2017

A world in a flower

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Christine Carr, and my committee members, Emily Morgan and Steven Herrnstadt, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends, colleagues, the department faculty and staff for making my time at Iowa State University a wonderful experience.
Since photography was invented, it was used to record the beauty of life. I made an abstract photography project using flowers as my subject to borrow colors and shapes from nature. I use cut flowers since they are separated from the whole plant and only survive a few days. I use long exposure as a transformative process to create abstract photography, and freeze the fleeting beauty.

I was inspired by Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wynn Bullock. Sugimoto’s Seascapes inspired me to incorporate basic elements of nature while Lightning Fields encouraged me to explore my process. Bullock’s works of using broken glass to create different scenes enlightened me to produce works that transform the subject matter.

‘To see a world in a flower, and a bodhi in a leaf’ is one of the most important Buddhist philosophies. It explains how a world of information may be discovered through a simple object, like a flower. A flower contains a wide range of information from the earth to the sun it grew with. By moving my camera while shooting, I attached my feelings at different moments into the photos and expressed myself with the flowers. As viewers wander through my arrangement of hanging fabric prints, they react to the overall presentation with their own personal experiences and feelings. It’s an unusual way to appreciate flowers, and another new world of feelings could be triggered through the walking process. The gallery installation features large silk hanging fabric, and it allows viewers to wander through and lose themselves in it.

The series includes the blooming flowers as a way to explore ephemerality and eternity. When I look at the images I forget who I am. I experience movement, color, and
form. There’s another world that can be found within one flower. The viewers are connecting to the macro world as they lose themselves a little bit.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 The background

An ancient Chinese saying states “To see a world in a flower, and a bodhi in a leaf.” It’s the core of a Buddhist scripture called The Avatamsaka Sutra. This explains that a being, whether human or other creature, can perceive the entire world from a flower, sense the whole tree from one leaf, and feel the existence of three thousand different worlds from one grain of sand. There’s also a poem that conveys a similar idea from western culture. It’s the first paragraph from the poem Auguries of Innocence by British poet William Blake.

“To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”

I’ve chosen the subject of flowers because I’ve always been fond of Mother Nature. I believe that nature can heal. Inspired by the healing power of nature, the series “A WORLD IN A FLOWER” is created with intentions of expressing my feelings and helping my viewers feel better. I use flowers as a way to explore nature and use technology to investigate the natural world.

I grew up in a big city in China. The city streets don’t contain a lot of flowers. I always brought flowers to my mother during the holidays when I was with her. That evolved into a habit. When I think of flowers, I typically go to a shop and purchase cut flowers to appreciate at home. When I began my thesis, I immediately thought of buying cut flowers, rather than going out. Until people told me that parks contained flowers, I never considered it as an option. But even
knowing I could go to a park and photograph flowers outside, I still prefer to buy flowers. If I went into nature and took photos, distractions from the surroundings that I didn’t have control of might be reflected in my images. Only when purchasing flowers can I feel like part of nature might actually belong to me. I can resonate with the flowers and incorporate their vibrations into my works. Recent science has proven that everything vibrates and has its own frequency. By staying indoors, I was only able to incorporate my frequency with the subject into my photos and the product I had would have an effect on the frequency of my audience when they walk in the gallery.

I slightly adjusted my camera using a long exposure in order to create blurry images. The color, light and shadow of the flowers are altered and drawn out as I move my camera. In this way, my camera becomes a brush and light and color become the paint. This technique translates my present state of being into the shots I take. A quote by American photographer Ansel Adams states "We don't make a photograph just with a camera. We bring to the act of photography - all the books we have read, the movies we have seen, the music we have heard and the people we have loved." How I feel at the moment affects how I move my camera. That’s how my state of being is written into my images. A macro lens enables me to enlarge the parts that are typically neglected when viewing in a traditional way. I choose different varieties of flowers each time I shoot. All the flowers are different, as are my emotions each time I take the photos. Changes in weather, season, and life circumstance all contribute to the final product.

The images are presented as large prints on silk fabric, hung from the ceiling and floating freely. This installation will allow viewers to sense different emotions, and will produce an experience that is different from what they might receive in a typical photo exhibition. The installation creates a space filled with colors from the beauty of nature. When the viewers are in
the gallery, they will be walking between my photographs on silk. It will bring the natural elements indoors, activate the white gallery space into a colorful healing environment, and help the viewers experience feelings of pleasure.

1.2 Thesis procedure

Starting August 2016, I began producing ten works per week. Each week, I shot between two and four hundred images of flowers and selected my top ten choices.

In order to convey the feeling of flow, I chose fabric to deliver my ideas. I ordered and received fabric samples in October 2016. I then ordered a test print from a composite of several of my photos. The photos I chose for the test swatch had warm, cool, and medium tones. At the end of November, I received samples for different fabrics. I decided to use silk, in order to add some delicacy to my works. In addition, because silk is very light, a dynamic motion of the fabric would be caused when people walked by. Some fabrics had strong grain texture, but I preferred the ones that looked smoother on the surface. I chose two different silk fabrics to further explore. One was opaque called “Silk Charmeuse Lycra”, and another was transparent called “Silk Georgette”. I ordered two samples for the two different materials. After I got them at the end of January, I decided to use the “Silk Charmeuse” since the “Silk Georgette” was too transparent when seen from a distance.

