

Flowers, Failure, and Fetishizing the Other

Saeid Janaati in conversation with Sean J Patrick Carney, 2020

SJPC: Most of your photographic work up until this point has felt like an itinerant reframing of what's *already there*—an interesting bit of architecture; a snapshot of unstaged, everyday homegoods; a city street at dusk. But this recent body of work exists in stark contrast. Tell me the story of how you ended up doing studio-based floral photography.

SJ: It began this past summer in Berlin. My friend and I found two large boxes abandoned on the street, each packed with color photographic slides. We waited, then waited some more, but no one came around to claim them. Eventually, we carried the boxes to my friend's apartment and dug into them. There were many slides, neatly organized by image category, date, and location. Many of the images depicted flowers. I personally like flowers—most people do, I think. As I started to imagine this unknown photographer dedicating their career to obsessively documenting flowers, I was surprised to find myself thinking: *what a great idea, what an intriguing career!* Flowers, a kind of definition of beauty itself. *I'll also photograph flowers.* It would at the very least be therapeutic.

Beauty means many things to many people. As an artist, how are flowers a definition of beauty to you?

In the simplest of terms, I think flowers are beautiful by themselves—just their appearance. I find myself fascinated by their textures and shapes, how unique and delicate they are, and of course, their palettes of color. People have long admired flowers and also used them to bring beauty into our lived environments. This history has a significant impact on our present perceptions of flowers. Imagine a landscape filled with flowers. What word might we naturally use to describe that scene? Wouldn't most agree that it is beautiful?

Yes, I suppose most likely would. So what was it about these particular found photographic slides that felt beautiful? Were the photos from nature, or produced in a studio?

Those slides of flowers—secured and dated, one by one, in plastic slide mounts—were taken mostly in nature, but also in city parks and even the small backyard of a home. They were organized chronologically, most dated between 1990 and 2000. This anonymous photographer had used a macro lens, giving us the impressions that they were quite serious about capturing each beautiful detail. In addition to the floral photography, there were some portraits of people, but also snapshots of people doing daily tasks, seemingly unaware of the camera. My friend and I were shocked, in a way. We felt as if we had stepped into someone else's life.

How did you start your own process of photographing flowers?

On an extremely hot day back in Texas, I took a city bus to a botanical garden to start collecting images of flowers. But while on the bus, I saw a middle-aged woman knock over a child with Downs syndrome as he tried to find an open seat. The other riders never even looked up from their smartphones. After arriving at the botanical garden, I removed my camera from its bag and tried to start taking beautiful photographs of flowers, but my mind was in an infinite loop of anxiety, replaying the scene on the bus over and over again. *When*, I wondered, *did our human interactions become so inhumane?* I couldn't stop asking myself how we'd grown so passive when it came to others and the world around us. I'd intended to produce some beautiful images that day, but I simply couldn't.

A day later, frustrated, I went to a Michaels of all places—the arts and crafts chain store—where I knew I could stock up on mass-produced plastic flowers. I brought them back to my studio at the University of

Texas, a space where I'd often edited my photos but rarely actually produced them. Using a black background, I put together a very simple studio staging and started shooting from above. Blasting the flash made the background even darker, creating the appearance that the flowers were floating.

Incorporating plastic flowers certainly changes the connotation of the imagery.

Of course. It made sense to me, as the process leading to this decision had been an experience of frustration and failure. Real flowers are beautiful, a part of nature; they feed from nature and are also food for nature. The plastic flowers are an opposite of that. They offer a fictional, unnatural beauty. Plastic flowers felt more reflective of my daily experiences, where human interactions are often quietly revealed to be so inhumane.

Were the images you made of the plastic flowers still beautiful, as you anticipated images of real ones ought to be?

Yes, I was actually amazed by the imagery. The colors, the compositions, and the lighting were surprisingly seductive and compelling. While shooting, I realized that I had complete control of my setting. I wanted the flowers to be exactly centered in the frame—I think having my subjects centered in the frame results from my being influenced by the aesthetics of the Dusseldorf School of Photography. I've always been very accurate in my framing, and I think it's clear in my previous work that I strongly consider my formal decisions. In the studio though, suddenly I had the chance to not just make my frame, but to control the lighting, to balance the color settings more intentionally. The final result, coming from my messy studio, was a simple, beautiful, colorful little flower on my screen. Producing the work actually felt joyful.

It sounds like you found a functional path forward, at least in the studio.

I initially thought that I had, but I was on such a high making these pieces that I neglected to consider an integral, elementary photographic detail: *depth of field*. The depth of field that I was using was too shallow, and this resulted in images where parts of the flowers looked crisp while other parts—the leaves, especially—were unsharp. I tried to convince myself that the shallowness had potential, that it might prove visually interesting. So I made multiple test prints. But through a series of studio visits with faculty, it became clear that the shallowness was distracting for viewers. It looked like an oversight, not an aesthetic choice. One faculty member noted that the shallow depth of field was limiting their very field of vision to the point where it was actually unclear that the flowers were fake. And since the slow reveal of the beautiful flowers being plastic was meant to reflect my daily experience, I knew that the photographs were unsuccessful.

