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Evening Glories: Robert Turney's Moonflower Photographs

Steve Rachman

Robert J. Turney's moonflower studies are the photographic harvest of three years worth of summer evenings in East Lansing, Michigan. In the spring, Turney sowed his seeds in three large flowerpots (he is a casually accomplished gardener) and let the twining vines grow. Come July and August, the plants would blossom as the sun went down and the photographer would move his pots of moonflowers into his driveway, set up his lighting (two no-nonsense 500-watt quartz construction lamps), and get his Schneider 355mm *f*/9 G-Claron lens into position. In darkness, Turney shot them: singly, in pairs and groups, in bud stage or various phases of blossoming, and in full, trumpeting bloom. From 1999-2001, in this seasonal way, Turney pursued the flowers, under clouds, under stars, under the glowing coal of his cigarette. He used all the elements of light and dark, testing each photographic idea as it occurred to him, printing them, scrutinizing the results under the ground glass until his lens had nothing new to show him and he knew that he was done.

He winnowed the results to thirteen images, six of which have been selected and reformatted for presentation here. They are not especially enlarged, Turney assures me, but it would be easy enough to mistake them for gross enlargements. Taken from eighteen inches away and printed in a generous 13"x 10" format, the blossom in, say, Moonflower #1 is larger than a splayed hand. One feels slightly miniaturized before the magnified beauty of these flowers. It is subtle because one does not readily perceive it as magnification but as clarification. Each phase of the opening flower appears with the insight of fresh observation. One finds here a closed umbrella, there, a soft, almost molten pinwheel of petals, or an origami ear trumpet. Each marbled curl and vein in the heart-shaped leaves, each papery crease of a bud, each horned serif and curlicue at the tips of the white petals is on display

with a kind of tactile immediacy. There is a pleasing synesthesia of vision and touch here; every texture is made visible.

This is the case not only because the flowers are in bloom, but the plants are alive. In the alfresco studio of the driveway, the pots gave the photographer the freedom and flexibility to arrange and rearrange the living flowers—uncut and un-vased. Monet had to go into his gardens at Giverny to paint his lilies; Weston had to pick his pepper before he photographed it, but Turney's is a harvest of unpicked blossoms. A moveable garden opens up possibilities of balletic arrangement without destroying or delimiting the plant's existence, establishing working and living relationships among the photographer, camera, and subject. In this way the aura of the living plant is recorded and at the same time set free. Through the deep shadows and simple, strategic lighting, the photographic illusionist works his understated magic, the pale moonflowers are liberated from their root-bound condition and begin to swim, like the moon itself, in the velvet darkness.

It would be easy to misconstrue Turney's moonflowers as conventionally romantic. Summer nights, flowers, moons, and beauty suggest the props of romance, but they are not seeking sentimental associations. If they are romantic at all then they refer to the romance of ordinary beauty, sensuality, and sex. The beauty one finds in the back yard, in the middle of Michigan. In *Moonflower #5*, an insect or moth of some kind clings to the underside of a leaf; in another image (not shown here), a mosquito appears to be siphoning off a stamen. Small prosaic detail sits quietly hiding in plain view amid the evening luster. Romance would exaggerate the inconsistency between the sensual blossom and insect life, but nothing in these pictures calls for that, they are part of the life of the garden. "If one decides upon the medium of photography, why attempt to soar in the realm of imagination?" asked Imogen Cunningham, whose studies of magnolias from the 1920s are Turney's closest photographic cousins. "There are plenty of the subtleties of life right on earth, which need delicate interpretation." The felt need of delicate interpretation always urges the photographer to depress the shutter. In John Berger's words, a photograph always claims "that it is worth recording this particular event or this particular object has been seen." In the grandest philosophical terms, "Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality."¹ So much of what counts today as important photography has a strong sociological bent to it. Perhaps the legacy of the photographic documentary tradition has created a bias toward a sociological aesthetic, especially as painting has grown more and more conventionally abstract (or, paradoxically, photo-realist) in

