

# ARTFORUM

MARCH 2011

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

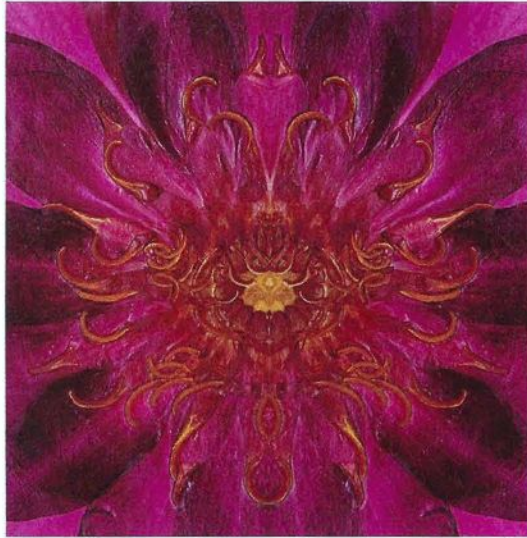
## E. V. Day

CAROLINA NITSCH

Last summer, E. V. Day spent three months as an artist in residence at Monet's garden in Giverny, France, with the charge that she find inspiration in the floral idyll being the only condition of her stay. The fifty works that visit yielded, fifteen of which comprised this show, began as horticultural residua. Day trailed Giverny's gardeners on their pruning rounds and selected the most striking of the clipped botanicals, which she then pressed in a microwave, scanned digitally, and printed, magnified to eighteen times their original size, on photo paper. Color has not been manipulated, but form has: Half of each image was mirrored, rendering the individual flowers bilaterally symmetric, their pistils and stamens forming a vertical axis ringed by petals of brilliant, almost lurid, oranges, pinks, and purples.

On first look, this project seems a shift for Day, and not only for its transition from the three-dimensionality of her sculptural practice to the emphatic depthlessness of the digital print. Feminine archetype though it is, the flower as a theme feels somewhat tame stacked up against previous endeavors that considered gender precincts via Barbie dolls, fishnet stockings, and thong underwear. Her claims for it are in turn more modest; whereas she said in 2006 that her art transforms "a sexual or feminized trope into a statement of power and independence," her description of the aim here sounds straightforward and, in its evocation of the Impressionist enterprise, nearly quaint: "I created these images to transcribe the intimate sensation of being alone in the drama of Monet's garden when it's in full-bloom." Yet while the artist succeeds on this count—the large prints, tightly hung in a small gallery, effect chromatic envelopment—the work has greater stakes than she lets on, and consequences that take up and extend earlier concerns.

The upshot of Day's process is the denaturalization of her natural source material. It's hard to believe that these colors haven't been trumped up digitally; the supersaturated hues look artificial, even steroidal. *Water Lily*, 2010–11, makes a hallucinatory violet mandala of Monet's perennial (an unwitting reminder that the paintings he produced toward the end of his four decades in Giverny unhinged mark from referent to a degree that verged on abstraction). And while the splayed buds have an under-glass specimen quality, and one could probably learn all one needs to know about pollination from their blown-up reproductive organs (squashed bugs even linger in a few), Day's medium



E. V. Day, *Water Lily*, 2010–11, digital composite on photographic paper, 72 x 72". From the series "Seducers," 2010–11.

and scale have a distancing, flattening effect on her subject, one reinforced by the blossoms' transmutation, through digital mirroring, from irregularly shaped objects into quasi-geometric ones. For all of their verisimilitude, they don't read as having once lived—and possible associations with other living things are accordingly blocked.

Georgia O'Keeffe is the obvious lead here, but if O'Keeffe's flower paintings give rise to bodily analogies and sensations (and, more importantly—as art historian Anne Wagner has argued—threaten their stability, and that of the legibility of the represented body), these prints do the opposite.

None of the equations that O'Keeffe made, and then upended, obtain; there is little femininity in the flowers and nothing sexual, let alone erotic, in their giant anatomies—the "Seducers" that give the series and exhibition its title. They conjure instead, in Day's apt summary, "faces and masks; mammals and insects; religious iconography: altars, angels, shivas, chalices, mandalas; patterns and forms that suggest baroque and art nouveau," and her comparison of the symmetrical blooms to Rorschach tests is telling in this context. As her earlier work has demonstrated, and as "Seducers" does in a subtler, promising key, curtailing a symbol's potential as a container for one kind of projection clears space for it to become a repository for others.

—Lisa Turvey