Was it tempting to just scrap the plastic flowers and go back to the botanical garden? You could probably, very quickly, make some beautiful pictures of flowers with your usual point-and-shoot approach.

Momentarily, but I decided instead to just restage and reshoot everything, this time with a more considered depth of field. I really felt like I was onto something. In my studio, I set up more complex lighting, tweaked the staging, and employed a significantly deeper depth of field. The results of this do-over spoke for themselves! More details, sharper imagery. It was just more satisfying overall to spend time looking at the images!

Failure doesn't automatically equal wasted time.

Right—even though the results of my first attempt were disappointing, I really do not think I wasted any time. As I said before, the plastic flowers felt like a stand-in for certain types of everyday failures. So what harm could one more round of failure *really* do? This was a new experience for me, an unfamiliar approach to image-making. It is okay, I have come to understand, to take time experimenting and fumbling. Interestingly, this was the first time that I was in the middle of a project already thinking about what my next project should look like. That was a strange feeling for me—it still is, actually—and I wonder if this is because it was the first time that I'd pursued a photographic approach that contrasted the typical one that I'd grown comfortable with.

It's interesting that you mention that, because it does seem that your photography up until recently seemed more off-the-cuff and organic, more like collecting snapshots while you wandered in public—more of a habit than a practice, maybe?

This feels weird to admit, especially while finishing up my MFA, but it has been my working through this specific project where I believe I have actually gotten myself out of a photography habit and into a photography practice. Can I ask something though—since you brought up the distinction—what's the difference, for you, between a habit and a practice?

That's a good question. I consider an artistic habit to be like a lot of other habits—cracking one's knuckles, smoking, compulsively snacking—in that it's done without much thought. It's rooted not in criticality, but rather in the comfort of repetition and reward. An artist might naturally be good at something—shooting really nice architectural photos, for example—so they keep doing that same thing without stopping to consider what it *means*. That doesn't make the art bad, per se, but it doesn't inspire me as a viewer to want to spend much time with it. An artistic practice, by contrast, is intentional and reflective. It's self-critical and self-aware. And, as a viewer, I feel like it means the artist is open to taking risks.

And open to failure.

Exactly! An artist with a *practice* isn't as intimidated by potential outcomes, because they are critically invested in their processes. Even if their processes require meticulous structure or significant planning, an unexpected outcome is less of a disappointment because it can foment new avenues of inquiry.

That resonates with me. When I was in the middle of this project, already thinking about my next project, I was thinking about the process. How would these new studio-based approaches change the next project? The making is on my mind more than the product.

So let's talk about the processes in this recent work then. As I mentioned, it's a departure for you. Instead of seeking existing compositions out in the world, these images are constructed clinically. You've produced them using an exacting, rigid perspective. Were you feeling a need to be in control?

Well, when I began this project, I felt disconnected from the world around me and, admittedly, I also felt a little out of control. I was isolating myself. Those trips to the botanical garden and to buy plastic flowers were two of the few days I spent any real time outside of my home or studio, save for weekly trips to the grocery store—a funny thing to think about now that we are all instructed to stay at home to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

I was going to say...

But seriously, unlike the years leading up to that point, I just couldn't get excited about carrying my camera around in public. For someone who has always made work that way, it was a crisis. How could I continue making my art under these conditions? Then, I realized that actually producing the work in the studio might allow me a welcome sense of control over what I was looking at, what I was experiencing. With these plastic flowers, my music playlists, and my camera in the safe zone of the studio, I finally began to feel some authority.

Can you talk about your own relationship to authority?

Lately, it feels like the authority I find myself dealing with most frequently is cultural expectation.

Right, I know that you're apprehensive about overtly incorporating too much about your lived experience into your work, because you've expressed a healthy suspicion about how various identities are expected to *perform* in contemporary art. I want to respect that, but I also think that your perspective on these very topics is salient in relationship to your thesis work, and your future work. It feels relevant to articulate and document those concerns here.

Alright, let me explain a bit here. Like everyone else, I am living with my identity twenty-four hours a day. But here in the United States, my experience is different from the experience of someone who was born here. For example, a few months ago, my Uber driver asked me where I was from, and I lied. Not because I am a liar, or because I want to be someone other than myself, but because I am exhausted. Whether these conversations end up being judgmental or sympathetic, they exhaust me. I get nothing from them; they don't help me. Nothing is going to change because of one of those chats.

And I'm guessing these types of interactions manifest in your interactions with the art world, too?

