

## **Photography of Flowers in Black & White:**

### **REVIEW OF AN EXHIBIT BY OKSANA KHADARINA**

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Black & white photography is recommended for situations when color might overly detract from an underlying beauty of form and texture. In this respect, photography of flowers in duotone may seem counterintuitive. Most blossoms and their delicate parts appear in gorgeous or at least beguiling colors that at first glance would seem the most attractive quality of the flower. Nevertheless, masters such as Weston and Mapplethorpe demonstrated that black-and-white imagery of flowers can be spectacular, with emphasis on graceful form and luscious texture that stand out when color is muted.

Notwithstanding this potential, the photographer of flowers is superbly challenged to compensate for the omission of color. Essence has to be captured by composing a delicately sensual portrait of shape and texture alone. As a prerequisite, it is necessary to identify blooms ideal for black-and-white photography. Flowers should offer a distinct grace of form, ideally with alternating hard and soft features, or a weave of varying tones and textures that can be drawn out and finessed in monotone. Composing and printing such images require finely honed skills and patience. Such is the task of photographers selecting a road least taken in contemporary photography—black-and-white imagery of flowers.

Oksana Khadarina shines and has masterfully met these challenges in her exhibit, “Flowers: Colors of Black and White” (which was held in March-April 2004 at the Fisher Art Gallery, Schlesinger Concert Hall & Arts Center, Alexandria, Virginia.) Clearly, all 16 images were created with tender care, and each opens to a miniature world—photography at which to gaze.

I was immediately taken by the diversity of the subjects including tulip, lotus, iris, magnolia, calla lily, gladiola, white orchid, rose and sunflower. Some were photographed indoors and others outside. All were taken in sunlight ranging from cloudy bright to overcast. No flash or artificial lighting were used, although the indoor photography was aptly conducted where the sunlight reaching the flowers was diffused from different directions.

Most of the images have nearly full depth of field, the subjects almost entirely in focus. All are finely exposed and printed. Moreover, perusal of individual images indicates that Oksana’s technique has moved beyond finessing composition and texture of a given suitable subject, to selection of particular flowers allowing for composition for a sense of flair, sometimes suggesting motion. In this respect, I especially admired “Two Callas” (i.e., two calla lilies), in which a flower and its stem elegantly eclipse a second

stem. Another lilian photograph, “Calla Lily,” is wonderfully composed to portray a transition from lighter to darker petals, an impression suggesting a wave or flow.

My favorite photograph of the show is “Iris.” This black-and-white image of a blue iris reveals a remarkable motif of light streaks on the petals, subtly melding with and transforming into dark streaks. The tonality appears to shift dramatically from one point to the next, but it’s not possible to discern exactly where. Upon close examination, the effect is extraordinary. Rarely have I seen such detail of tonal shift so close-up in black-and-white photography.

The image “White Orchids,” showing a small flower on the left connected by a long tether to a large blossom on the right, evokes a sense of fantasy. I imagined two alien beings from space. Oksana advises she admires the work of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Two works in the show—“Opening Magnolia” and “Rose”—are portrayed without stems as if disconnected from the world. Abstraction is the intended effect, of course. Observers will differ, but to my mind, the impact detracts from the beauty of the flowers themselves. The rose, by the way, is quite elegant—reddish-white that comes out beautifully dappled in black and white.

### An Impressive Application of Digital Technology

Oksana used a digital camera—the Canon PowerShot G5—to create the works in her show. The sizable, approximately 16x20 images were printed in her digital darkroom using an Epson Stylus 2200. Was it possible to notice or glean that the images were digital? Although the invitations to the show included a sub-title indicating the photographs were digital, some attendees appear to have overlooked the advisory, and were surprised when informed. If I hadn’t read the card, I would have thought it probable the photographs were from film. Having been informed of the technology, I scanned the prints for any telltale signs of digital imagery. Were any apparent? Hard as I looked, there was no discernable fringing or ghosting, nor (pun not intended) blooming (a distorting effect caused by faulty sensors). In sum, detail and contrast were excellent. It was a situation where any digital peculiarities would be so minute that the observations would be questionable. Such is the state of the art.

Oksana advises that her Canon PowerShot G5, which provides up to 5 megapixels of resolution, produces fine-quality prints up to the roughly 16x20 dimension featured in her show. This experience is consistent with the conventional wisdom on digital resolution. I should also note that Oksana worked especially hard in the printing phase of the production. She made several hundred prints over a six-month period to produce the final 16 images featured in her show, the major variable being the finessing of contrast.

“Flowers: Colors of Black and White” presents dynamic images, thoughtfully composed and produced to the highest technical standard. Khadarina has demonstrated vital creativity finessed with the patience and persistence.