

THOMAS FLECHTNER  
“RADIANT VITALITY”  
Cherry Smyth

**“Incorporated in a radiant vitality:  
you want more than that?”<sup>1</sup>**

Thomas Flechtner’s new work, *Bloom*, 2001–2006, signals a remarkable transition from his previous series, *Snow*, 1996–2001. In *Snow*, Flechtner’s camera traces barren, unpeopled walks and passes through sunless Alpine landscapes, the deserted streets of a snow-shaped Swiss town, and the vast, subdued wastelands of frozen sea in Greenland and Iceland. If a subtle bluish grey informed these images, in *Bloom* Flechtner moves from the vernal pink and white of *Sakura* (cherry blossoms) in Japan to the lush verdancy of the Kerala forest in *Spice Garden*; from the synthetic landscapes in *Sites*, which include a yew tree farm in the Netherlands and a Portuguese grass farm, to the loud purple, pinks, and reds of his own summer gardens in central France and in Switzerland in *Blumen*. This radical shift in palette from the tonal neutrality of a largely monochrome world to an exaltation in colour, is as startling a change in direction as Post-Impressionism clearly was to early 20th century Europe. The heat is on.

While a linear minimalism defined many of the earlier photographs, this latest series celebrates a profusion of marks that take the eye on a dance over and through the image. Stillness determined the images in *Snow*, while movement characterizes *Bloom*. Few of his works make the location specific: Flechtner is more interested in the metaphorical space where wilderness meets landscape, where landscape meets garden or buildings. Snow, like vegetation can cross these boundaries more easily than human beings can. In both series, Flechtner enjoys de-familiarizing the familiar—how we perceive and represent snow and flowers.

Perhaps you could say that the *Snow* images look like the result of walking (or skiing) over vast swathes of mountain, and this new series, the result of standing—in fields, gardens, and parks. The quiet majesty of the snowscapes produced the silent, mid-opening awe one gets before a Robert Ryman white painting, but rarely is one’s breath so stopped as by the intense landscapes of *Sites*, 2006, in which fields of pink, white, and cerise phlox burst forth with dazzling vibrancy. Here is the William Eggleston of the natural world.

At first you wonder what this mad fur spreading on the skin of the earth could possibly be. It looks like a chemically induced trip, a lethal lichen, over-fertilized and throbbing under the insouciant birch trees. It’s not a nature we know. It’s an alien, hybrid cousin we’ve created through agribusiness and the demand for the perennially decorative. It immediately shakes up our romantic, traditional notions by seducing us with color and then repelling us with market forces. We come to realize how unnatural most of what we love as nature is.

If the snowscapes exist mostly independently of our pleasure, the scenes in *Bloom* are dependent on it. Apart from the

forests of Kerala, these trees and flowers and grasses are produced to give us visual joy. It’s as though Flechtner has eschewed the rigorously spare vision of artists like Agnes Martin, an American painter who investigated the repetitive straight line on a pale ground, in favour of what William Blake called the beauty of exuberance, making me think of a New York painter like Cecily Brown. He’s developed from the spare cool aesthetic of photographers like Hiroshi Sugimoto to the sensual, inviting worlds of installation artists like Wolfgang Laib. Did he consciously forego the seclusion of place and aesthetic, or did his absorption in that barrenness allow a renewed delight in the superabundance of color and multiplicity of form?

“I grew into this shift. Some of the photographs I’d taken on the frozen sea in Greenland and Iceland were really close to what I was looking for—the emptiness of space, no horizon. I never thought I could take such a direction from the *frozen* period of my life to this abundance. It seems that it is also part of me. Before this work I was somehow convinced that this very reduced landscape in terms of color and space was me. Then suddenly I started to discover the other voices, pushing towards light and color.”

There’s also what seems to be a moral change in direction from one series to the other. The *Snow* series suggested abstinence, a kind of chosen seclusion, and even though there are no more people in the second series, there is a sense of inclusion and of consumption. If, for example, you look at images such as *Cufercal*, 2000, *Val Piora*, 2001 or *Pascumin*, 2001, there is an insistence on the emptying out of landscape until only regular ski-trails are left marking their rhythm on the bare canvas of snow. The mountain covered in snow, in some images, is abstractly offered as rippling water, or as a seashore lined by tidal marks. In *Gletsch*, 2000, the roads and passes are virtually snow-bound and stop and start like charcoal across the image, while the trees stand like vertical graphite lines in a Henri Michaux drawing. There is a beautiful frailty, a hesitancy of mark and an indeterminate scale and sense of place.

Snow remodels landscape, simplifying and nullifying. It increases the intensity of intimacy of the houses and hotels photographed under a lip of snow in Flechtner’s images. Amidst catastrophic climate change, which has given us melting ice caps in the Arctic and Antarctic, a winter of snowless Alps, and the havoc of floods and hurricanes, snowscapes are increasingly read as laments for a landscape that is passing. These images inevitably carry a certain awareness of snow’s pristine presence, its ability to bestow a transforming innocence on the most grubby town or disconsolate piece of waste ground.