Yes, my nonwestern artists friends and I have noticed this as we engage the western art world. There are many institutions, curators, and galleries who are eager to know more about an outsider's identity—particularly every exotic political, social, and cultural issue that comes with it. They seem to want their western gaze satisfied, and will pay to make it happen! Of course, different artist communities will have different attitudes about this; some artists are not bothered by it, and they can fulfill that need. That is up to them.

Consider that in the western art world, if I were to express my identity, life experience, and culture through my work, there is often an expectation that I'll be exotic and mysterious. Instead of being an innovative artist, I feel like I'm supposed to be some wonder from a far away land. I'm expected to bring something unfamiliar, something new, to my audience—who happen to live where the world's wealth is concentrated, and who can afford to buy art. I am always a traveler with tales to tell. Since I'm not local, I can't just talk about the weather; they've got enough people doing that already, so what do I have to add?

In your estimation, where do these expectations come from?

This is all residue from colonialism. There's a duality here, a judgment between immigrant artists, like me, and western artists born into wealthier, more technologically-advanced parts of the world. Western audiences allow their own artists to make work about whatever they want, but expect immigrant artists to bring curiosities and souvenirs from their far away lands. This is important in relationship to basic human concepts of beauty, love, pleasure, and so on, because the western world has its established definitions of these concepts and expect us immigrants to spice them up with our wonderful stories.

In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson states:

“The colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonized were at the margins. The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper ‘self’; native peoples were considered ‘other,’ different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human. This practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called *Othring*, and it divides the world between ‘us’ (the ‘civilized’) and ‘them’ (the ‘others or savages’).”

First as a human being, and then as an artist, I believe that I should be able to do whatever I want, provided that I’m not bothering anyone. Of course, I could do whatever I want, artistically, but can I survive professionally or financially doing that when the main expectation of artists from Third or Fourth World countries is to talk about fucked up things?

It seems like ninety percent of the studio visits I’ve had with artists or curators who don’t already know me begin with the same question: *Where are you from?* This usually happens after I pronounce my Arabic name, with what they think is a strange accent. Can you guess what feedback I get about my work from nearly every one of them?

What do they say?

They want to know more about Saeid! They want to know what Saeid’s experience living in the United States is like—as if I owe them a story of trauma for thinking about my work. It is frustrating to encounter these attitudes in the studio, to run into the same expectations over and over again. Instead of bending to their expectations, I have decided to pursue what is satisfying for me in the work. If they cannot be satisfied by the work, I’m no longer concerned with that. I’ll focus on getting better and better at creating the work that I want to create.

Whose work do you think achieves that kind of independent, self-driven satisfaction?

I have been thinking a lot about Farideh Lashaei, the Iranian abstract painter and writer.

What is it about Lashaei’s work that you’re feeling right now?

During the years of war between Iran and Iraq, she began to focus on painting flowers. While representational, these pieces managed to maintain her unique, abstracted style. I’ve been considering what it means to produce imagery of flowers in a violent political climate, and how that gesture could be read as an act of protest against the ugliness of the world. It might even be a sort of romantic protest, one that expresses a sincere desire for peace.

Do you consider this body of work to be an act of protest?

Yes, it is first a protest against current political situations. But then—and this just as important—against the expectations that people place on me because of who I am and where I am from. They want me to talk about my experience living in the United States. They want me to talk didactically about political issues, about my identity and my experience around it. Instead, I have decided to talk about flowers!

What have you been reading lately? And is it finding its way into the work?

I've been returning to Charles Bukowski.

I wasn't expecting that! Bukowski seems sort of incongruous with these floral photographs. He's brash and caustically masculine, whereas this work feels contemplative or even vulnerable. Is Bukowski's writing influencing the work?

The conceptual basis for my most recent images isn't really influenced by his writing—or his personality. And I don't usually discuss him in reference to my work, but you asked what I've been reading!

That's fair—everything an artist reads or looks at doesn't have to then appear in what they're producing at the time. What is it though that's brought you back to Bukowski, irrespective of your most recent photographs?

I think it's that I am attracted to the way that he lives inside his writing—I'd like to engage photography as intimately. Bukowski wakes up, goes to boring jobs, gets fired. Rarely rewarded, he gets drunk. He passes out. But still he writes and writes. He writes about the experience of being a person, of being a writer, a drunk, a real human being. His writing seems very honest to me, very clear, and very simple. Bukowski uses simple words, but not because he's got a limited vocabulary. I think he writes this way because life is so complex already. Why add to the confusion? The writing is attractive to me as I feel like it's clarifying things.

Perhaps Bukowski's style, but not necessarily his substance, has found its way into your work after all? For example, something I've personally responded to is how uncluttered and unfussy your photographic aesthetic is. The simplicity in your own images might be similarly clarifying about life in some way.

