

THE PERFECTION OF THE WILTED ROSE

For **Seamus A Ryan** the quest for the consummate image led him down the path of the flawed and fallible. Only here did he find what he was looking for. He talks to Elizabeth Roberts about the elusive beauty of flowers.

I first met Seamus A Ryan at the Atlas Gallery in London where his work is represented. We were both attending the private view of Nick Brandt's *Across the Ravaged Land*, and Seamus was hugely enthusiastic about the work. His warmth and friendliness made me want to see what his photography was like, and whether it reflected his personality.

Back at the office, I checked out his website and knew right away we had to feature his work. Tender and sensitive, his flower imagery evokes a past era of photography, with a romantic sense of beauty and charm. Its antithesis to much of today's imagery makes it stand out, while its content and subject matter has a quietness that is almost self-effacing.

When we meet again it is at Seamus' home in Tunbridge Wells where he both lives and works – generally setting up a makeshift studio in his dining room. The modesty of this arrangement is not lost on Seamus who at one time worked in the City. 'I was very well paid and I was able to buy lots of photographic toys – medium format cameras, expensive lenses, etc.' A photographer from an early age, he enjoyed being able to hire a darkroom at weekends and learn how to print his own work. 'I met the printer Melvin Cambetti Davies who was an absolute inspiration – I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't met him because he instilled in me a love of a good print.' It was Melvin who lent Seamus a 5x4 camera to experiment with, along with a box of Polaroid Type 55. 'That was my downfall – that's where all my money went for quite a long time: Polaroid Type 55 film and Kodak Ektalure paper – a wonderful combination.'

For many years Seamus' main photographic interest had been in portraiture and, as a member of the British Fantasy Society, he mixed with authors and artists who published books and he was frequently asked to take portraits for dust jackets. 'There was one particular weekend when a writer was due to come to my house to have his

portrait done,' he explains. 'I was all set up and in the mood when he phoned to say he had a dreadful hangover and couldn't get out of bed.' Feeling creatively frustrated, Seamus decided to carry on with some photography anyway and decided to do a Mapplethorpe-type picture of some lillies in a vase. He produced a lovely picture, printed it as a 24x24in silver gelatin print, toned in gold and selenium. 'I had set myself the exercise and I ended up with a print that everyone seemed to like – in fact, a restaurant bought it for their main lobby area. But I looked at it and I thought, God, that's dull. It just didn't do anything for me creatively.'

He was, however, still interested in pursuing floral photography and having seen the work of John Blakemore he discovered something else. 'His work introduced me to the concept that with black & white you don't need straight black or white, you can have tones of white or tones of grey. It opened my eyes to what a photograph could be.' With this idea in mind he invested in a Horseman studio camera. 'I enjoyed the more contemplative way of working,' he says. 'I found I wanted the flowers to be more than just objects, I wanted to imbue them with emotion.'

At the time Seamus and his family were living in London and he got into the habit of driving up to Covent Garden flower market on a Saturday and buying flowers by the armful. Over the following week he would slowly work his way through photographing them. Naturally, they began to deteriorate from their initial perfection, and it was this that Seamus found to be the key to what he was looking for. Sometimes it was a broken stem, sometimes a wilting petal that made, for him, the perfect specimen to photograph. 'My favourite picture of all time, *Cabbage Rose*, came from one of the weekends when I had been to the market. I put the flowers in buckets and vases in the spare bedroom to wait until I had time to photograph them. It took a couple of days to get to the dark roses,

by which time they had wilted. This rose, which had been magnificent, had slowly fallen over and the bottom petals had draped down but the top petals had just started to sit nicely on top. I saw it and thought, it's perfect.'

Seamus had found his way of working and the images began to be successful. 'When I started out with the Stephanie Hoppen gallery in London there wasn't a month that went by without selling my work. Those were happy days,' he says. Since then, times have become more difficult in the fine art market. 'A lot has changed in the last 15 to 20 years. So much of photography now is about the story behind it, as opposed to the picture.'

Along with this change came the disappearance of traditional materials. 'At the demise of Kodak Ektalure, Martin Reed at Silverprint contacted me (I was known for printing on it) and said he had bought the remaining stock – how much did I want?' Seamus discussed the matter with Audrey his wife and they scabbled around with credit cards and spent around £7,000 on buying up Martin's stock. 'I still have about four or five boxes of the 20x16. I would like to take some of my key images and do an edition of five of each, from digital negs, contact printed as platinum prints – whether the galleries would sell them or not, it's something I want to do for myself.' >

READER OFFER

Seamus A Ryan is offering B+W readers the chance to buy his monograph *Involuntary Sculptures*, from which most of these images were taken, for £30 (RRP £50) plus a 10x8 print of any of the images on his website (seamusryan.com) for £30, or both for £50 (plus P&P).

Also, two lucky readers who take up this offer will have the chance of being picked to join Seamus and B+W Editor Elizabeth Roberts for a day of photography at Seamus' home in Tunbridge Wells.

➤ **Contact Seamus at info@seamusryan.com.**





Amaryllis



Sweet Peas



Rose



Stump and four roses



Roses



White Roses



Dancing Tulips

'I enjoyed the more contemplative way of working,' he says. 'I found I wanted the flowers to be more than just objects, I wanted to imbue them with emotion.'



Dark Poppies



Seed Heads



Parrot Tulips II

To see more of Seamus A Ryan's work visit seamusryan.com

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