Yet Flechtner never sentimentalizes his subject—the properties of snow. Instead he sees it as a blank surface he can make marks on, or a lumpen ready-made in sludgy brown

at the side of the road, or a smooth or curved outline softening a brutalist concrete building—like two diverse materials bumping up against each other in a sculpture. He's more interested in negotiating the frontier between the real and the unreal, the natural and the man-made, in works that ask that we think of how we use the word *nature* and how we seek the unspoiled, then despoil it in the name of love. There are also formal concerns, like how the eye reaches for the representational in an image to anchor meaning and sense in the abstract: the roadside poles that mark the height of the snowdrifts, the line that delineates horizon.

These concerns recur in the recent work. The idea of frontier or threshold is common to both sets of work. In the *Snow* images, the way forward is often blocked by a drift of snow across an entrance or piling into the mouth of a tunnel, while in the new series, the impasse is created by an abundance of growth. We are, for instance, taken within the branches of the flowering cherry blossom, surrounded by its flux as if sight becomes scent, and focus, like smell, evaporates as the breeze takes it. The use of a lightbox and the life-size scale enhances the images' immediacy. As with the forested green of *Spice Garden*, there is no way through: the pristine surface of snow has now become the resisting density of undergrowth, banana trees, ferns, and tree trunks. Only light and air transmit.

With the *Blumen* series, 2006, the unfocused beauty of the close-up clusters of flowers impinges on us, almost claustrophobically. Using a 2–3 minute timelapse, Flechtner freezes and magnifies their small movements. This required a shift in attitude to his process:

“Before *Bloom*, my photographs were very controlled. I worked—and still do—in a large 5×4 format, which let me work very precisely. Then step-by-step I gave up a certain control. It started with the cherry blossoms, which I exposed for a long time and if there was a breeze, or change in energy, it was out of my control. It's much more unpredictable.”

*Blumen*, with their sundaze of brilliant colors and blurred petals set deep inside a Plexiglas frame, as if within amber, become photographs of a memory of flowers. They are non-specific and yet we know what they are. The image exists beyond the individual name, the distinct shape of the petals. They could be sweet peas, roses, pansies, busy lizzies. At their center is a white flare, a hole outlined in color, a gap to sky or space, which to me suggests the winter when the bloom will not be there, the image of what was there before and what will exist again, as if the flowers move in and out of time, their seasonal appearance and withering present in the same image. As Thomas Clark, a poet and land artist based in Scotland, writes about a field of flowering flax: “The color is unstable, weightless, detached from form, a plenitude without presence, not anything you could touch.”<sup>2</sup>

If the first series confirms the blanking seduction of snow, this series makes us question why we find flowers beautiful, why we labor for hours to nourish them and how they teach us an intimate co-dependence. Gardening has become a private way of retaining some sort of link with the seasonal cycles, of getting to know a small piece of earth like you know a lover's body. The garden itself blurs the line between art and nature and Flechtner makes light itself bloom, breaking our gaze, unsettling the color, shifting attention. Isn't the space and air around a flower as important as the flower itself? Its beauty depends on the grace and delicate elegance with which it hangs in space on the thin rod of green. There is nothing lyrical in a dry, pressed flower. Is the white space in the image a white that is all the colours of the flowers or none? Is this the infinity in a flower that Blake once saw, the opening of the sky of the mind glimpsed then lost in the next instant?<sup>3</sup>

For me, this is the same quest for emptiness found in the earlier series. Can we immerse ourselves in saturated color and presence as fully as we can in the monochromatic spaces of absence? Here, Flechtner seems to be asking how we find seclusion in the thrust and fury of everyday life, how to locate quietness in the bustle of the cultivated, domesticated world whose beauty comes already preconceived and overdetermined. The palette of the *Blumen* recalls the intense indigo, reds, and oranges in the cityscape windows of an apartment block at dusk in the *La Chaux de Fonds* series, where the artist instilled a painterly beauty in a built-up urban setting.

Once images of the garden signified prelapsarian bliss, a longing for an idealized past. Still life paintings of flowers began to flourish in the 17th century Netherlands and were bought to celebrate luxury and display in a time when flowers were fixed to seasonal cycles and were absent for much of the year. The paintings evoked the easy bond between man and nature, nature's plenty and man's grateful harvest.