the last century. So many important American photographers of the last hundred or so years have forged an aesthetic out of the power of photography to capture new social realities, from the city to poverty, to labor, to war: Jacob Riis, Paul Strand, Lewis Hine, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Robert Capa. In recent years, photo-portraiture has made the loudest claims. From Diane Arbus to Sally Mann, Richard Avedon to Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin to Cindy Sherman, the photograph becomes a vehicle of a social vision that, while important, has obscured the other genres vitally relevant to photography. Also, the ease and proliferation of digital imaging has obscured the subtleties and complexities of analog photography. The camera as an instrument of vision of ordinary objects, of the beautiful, of the still life, of the arrangement in black, white, and gray, has tended to be relegated to the past, to the falsifications of pictorialism, to the aestheticism of the early Alfred Steiglitz and the Photo-Secessionist of the turn-of-the-20th century, and the modernism of Edward Weston and Cunningham and Group f/64.

At this juncture in the history of art, photography, and image-making, what could be more difficult to assess than the aesthetic status of the serious flower photograph? When one looks at photographs of flowers, especially ones of exacting seriousness like those of Robert Turney, many might be prompted to wonder: Beautiful, sure, but important? The vase of flowers has been forever linked to the decorative, a routine part of the backdrop of the conventional photographic portrait along with velvet curtain and the Greek pedestal. Like the bowl of fruit, the flower study, has always been a commonplace still-life subject, unavoidably evocative of the atelier and easel, or the art class assignment. The problem is compounded by the mass of literary and artistic history that has taken up flowers as its subject. Van Gogh had his sunflowers, Monet his lilies, and why confine ourselves to the famous? Old Quost had his roses and Jeanine his peonies. In poetry, Wordsworth had his daffodils and Plath her tulips.

In the history of photography, the flower photograph can hardly be avoided. One would have to ignore the legions of amateur and professional bouquets that filled the pages of Henry Peach Robinson's *Pictorial Photography*. One would have to ignore the botanical studies of Anna Atkins in the 1850s who made cyanotype impressions of flora, and Adolphe Braun's floral arrangements from the same decade, not to mention notable studies like Henry Troth's "Tulip Poplar" (ca. 1900), and the work of Heinrich Kühn and Albert Renger-Patzsch. Turney's approach to moonflowers resembles that of Imogen Cunningham's magnificent magnolias and Georgia O'Keefe's

photographically-influenced, oversized paintings of trumpet flowers: close-ups on single blooms or small groups of blossoms—perhaps the only style of serious flower photography that still has wide currency.

What makes the genre challenging, then, is its over-determined conventions. Caught between the clichés of pictorialism and the clichés of modernism, what is the photographer to do? What does it mean for Robert Turney to produce these photographs now? In the moonflower studies it became the photographer's task to restore what Walter Benjamin called "aura" to the floral portrait. This is perhaps no more or less than any successful artist might achieve in a given work. Benjamin describes photographic aura as "a strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand. On a summer noon, resting, to follow the line of a mountain range on the horizon or a twig which throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or hour begins to be a part of its appearance—that is to breathe the aura of those mountains, that twig."² Turney has captured the aura of the moonflower, that web of time and distance in which night and moonlight are parts of the flower's appearance. We scarcely know what it means to look at flowers anymore, no less to look at photographs of them, and so Turney freshens them for us by incorporating the night into what they are.

While his delicate buds and blossoms resemble Cunningham's magnolias, and for that matter, O'Keefe's, significant differences emerge. While aware of these precursors, no hint of belatedness lingers about Turney's images or any particular anxiety of influence. They are first and foremost expressions of his own life as a photographer, as a patient night owl in love with quiet evenings, as a gardener and an artist transforming and cultivating the field he has chosen. There will always be things calling out for, as Cunningham says, "delicate interpretation." He is not an impersonator and his moonflowers are not merely homages to modernist photography. Cunningham's images are forever bound up in the eroticism that preoccupied the modernists as they sought to counter the aesthetic pruderies of their own era. Turney's are quietly, inevitably erotic but no longer need to be concerned with prudery, and concern themselves with an on-going relationship to plant life and to what photographic vision can provide but we seldom trouble ourselves to see. Cunningham picked her flowers and worked her magic in the studio; Turney photographed his at night, outside. Turney has struck an elegant compromise between the needs of living plants and the exigencies of photographing them, weaving in this process a different web of distance and time, forging a quietly different relation to his subject.

