

Prologue-Flower Book

I have been a photographer for over 30 years and I had never taken pictures of flowers, mostly because I had always been a black and white photographer and photographing flowers in black and white seemed like an insult to the flowers. One of the reasons why I've always been a black and white photographer is that I'm red-green colorblind and I've found it difficult to print in the color darkroom. I noticed, though, that with Photoshop, I could color balance digital images in the computer much easier than in the color darkroom. Printing pictures with a digital printer was also a pleasant change from printing in the darkroom. I could do it in the comfort of my office, listening to music while breathing clean air, and it was a great relief to my back, which was starting to get seriously misaligned from bending over the darkroom sink. In the summer of 2004 I finally decided I had done more than my share of darkroom work and closed it down. I bought six or seven Photoshop books, a six-megapixel digital SLR and an Epson wide printer.

The first project I attempted to do with the digital camera was a disaster. I had a beautiful new cat, and I planned to take enough pictures of him until I could put together a cat book. In 1985 I published a book about the cat I lived with at that time. Ernie: A Photographer's Memoir has endured; it went through ten printings and two publishers, and the book still springs to life every Christmas. I started photographing Max and right away I knew I had a problem. In all the pictures his eyelids were half closed. Digital SLRs are fast, but in my camera there is still a 50 millisecond time lag, and Max, who hates the flash, is faster than that. I gave up on Max.

My second attempt to come up with a project proved more fruitful. I wanted to photograph something colorful — a major challenge in Columbus, Ohio. Carmen, my wife, who is an avid gardener, had a plot in our town's community garden, so I went down to her plot and started taking pictures of the flowers she had planted there. The neighboring plots also had some flowers, so I photographed those too. From the first flower pictures, I photographed with the camera very close to the ground, probably because I have a long history of photographing cats and dogs from a low vantage point, at their eye-level, and I'm used to looking at the world from down there. I liked how the low angle of view seemed to render flower pictures that were unfamiliar to my eyes, closer to the tradition of landscape photography than flower photography. I also found that stormy, foggy and overcast skies created great backdrops, like the backgrounds in a photographer's studio. Every picture was taken with a strobe, since the flowers were always backlit by the sky.

Almost all the pictures in this book were taken in two small gardens in Ohio and in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. All the pictures dated in 2004 were taken in the Grandview Ohio community garden, about one square block in size. Most people

planted vegetables but there were enough flowers, especially cosmos and morning glories that grew wild in September and October. I spent the following winter printing flower pictures. I showed them to a few people, got very positive responses and couldn't wait to photograph a second summer. I exhausted the Grandview community garden rather quickly the second time around, partly because Ohio had a terrible dry and hot summer and all the flowers in the community garden looked awful. I found a small, well-watered horticultural garden at the Ohio State University and photographed there. I liked how the flowers were more varied and exotic. In August I flew to San Francisco. I lived there in 1967, during the Summer of Love. I drove cross-country on a convertible, and the song always on the radio advised: "If you are going to San Francisco, make sure you wear flowers in your hair." I remembered well the flowers in Golden Gate Park, worn by the hippies but also growing in its many gardens. The fog that hovered over the park during my visit, was an excellent neutral backdrop for flower photography.

I must admit I've become a born-again photographer. For over thirty years, I've always photographed things that I observe in the world and find visually interesting. I've always enjoyed pictures with interesting light and good form and especially, pictures that capture a moment that seems to reveal something curious, or unfamiliar. The problem with this kind of photography is that it is not set up or contrived, like most contemporary photography one sees in galleries, and worse, one has to take a lot of pictures to get a good one. With film cameras, the film costs a lot of money, and it took hours to process the film, wait for the film to dry, then make contact sheets, then make the prints, and all the while I was always suspicious that the chemical fumes in the darkroom were going to kill me. I was finding it more and more difficult to go into the darkroom. Now, with digital cameras, the film is free. I love that, and it's encouraging me to shoot a lot, like when I started in photography. I like how I get instant feedback when I shoot a picture, and on the next shot I can correct the problems. For this project, I took 2000 pictures the first summer and 4000 the second. I estimate that it would have cost me quite a few thousand dollars just for film and processing and I would have spent countless hours breathing fixer fumes. I never would have done it.