

Visual Alchemy: Peter G. Pereira's "Hydrangean Epiphanies"

The latest work by artist Peter G. Pereira straddles genre and mediums to create a hybrid form dubbed by the artist as "surreal photographic paintings." Composited over a period of four years, these pieces were gleaned from roughly 10,000 photographs of hydrangeas taken by the artist at Carl Shurz Park, on the upper east side of Manhattan, which were later "painted," modified, and reconstituted digitally. The result is a kaleidoscopic panorama of floral repetitions, which draw the viewer in and hold the gaze in a kind of sustained hypnotic attention.

What appear at first glance to be merely O'Keeffe-like photographs of flowers, doubled and redoubled in mechanical arrangement, become more than what they seem upon closer examination. Like a Rorschach test, strange images emerge between the surface shapes, out of the emptiness of negative space. Seemingly innocuous images yield sudden, minor terrors; black eyes peer out of the space where petal corners meet: eerie, yet simultaneously delicate and gentle. The eye travels between the foregrounded floral images and the shapes hidden in the background, as though journeying between consciousness and unconsciousness. Peel your eye for seated Buddhas, lotuses, alien-like faces, birds, and dragonflies. At times, images seem to randomly materialize, and one wonders whether these are visual coincidences or part of the artist's plan. In other cases, the artist imposes more authorial control, by chiseling recognizable symbols out of the photographic compositions, such as crosses and stars of David.

This collision of the organic image of flowers with familiar human symbol systems represents the fundamental irony and contradiction inherent in this work. It

brings to the forefront the human influence on nature, but without the obvious display of the artist's immanence found in more painterly pieces. These are vestiges of technology's cold yet consistent hand, its ability to reproduce, refract, and reassemble. But human vision, while distant and removed from these surfaces, is ever-present though unseen, like an omniscient, third-person narrator, more organizing principle than immediate presence.

The technological dimension of these pieces brings to mind mass production, the commodification of the natural world. Yet at the same time, the computerized reproduction of these botanical photographs mimics the very patterns in nature itself. Look closely at the leather-like texture of a leaf, its repeated lines and surface symmetries, and it is not unlike the repetitive patterns imposed by the artist. There is a harmony between the world of nature and the world of human technology, but an acknowledged detachment is required for the artist (and the viewer) to enact that relationship. Where realism attempts to represent an exact visual replication of nature, these abstract photographic manipulations attempt to mimic the underlying patterns that govern the natural world. The human witness disappears, the artist's hand invisible, and what remains is the almost hubric desire to understand the secret processes of creation. These pieces are an act of visual alchemy, sometimes bizarre, but often wondrous and playful. They transport the viewer through realms where reality and imagination are blurred, where nature is simply a mirror of the human mind.