At the beginning of February, I came up with three different layout designs for gallery installation. I would incorporate 38 images. The size of each image would be 37 inches by 53 inches.

I uploaded my images and sent them out for printing on Feb 14th, 2017 and received them on March 15th. On Mar 1st, I made a model for the gallery installation.
CHAPTER 2
ARTIST STATEMENT

Growing up in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, a large city in Southeast China, there is not a lot of accessible nature. I would purchase cut flowers in order to bring nature to my home. I still use cut flowers when I’m in Iowa because after purchasing them, the flowers become my possession and I’m better able to translate the vibration they bring to me into my photos. I started this photography project with a vision in my mind of soft, blurry, and fluid images. I started to experiment with a macro lens and the final outcome depicted what I had envisioned. I desired to capture movement and vibrancy, so I started photographing with a long exposure. I made the photographs, while I subtly moved the camera. The movement creates lines and shapes that present a new perspective on the flowers. The long exposure creates a transformative and ethereal effect, but still preserves some edges and detail. I use this process to invite the viewers to experience the flowers in an innovative way - new worlds may be evident through the motion and color. As the flowers are captured, the moment of the pictures’ creation becomes permanent.

My goal with this work is to bring nature’s elements inside and create a healing environment. My motivation is to convey the idea of oriental philosophy by seeing a world in a flower through my photography. Perceiving the whole flower from portions and through its abstract forms with the hanging fabrics will create a mysterious space for viewers to wander around and experience it.
CHAPTER 3
INSPIRATIONS

3.1 Hiroshi Sugimoto

Hiroshi Sugimoto is a famous Japanese photographer, and has several well-known projects, such as “Seascapes” and “Theater”. Sugimoto has spoken of his work as an expression of ‘time exposed’ (Palka, 2016). He usually has Eastern philosophy behind each of his projects, and most of his projects relate to the concept of time passing through and things in life that we had taken for granted.

3.1.1 Seascapes

In 1980 he began working on an ongoing series of photographs of the sea and its horizon, Seascapes, in locations all over the world, using an old-fashioned large-format camera to make exposures of varying duration (up to three hours) (Pagel, 1997, & Sugimoto, 2008). The images feature a similar composition, while the locations are all over the world. The black-and-white pictures are all exactly the same size, bifurcated exactly in half by the horizon line (Wilson, 1994).

Sugimoto’s artist’s statement reads: “Water and air. So very commonplace are these substances, they hardly attract attention—and yet they vouchsafe our very existence….. Let's just say that there happened to be a planet with water and air in our solar system, and moreover at precisely the right distance from the sun for the temperatures required to coax forth life. While hardly inconceivable that at least one such planet should exist in the vast reaches of universe, we search in vain for another similar example. Mystery of mysteries, water and air are right there
before us in the sea. Every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home; I embark on a voyage of seeing.”(Sugimoto’s official website)

Figure 1 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Mediterranean Sea, Crete*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches

Figure 2 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Yellow Sea, Cheju*, 1992, Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches
The composition of this series is very consistent. The image is divided into sky and water areas, in which each of the areas occupy half of the image to show the equal importance of the two elements in life’s creation. In the project, water and sky are the only elements in the images. Sugimoto encourages viewers to question the coincidence that earth is the only planet for life. He shares his views of the sea and how he feels through the straightforward but unusual compositions. He went to different parts of the earth to seek the sense of security. Some images have a clear horizon line while others are covered by fog.

I have been particularly inspired by how he uses basic nature elements in his image to convey his feelings of security, and how he contemplates the coincidence of earth being the only planet that allows the existence of life. I try to do with flowers what he has done with the sea. Most of my works are very abstract, but there are still parts of the images that have sharp edges and will inspire the viewers with my subjects. Sugimoto took the seascape images in a way that transforms the sea, and I use the macro lens to capture parts of the flowers that show the viewers a new perspective.

3.1.2 Lightning Fields

Sugimoto attempted many photography experiments. In his 2009 series “Lightning Fields,” Sugimoto abandoned the use of the camera, producing photographs using a 400,000 volt Van de Graaff generator to apply an electrical charge directly onto the film (Yeoh, 2010). Instead of placing an object on photo-sensitive paper and exposing it to light, he produced the image by causing electrical sparks to erupt over the surface of a 7-by-2.5-foot sheet of film laid on a large metal tabletop (Kino, 2010). The process creates very delicate textures and the results feature branching sparks.
The images include a strong contrast between black and white. The background is pure darkness with one main white stroke and its branches, resembling a lightning bolt. The effect is created by electricity. The result of causing electrical sparks to erupt over the surface of film is unpredictable. The texture and image is influenced by the energy at that moment, which includes the film, environment, and (most importantly) the photographer himself. Sugimoto used the process to create texture and sparkle branches that he didn’t have any control over, in order to let nature produce the static electricity.

