuous nature of her subjects, of how her photographs have engendered within her a new awareness of plant life as metaphor, In time her chosen subjects seemed to echo, to signal other aspects of life, such as the way society values people in their prime, how signs of degeneration, of aging, are demeaned or denied. Enos today reiterates her belief that her work is *about aging*, about enabling sight of and insight into the pathos as well as the loveliness of deteriorating natural forms. Through her photographic images she seeks to remind others of the need to sense and to respect the inherent *beauty in decay*.

The recent floral images by Enos neither betray the democratic prettiness nor sponsor the short-term sentimentalities of typical flower photographs, those popularly revered pictorial accomplishments displayed in family albums and camera club salons: no obligatory Xmas poinsettias; no Easter lilies, their numinous iconic identity aborted by accompanying plastic crosses and unmercifully cute bunnies and chicks; no prom-time chrysanthemum-gardenia-sweetheart rose-orchid corsages; no graduation-time long-stemmed carnations or red roses noddingly lost in an overabundance of asparagus fern; no hyper-arranged bouquets in distracting vases. The flowers traced

photographically by Enos may be similar, but they are defined with a different sentiment in mind.

Enos's flowers are not intended to serve as memorials for analysis by botanist or naturalist; nor to figure as categorical plant life studies for the painter or draftsman, as so often were the images of flowers and leaves defined in salted paper and albumen prints by such nineteenth-century photographers as William Henry Fox Talbot or Adolphe Braun. Neither do her images seem akin to quiet or to to fantastically sumptuous examples of prearranged nature as evidenced in still-life photographs by early photographers such as Hippolyte Bayard, Henry Le Secq, or Roger Fenton. She denies an interest in the dry aims of scientific photography; she aims toward neither the conventionally artistic nor the glorification of the traditionally tutored arrangement of flowers to imply proprietary cultivation and control of nature.

One cannot help but sense some affinity, even if it's an indirect linkage, between Enos's pictorial art and that of certain progenitors of modernist photography. Consdier for example, Edward Steichen's photographs of apples and pears, photographs defined in 1921: the brobdingnagian size of the fruits as well as the waxing and waning detail on their surfaces enhanced by a subtly fluctuating chiaroscuro. Compare Edward Weston's radical visual cuttings from the forms of vegetables, the fragments on the picture plane denying recessive space, seeming to extend toward completeness beyond the photograph's framing edge. There are affinities with such photographs in the work by Enos, but little of idealizing form, and little interest in the quintessentially of a subject or in its abstraction.

Of greater relevance as archetypes for Eno's photographs are those seventeenth- and eighteenth- century flower and fruit pieces painted on panel or canvas by the great Netherlandish still-life painters. Such paintings, defining the extravagant blow of asymmetrically arranged flowers, the calligraphy of stems and tendrils, the lively acrobatics of foliage, the spontaneity of efflorescent nature, are proper preludes to the slowly writing, curling, twisting, drooping energies signaled in the dying plant life in the Enos photographs. It is in such paintings that one also discovers the portrayal of lush plant life that never denies the capacity of a sagged bloom, a fallen petal, a dried-up leaf, a shattered nut to moralizingly bring to mind the transience of all earthly things, to remind of the potentiality of decay amid plump fruits and burgeoning flowers. Paint, in another time, was manipulated to offer stunningly exquisite *tromp l'oeil* counterfeits of flowers at the edge between beauty and decay. Light reflecting from her chosen subjects and the light-sensitive media utilized by Enos have enabled specimens of dying nature to become transmuted into individuated pictorial arrests, rising from the ivory-surfaced print to confirm the authenticity of a stage in the biophysical cycle of life.

Considering Enos's photographically rendered rose, one can immediately recognize that in its original state as a specimen of dying plant life it would have had no potential to appear as it does in its scaled-up reconfirmation by light. Magnified ten times its original size by the Polaroid 20 x 24 Land Camera, the shriveling plant life becomes a vast subject for human eyes now become lilliputian sensors. The eyes explore the baroque forms and multitudinous details of the rose. They *see* the *presence* of aging that transmutes the base flower into an art of meaning.

Each of Enos's photographs ultimately serves as a sign *of*, not *about*, aging. Each is an *itself-reflexive* account of the tentativeness of matter. Each photograph by her of adding flower defines a stage in at the natural order of life, an order that needs to be psychically, aesthetically valued. Each photograph also serves to suggest a potential for the gross decay of all things when dangerously human, not perfectly natural, disordering of matter occurs or prevails.