TAKASHI TOMO-OKA
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Artist Takashi Tomo-oka discusses his work and influences:

I wish to express the beauty of *kaboku*, which is to say 'flowers and trees,' using photographic techniques to create an image resembling a painting. I want to be able to feel the unadorned beauty of the plants, using a composition consisting solely of the plant and empty space, making the picture as simple as possible.

*Lotus 3, 2011*
My photographs are all tall and narrow, the same proportions as calligraphy paper, as I instinctively found this ratio to be ideal for expressing plants. I think that this may be a result of my experience seeing painted hanging scrolls, fusuma (sliding door panels) and folding screens in temples as a young boy.

My parents had a strong influence on me. My father was a traditional basket weaver, and from him I learned the value of honest creativity. When I was small child I used to accompany him up into the mountains to gather
bamboo and he taught me a lot about the plants and animals that can be found in nature. I was also able to experience the sounds and atmosphere that exist within nature. I think that a lot of what I felt then is apparent in my work today.
My mother was a dressmaker and her workroom was filled with fabric and a well-used sewing machine. She always looked happy, making clothes in that room. Of course, I am sure she must have experienced hard times, but I feel that she taught me the joy of creating and making things.

When I worked as a gardener, I visited the gardens of Kyoto’s famous temples every day. Although I saw these gardens daily, they would change their expression in a moment as I looked at them. In particular, Japan has four very distinct seasons and the gardens’ appearance would alter completely with each season. They also changed according to the state of the viewer’s mind. Each garden possessed a kind of universality that I could always feel while I was working there.

Garden work is almost entirely involved with interacting directly with plants—pruning trees, planting shrubs, tending the moss, etc. The job is built on the concept of beauty and consists of its creation in physical space. Even though each garden possesses a tension, we are able to find peace within them. They have an atmosphere that is difficult to express in words. In the case of old gardens, I may not be able to understand the philosophy behind their design, but I am able to feel their atmosphere. It is something you can feel regardless of religion, etc.

Magnolia 2, 2011

Akebi, 2011
There is a big difference between photographs and paintings. In painting the artist looks at the subject, considers it, then passes it through the ‘filter’ of his or her physical body to depict it; photography is much more direct. Photography cannot exist without a concrete subject (in my case flowers). There has to be something material in order for the camera to cut out a moment of its existence. When photographing plants, their natural power and aesthetics are expressed directly without passing through the filter that is me. I photograph plants that are on the verge of decay because they are beautiful. It is my ambition to capture the expressions unique to each plant. If you can feel the power of the plant, then my ability and individuality becomes almost unnecessary.

The reason why I choose flowers as my subject is because I like them. No other reason is necessary but if I were to venture one, it would be that I think they possess an absolute beauty that mankind is incapable of copying. The time I spend in contact with plants (growing them, collecting them from the mountains, observing them every day as I wait for them to reach their best condition) is vastly longer than the time I spend actually photographing them. Before I take a photograph I like to get to know the plant well, observing it carefully and making sketches. The time I spend in contact with plants is when I am at my happiest.
Born in Kyoto in 1971 to a basket weaver and a dressmaker, Takashi Tomo-oka developed a keen eye for the diversity of the natural world at an early age while accompanying his father on field trips to gather bamboo for baskets. While living in the Kyoto area, which had long been an imperial capital of Japan, Tomo-oka was exposed to highly refined Japanese art forms. He later worked as a landscape gardener and gained access to famous temple complexes such as Byōdō-in and Ryōan-ji. This allowed him to incorporate firsthand experience of classical garden design and the paintings and other objects in the temple collections into his work. These life experiences create a unique perspective, richly grounded in the traditional arts of Japan, which dovetails with the formal training he received as a painter at Kyoto Seika University.

As an artist, he became interested in painting but was drawn to photography, adopting the digital camera as his medium, rather than a brush. Tomo-oka eliminates all extraneous visual information other than the subject itself and the resulting images display a sensibility similar to that of the Rimpa school’s nature studies in the 18th and 19th centuries, replacing their gold leaf with stark white backgrounds. Each work is the result of careful study of the plants’ structure and color as well as their ephemerality. These spare compositions are digitally printed on washi (paper) and mounted in scroll format, further blurring the divide between his painterly sensibilities and digital methods.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and the Pasadena Art Alliance.