Yes, for sure! My images are intentionally simple and clear. A billboard is a billboard. An ATM is an ATM. As an image-maker, I am not looking for forms or compositions that are overly complex. I try to avoid overelaborate details. Now, this does not mean that I make the loaf ready for my viewer to digest (I love this Persian slang). I do not wish to overwhelm or confuse the viewer with visual complexities. I prefer to save that time, and let them contemplate my artistic and critical intentions in my photographs. My thinking is that I'd rather have viewers spending time on what's behind the image than on what's going on within the frame. I am still not sure if Bukowski's writings have such a direct influence on the way I actually produce my images, but they have definitely influenced how I talk and think about my work. And they've also had an impact on how I approach writing.

Lashaei's work, perhaps as a counterpoint to Bukowski, seems very much about a powerful femininity. You hinted at this in describing the paintings of flowers as a type of protest. What is your relationship to the feminine? And is it present in this work?

It is not surprising that you ask this question. Since the beginning of this project, I have had to consider the relationship between flowers and ideas about the feminine. And I know that some viewers might be interested to know: *what is Saeid's relationship to the feminine?* I'll just say that I think this is a personal question—not in a bad way—that you could ask anyone, regardless of whether or not they're making art.

In speaking about my work, I prefer to not give too much attention to categorizations like masculine or feminine. As an artist, I don't want to categorize my work as *this* or *that*. Some viewers have given me feedback that these photographs are highly erotic. That wasn't my intention while making them, but I understand, and more importantly accept, that someone might find them erotic or specifically feminine.

Certainly, flowers can signify femininity, romance, or celebration. But they're also what we lay upon caskets and gravestones. In looking at these works, what do you want me to think about?

Ideally, you'll think about love first—or at least desire. Flowers are beautiful, so I hope these works initially conjure pleasant associations of love or beauty. But as you spend some more time with the imagery, as you move closer to the photograph itself, you'll notice that the flowers are plastic, fake. Perhaps you'll feel a pang of disappointment because these plastic flowers will exist far longer than any person looking at the work; it'll likely take hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years for the subjects in these photographs to decompose. The black background might then start to produce specific associations with failure, sadness, or death.

But I already know I'm going to die. Why remind me?

Well, my intention is not to remind anyone about *their* death, specifically. But if the works conjure associations with death, in addition to associations with beauty or love, that works for me. Because I deal with the concept of death every day; we all do, in one way or another. So, I don't want the viewer to think that these works are only about death, because they are about the whole scope of everyday life. Yes, death is sometimes a part of that. I hope though that the project's title, *2020*, directs people towards their own experience within this specific calendar year, to what is happening to us collectively and as individuals. That will be a unique experience for each viewer, or at least that's my goal.

Why did you want to approach the writing component of your thesis project through conversation? Why not produce a specific, linear argument?

In the majority of my previous projects, there came a point where I thought deeply about writing as a component of the work. Sometimes, that meant including a piece of writing alongside the photographic imagery—something that added context to the works. Other times, I decided a writing component just wasn't going to work. But writing is always something I'm considering when making work.

For *2020*, having to write something was always a given; it is my MFA thesis, after all. For months, I have been thinking every day about not just the processes I'm using to make this work, but the feelings I'm having in relation to the imagery. I imagined my thinking filling up pages and pages, linking those feelings to the visual parts of the project. It would be confusing at times, but doable. Then my mind started to ask itself some tough questions. Why write something when you feel so isolated and so hopeless about your everyday existence? Why have this conversation with myself, when I've been having the same conversations over and over again? And so it dawned on me that with such an isolated studio project, I needed to engage with another human being. If somebody is asking me questions about the work, I'll have no excuse for hiding out, for not communicating what I'm feeling. To me, a conversation is simpler and more clarifying. The expectations are clear: You ask me something, and I respond.

Imagine a viewer who doesn't get to read this conversation. What text might you have in an exhibition setting to guide their reading of the work?

I've thought about this time and time again, about so many different texts that I might want on the wall to accompany these images. And I keep returning to the simplest version, the title: *2020*.

You mentioned that this was one of the first times that you found yourself thinking about future projects in the middle of a project. What do you imagine will come next?

I haven't decided upon the conceptual specifics for the next project, that will have to come later, but I have learned so much through experimenting with studio-based photography. I am confident that it will remain an integral component of what I now know is my photographic practice. In making *2020*, I have felt a personal peace. I've learned to take control of my processes, but I've also learned there's a freedom in uncertain outcomes. There's also, of course, a real sense of personal freedom in refusing to perform my identity according to Western art world expectations. Studio-based photography is something I'll be doing more of, and it's also going to influence how I approach what used to be my photography habit: documenting the world around me, as-is. It occurs to me that I don't have to compartmentalize those approaches. I can, and will, do both.