For years, Turney has made portraits of authors, and he suggested to me that the great trouble with portraits (this, he said, was especially true of authors but may apply to anyone) is that nobody ever likes the way they look. Humans, it seems, want the camera to lie, a little, enough. But flowers seldom complain. One secret of the moonflower photos lies in that Turney has photographed flowers as if they were movie stars from the 1930s and 40s. Think of Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Martha Graham rendered by Edward Steichen or Gloria Swanson by Nickolas Muray. Think of Peter Lorre lit from below. In Turney's hands moonflowers become heavenly bodies, achieving a kind of domestic glamour not associated with quiet Midwestern communities. Even in excerpt, a viewer can appreciate the grammar of Turney's sequence. The diagonal arrangement of Moonflower #1 moving from bottom left to top right is a profile; we see the moonflower's good side. In #2, we see a pair of blossoms wonderfully dynamic, one dilated and the other closed but about to open with the imminence of an organ's valves. As the eye travels from bottom right to left, the edges of leaves in the foreground appear strikingly crisp and gray, but in the background they become wispy curls of smoke. In a single image, the genre has subtly shifted from still-life to narrative. #3 takes us further into the realms of dilation. A ballet of three blossoms virtually crowds out the darkness. They are delicately lit from behind and below. The petals, full-blown, bend with a lover's touch, their translucent flesh as delicate as the skin of a pale wrist. #4 pulls back from this intimacy. Four blossoms form a stately, almost formal arrangement. The moonflowers have recomposed themselves as a blaring horn section, stalk and pollen sacs on display, white trumpets heralding the black night. Moonflower #5 returns to the profile of #1 but with less intimacy, surrounded by leaves and the gray cartouches of buds, one of these—a night or two away from opening—looks like a hand-rolled cigarette. Moonflower #6 shows two blossoms in three-quarter profile downstage with four buds surrounding them like back-up singers. The sequence goes on charting the course of a relationship or a series of relationships: enormous, almost phallic trumpet blossoms crossed like swords or the necks of swans; two blossoms full and perfectly centered, like two lovers who, having reached some equilibrium, have settled into friendship. There is one that Turney doesn't particularly care for (because the blossom appears more like a pansy than a moonflower) but might just as easily serve as an emblem of the study. It consists of a full frontal blossom. It is the moon almost full but for a petal edge bending into a deep shadow, the moon become a flower, a flower become the moon.

Sometimes when a photograph or more generally a work of art powerfully reveals the subtleties of ordinary objects and organic forms, as in Weston's pepper, the memorializing power of that vision has a tendency to confer special iconic status. The object is of course no more or less extraordinary than the vision that revealed it. It would be a mistake to think of the moonflower, after viewing Turney's photos, as some kind of vegetal may-fly. It is not a night-blooming cereus. It is neither rare nor poignantly ephemeral. It is a common plant, producing blossoms in abundance that open and stay open until they drop. The night blooming is simply part of its circadian rhythm; it is a morning glory that has reversed it hours, and therefore, as the old name has it, an evening glory.

Turney's photography—well, all photography, really—like his camera subjects, is a nocturnal form. A photograph begins in the dark chamber of the photographer's mind. By any possible source—a flash of inspiration, the glow of an abiding vision, the clear light of day, or a full moon—light enters the shuttered mind. Something clicks. Photons darken a silver nitrate emulsion in the same way they torque the cones and rods, firing the neurotransmitters, impressing retinal images upon consciousness. Or, often as not, the process flows in reverse. Consciousness creates an image that pleases the retina, or the mind's eye, and the camera seeks to record what the mind has seen. In a darkroom, by the dim illumination of a safe light, a photograph blooms in the chemical bath, like a moonflower.

Notes

1. Imogene Cunningham quoted in *Photography from 1839 to Today: George Eastman House, Rochester, NY* (Köln: Taschen, 2000): 503. John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph" in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980): 292, 294.
2. Trachtenberg, 209.

