

When The Flower Reaches My Hands

Thesis Outline

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Still from *Drench Your Lips In Rich Luxurious Color* (2021)

INTRO

In 2017 my mother and I went to a garden in springtime and saw voluptuous flowers spilling their blooms everywhere. They looked soft, inviting, and yielding. I reached out and touched them, fondled their insides, stroked the revealed stamens, knocking off drooping petals, and tore off crisp pink petals.

I saw the flowers standing gently, displaying themselves for my pleasure. It occurred to me that I could defile them, that no one would stop me. I could do what I wanted. So I did, and that became the video "Sweet little flower," (2017).

My impulsive actions towards the flowers echoed experiences I myself had of being manipulated, violated, and controlled. In this case I both identified with the position of the flowers and was enacting the role of perpetrator of violence onto the flowers.

The Netherlands is the largest flower exporter in the world. Every year, endless rows of colorful and photogenic flowers bloom. In late May and Mid-October, tractors come and behead the flowers, a practice known as 'topping,' which prevents the flower—the sexual organ of the plant—from going to seed. This keeps the energy in the plant's bulbs, which will be sold to home gardeners. The heads roll into the gutters between rows.

At Keukenhof Garden, 7 million flowering bulbs are cultivated in carefully designed geometric shapes and patterns. Visitors to the garden pour in armed with cameras big and small. The flowers are displayed as in a well-engineered beauty contest—their pictures are taken from every angle, and we look for the most brilliantly attractive colorations, the most alluringly parted petals, the healthiest stems.

The flowers are bred to be as beautiful as possible through extreme means—viruses are introduced into tulip bulbs to create striking striped and feathered patterns. These viruses progressively weaken and stunt the growth of the bulb over generations. These gestures echo the commodification of feminine beauty and sexuality—as with cosmetic plastic surgery in humans, invasive medical procedures are undertaken to improve beauty or maintain the appearance of youth, often at the expense of health.

Flower producers exercise control and violence, the flowers are seemingly submissive, and the consumers are voyeurs ignorant to the violence, taking pleasure in its effects.

Questions I will discuss in my thesis:

What is the life cycle of a cut flower, where do the flowers we see in the stores come from?

Where do the flowers that I have used in my work come from?

What have they endured in their lives and even before their lives to reach me?

Why am I so interested in flowers - both emotionally identifying with their suffering, and yet at the same time enjoying the fruits of what they've suffered through?

What is the relationship between vulnerability and violence? And voyeurism?

Do my projects echo psychoanalytic frameworks for processing trauma?

STRUCTURE

I will structure my thesis around three sections:

- 1.) **Tracing the Lifecycle of the Cut Flower:** Describing the structures of control and manipulation in each stage of cut flower production and distribution
- 2.) **When The Flower Reaches My Hands:** Examination of works I have made that include flowers, tracing the possible paths of each one
- 3.) **The Confusion of Pleasure and Pain:** Personal essay and critical contextualization of my practice

1. Tracing the Lifecycle of the Cut Flower

- i. Before planting - breeding, introduction of viruses
- ii. Planting - fertilizers, pesticides
- iii. Death of the flower - cutting, topping, beginning the process of transport
- iv. Flower auction
- v. Shipped to a different country, to a distribution center, to a store
- vi. To a consumer's hands

2. When The Flower Reaches My Hands - My works involving flowers

- i. Sweet little flower, (2017)
 1. Flower origin - Brookside Gardens, MD, US
- ii. Drench Your Lips In Rich Luxurious Color (2021)
 1. Flower origin - Keukenhof, NL
- iii. Cutting with scissors
 1. Flower origin - Albert Heijn, NL
- iv. Printed, pressed, preserved
 1. Flower origin - Karen's garden, Caretaker Farm, MA, US

3. The Confusion of Pleasure and Pain

- a. Personal Essay - My Conflicts With The Flowers
 - i. My emotional identification with the flower and all of the manipulation and violence it has endured
 - ii. My enjoyment of the cut flowers despite that knowledge
 - iii. My usage of the flowers to reenact my own traumas
- b. Case Studies
 - i. Sophie Calle, The Address Book
 1. Voyeurism/Exhibitionism
 - ii. Tim Leyendekker, Feast
 1. Transgressive Desire - Do I/we enjoy the pain of the flower?
 - iii. James Baldwin, Another Country
 1. Trauma Reenactment
 2. "The pain which signals a toothache is a pain which saves your life" (Baldwin 2011)

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