But Flechtner's natural world in his *Sites* series of images is commodified and sectioned off for profit. The old distinction between nature and culture is no longer relevant. The phlox are not found, occasionally, in a woodland, but grown in boxed grids in cramped flower farms or in contrived parks; *forest* has now become regulated rows of pruned and tailored yew trees ready for transplantation to another clime; grass is laid to be cut in strips and rolled for the perfect lawn within a tidy fence somewhere else. This bleak and bold wide-angled image showing the shorn earth, the carpet-like strips of grass, and the apparatus of pesticide spraying, comments on the outstripping of the world's natural resources and the dangerous severing of the links between ourselves and the agrarian cycles. The overproduction of phlox for the market becomes garish, excessive, damaging, creating an estranging landscape that makes strange our idea of a field, a harvest, just as the toxic yellow

fields of rapeseed have done in Southern England. It also reminds us that our idea of landscape itself is cultivated. Interestingly, in the Middle Ages *landschaft* (Flechtner's working title for this series) was the first form of the word *landscape*, and meant a collection of dwellings built within an area of cultivated land that, in turn, is surrounded by an unknown—and unknowable wilderness. Landscape is therefore something that has been acted upon or represented by mankind. Does landscape cease to exist if there is no one to witness it?

The sumptuous images of the cherry blossom, the *Sakura*, seem to hang in the balance between an overdetermined beauty and agribusiness destructiveness. These landscape shots become almost like portraits of a beautiful, almost translucent human form: they are palpably corporeal, unafraid of the suspicion of beauty. Part of an ancient Japanese cultural and spiritual tradition, blossom-watching (*hanami*) is a huge public event when families and friends visit shrines, temples, and parks each spring to have their photographs taken under the sakura. Some varieties bloom and scatter within a week. The transience of their countless petals measures man's fleeting bodily existence and Buddhist sages and poets through the ages have travelled to witness their brilliant brevity.

"I was surprised how deeply the sakura effects Japanese culture. It's like a pilgrimage to these places to see a special tree or a particular park. There was one place I visited which is regarded as one of the most well-known parks. When I arrived they said it had 100% full blossom. But that night there was a thunderstorm and the next day when I'd planned to shoot, half the blossoms were on the ground. It's too ephemeral to catch. I experienced it for a couple of hours and then it was over—come back next year. It's very precious in that moment."

The way Flechtner depicts the sakura here they seem to dissolve and reform in space and scale before our eyes. He excels in capturing the foaming frothiness of the petal blossoms, famously described in a 12th century poem by Saigyō.

"Buried in the waves  
So that it seems  
Fishermen's boats are sailing  
Over the waves of blossoms—  
A cherry tree at Kisagata."<sup>4</sup>

His defocused image creates waterfalls of movement, as though you could almost feel the spray on your face. It's again his evocation of synesthesia which appeals—sight becoming scent, color becoming touch, rendering his work utterly fresh and intoxicating. It's impossible to look at these images and not feel a soaring happiness, the kind that comes from feeling full and right in the world with nothing in your hands, your pockets empty.

The blurred blossom nearest to us seems to be already disintegrating, to hover between being and nothingness, so that we shift our focus to and fro from this scumbled, dizzying abstraction to the contrastingly dark armature of the branches within, just as visitors to the sakura have done for centuries. Here the branches echo the dark trails made in the snow of the earlier work, the blossoms recalling the sense of disembodied space in the ice water of Greenland and Iceland.

"Above in the thickness of the branches, between the gaps of sky and the crossroads of green, the afternoon battles with transparent swords. I step on newly rained earth, the smells sharp, the grass vivid. Silence erects and questions me. But I move forward, and plant myself in the centre of my memory. I breathe deeply this air charged with things to come."<sup>5</sup>

Although initially, the two bodies of Flechtner's work seem in sharp formal and narrative contrast with one another, there are several connecting and intersecting themes and concerns that link them: the sacredness of the frontier or threshold, the vulnerability of the natural world, and the fear that we are slipping out of balance so that the idea of heaven that we strive for is always already destroyed.

Flechtner's ability to reframe images of snow and flowers without recourse to sentimentality and to celebrate what cannot be forced—the sakura, the mountain passes, the fall of dusk—is what we retain, and a sense of innermost space that is secret and silent. The consecration and dignity of the places where we interact with the earth exude from these images. They have something to tell us. We know a change in human attitudes is necessary to save the natural world. Science alone cannot do it. We need poetry and art to reshape an imagination that can no longer be based on the stability of nature. The lurking fear of what may come is edged with a nervous hope that the energy Flechtner sees, feels, and cherishes in trees and flowers and the earth itself will somehow exceed our greed.

All of the artist's quotes are taken from an interview with the author January 23, 2007

1 Mark Doty from *The Pink Poppy* in *School of the Arts*, Cape, London, 2005  
2 Thomas Clark, *Distance and Proximity*, Pocketbooks, Edinburgh, 2000, p.67

3 William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence* begins *To see a World in a grain of sand/And a heaven in a Wild flower,/Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour.*

4 Saigyō, quoted in Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Penguin, London, 1966, p. 164

5 Octavio Paz, Garden and Child, from *Selected Poems*, Penguin, London, 1979

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