ALMINE RECH

Les Fleurs du Mal

Oct 18 — Nov 13, 2023 | Maison Guerlain, Paris, France

The flowers of evil, theme of the 16th exhibition held at the Maison Guerlain, celebrates Charles Baudelaire's poetry collection of the same name. Published in 1857, it left a deep impression upon the literature and art of its time and its impact continues to this day.

This exhibition encompasses a range of major themes, delving into humanity's most fundamental questions: the beauty and fragility of this planet; humankind's relationship with the natural world; decadence and debauchery; love and passion.

I aimed to bring together 26 artists of a variety of backgrounds and ages to illustrate these themes on a range of media: paintings, photographs, videos and installations.

The language of flowers is used as a channel to communicate about and explore the issues that are of real importance to the artists, such as abortion rights and gender roles in society.

We begin with Danish artist Anna Aagaard Jensen's exploration of femininity. She uses her anthropomorphic sculptures to express the female body in a way that's fun and romantic.

The human body is approached in a more sexualized way in Oda Jaune's painting, her bizarre world characterized by a surreal mixture of attraction and repulsion.

Erostism and sexuality are showcased in the iconic photographs of Nobuyoshi Araki and Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as in Roni Landa's fleshy, sexual flower sculptures. Moving onto the carnivorous flowers painted by Marcella Barceló, we see the natural world as something that's both sensual and dangerous at the same time.

The world of Kyiv-based Ukrainian artist, Mykola Tolmachev is a fantastical and quirky one. Painting in watercolours, he creates unvarnished, lyrical portraits of flowers in which sexuality reveals itself in a kind of contemporary mannerist style.

Francesco Clemente's works, created from plant-based pigments, draw us into contemplation and a kind of spirituality. His painting, 'Winter Flower XLII', is a composition that's both figurative and abstract, in which flower petals cover the canvas in its entirety.

The series of paintings, 'Future Herbarium' by Laurent Grasso, executed on palladium leaves, depicts a variety of mutated flowers: they divide into two, enabling the growth of mutations which might actually come into being in a near future.

Johan Creten's glazed stoneware sculptures are covered in hand-made rose petals. They're part of a series entitled 'Odore di Femmina', which is reminiscent of compositions both floral and sexual in nature.

Young artist Pauline d'Andigné has been invited to create an in-situ installation made from vinyl flowers, hung at the entrance to the store and visible through the window from the Avenue des Champs Élysées. Its soft forms, a nod to Claes Oldenburg, are held together by chains, symbolizing the contrast between the gentleness of the subject matter and the violence of the modern world. We discover this same contrast in her photograph, 'Too Sweet to rot', where she juxtaposes the freshness and fragility of a flower with a viscous substance.

'HYMNE À LA ROSE' is a multisensory art installation created by the Madagascan artist Joël Andrianomearisoa. It comprises 42 sculpted metal roses. They cover the walls of a space in which the audience can hear, in the dark, a text composed and sung in several languages by the French- Moroccan singer Hindi Zahra. The scent of House of Guerlain perfumes chosen by the artist greet visitors to this room.

Yan Pei-Ming's contribution to the exhibition is 'Roses Bleues du Mal' a highly original painting showing blue roses around a skull, symbolizing an impossible love next to death, a recurring theme in his work.

Two sculptures by Jean-Marie Appriou, especially made for the exhibition, look into a kind of Gustave Moreau-style Romanticism: 'The Briar Rose' challenges our concept of danger and of the triumph of good over evil; the sculpture, 'Poison de Rêve', with its flowers adorning the headdress of a figure lost in a dream, is about passion, desire and dreamlike wanderings.

Digital art pioneer Jennifer Steinkamp uses cutting-edge technology to render botanical forms in motion and ask questions about our sometimes sanitized relationship with the natural world.

Nestled in the intimate setting of a cabinet of curiosities, the watercolours on wood panels by Belarussian artist Alina Bliumis conceal a dark secret underneath their seeming beauty. The plants shown here were used to induce abortions. The artist makes us ponder the challenges to this right, one we believed to be secure, which is now being questioned in some countries.

Mimosa Echard, winner of the 2002 Marcel Duchamp prize showcases the deeply physical relationship between plants and humanity, whereas Anselm Kiefer looks at female ecstasy.

Not Vital's work belongs to Florence and Daniel Guerlain's collection. Plants play an integral role here, notably flowers applied to traditional paper hand made in Bhutan. Alvaro Barrington's installation places a drawing of a rose on cardboard alongside concrete and a metal shutter. The piece's title, 'Standing rose that grew from concrete' references a poem by Tupac Shakur, which highlights the beauty and fragility that can emerge from a hostile environment.

Thandiwe Muriu poses questions about modern women's identity in African society through her photographs of floral fabrics worn by her mother on special occasions. Duy Anh Nhan Duc symbolizes the fragility of the natural world through an installation made from dandelions, while Jean-Philippe Delhomme captures the fleeting nature of a still life where both the ephemeral (plants) and universal knowledge (books) are presented. Lise Stoufflet explores questions of gender through her depiction of a man carrying a bunch of wilted flowers. The Moroccan artist Ghizlane Sahli creates three-dimensional embroideries from recycled plastic waste, transforming ugliness into beauty.

In the 'Love Letter', series, Chinese artist Jiang Zhi sums up the ephemeral, fleeting nature of life in his images of flowers on fire.

'The flowers of evil' beckons us to explore the depths of our inner beings and unveil unexpected beauty. 'Beautiful' takes on a special meaning here, it being, as Charles Baudelaire said 'bizarre'. These two elements are not contradictory, rather, they are inextricably bound together. It's precisely in this insoluble contradiction that the secret of the poet lies.

Poetry, just like art, can ‘ensure that hope’s voice can be heard amidst the din’ (Bonnefoy, 2001 :97) bringing forth the truth and the beauty on which both rely.

— Hervé Mikaeloff, exhibition curator.