The concept of allowing nature to depict itself inspires me. Although I controlled the camera when I moved it, I had no idea what the final outcome would be. The shutter speed I used was usually between 0.25 to 0.5 second. After a lot of experimenting, I decided that the blurry images with at least one hard edge were the ones that were going to be used because they were the most interesting. I plan to have viewers figure out the subject after experiencing the images for a while in the gallery. When I moved the camera, I stayed still for about half of the shutter speed and quickly adjusted the camera randomly. Like Sugimoto, I let the overall energy affect the final outcome.
3.2 Wynn Bullock

Wynn Bullock was an American photographer whose work is included in over 90 major museum collections around the world (Bullock’s office website).

From 1959 to 1965, Wynn Bullock created amazing abstract color images on 35mm Kodachrome slides. The process, which he developed himself, involved complex multi-layered colored glass and objects, plus the creative and subtle use of depth of field (Bullock’s office website).

Figure 4  Wynn Bullock, Color Light Abstractions 1017, 1964, Pigment Print, 24 x 36 inches

He wrote: “Although cameras require an object to record an image, [the] relatively short focal length lens placed very close to pieces of colored glass, with three or four times the normal bellows extension, recorded, not the surface physical characteristics of the glass object being viewed, but what seemed like non-objective forms made up of light.” (Bullock’s office website)
Bullock created the *Color Light Abstractions* with glass, which is an everyday household item. The series reveals another way to see glass, bringing a whole different world to the viewers. He didn’t just photograph the glass, but he recorded the light and created a totally different scene with it.

I use flowers, which are also objects that people see in everyday life. Although our technique is different, I also use light to create images that are abstract and nothing like the original item. I didn’t just take photos of flowers, but I used the light with the movement of my camera to draw lines and create abstract images.

Bullock wrote “As sounds in a musical composition can be used not to express physical objects but ideas, emotions, harmonies, rhythmic orders and most any expression of the human mind and spirit, so light can be used visually to express the mind and spirit….When I look at the work, I feel completely out of any time or era of photography; they do not exist as part of any specific movement or style that I know of. I feel they are some of the most important photographs to have been taken thus far, because they are portraits of transcendence itself..., not as theme, but as a living physical force. …What is important is not what you think about them, but how they enlarge you.” (Bullock’s office website)

As Bullock wrote about his images, he mentioned that he used the materials and effects as pure energies and described his photographs as perspectives entirely beyond our present understanding. That’s what I tried to reach with my photographs. My expectation for the images is to make the viewers question the subject and perceive a totally different world, according to their own understanding. I tried to bring the viewers into a unique and novel state of mind. It’s less about how they think about my images and rather how they are affected by the images.
3.3 The philosophy of “A WORLD IN A FLOWER”

There’s a famous story in Buddhism. A Buddha was at Spirit Mountain and there were a lot of people asking for the truth of the universe. The Buddha didn’t speak a word, but only picked up a flower to show them. No one understood it, except for one of the Buddha’s disciples. After seeing what the Buddha did, he smiled. He knew that the truth of the universe could be sensed within one flower. ‘To see a world in a flower, and a bodhi in a leaf’ is one of the most important Buddhist philosophies. It refers to perceiving the deep truth behind a mundane scene. A leaf is more than what people usually see. It contains rich information. For example, if a leaf turns orange and falls, the change of season can be speculated. If it’s covered in earth for millions of years and becomes a fossil, it shows the information about the climate, the evolution stages of the plant, and how the earth moves around the universe at that time. If it’s picked up, put between book pages, and the book is given to someone as a gift, then it’s a hint for the two people who passed a message. Nowadays, binary systems have been developed and all the information of a museum can be written into a small disk, so it’s also possible for a leaf to carry the information of a world.

The search for inner truth always starts from the outward appearance. There’s a famous saying in Zen Buddhism—“The mountain is not only the mountain, the water is not only the water. The mountain is still the mountain, the water is still the water.” It conveys a similar concept. It means the mountain and water contains a lot of information, but only to the people who can see through the surface and find out what is behind. By observing the outside, attributes and characters can be seen and ultimately how the universe is operating at that point.

To have “a world in a flower”, I photograph the flowers in a way that’s not usually seen and encourage the viewers to discover another world behind this everyday object. By slightly
moving the camera, I add more of my personal feelings at that particular moment. The world I share is more than the flowers. It’s also how I feel at the moment with the flowers. When the viewers walk between the images, they react to the large images from their movement and add their understanding to the world they perceive.
CHAPTER 4
THE ARTWORK

4.1 Photographs

I set the aperture based on how much light is exposed through the lens. Stronger sunshine allowed better contrast of light and shadow on the flowers, so I used F29-F40. When cloudy, I set the aperture to F10-22. I set the aperture smaller when more light was available, but kept the exposure between 0.25 second to 0.5 second. Most of the time I used natural light, so that it added more nature into my photos.

Figure 5  Xiaohan Chen, *A World in a Flower*, 2017, Print on silk, 53 x 37 inches

I used the same techniques to create all my images. I began to take photos for the project at the beginning of September 2016. It was the end of the summer, and still hot. The images I took on September 7th (Figure 5) tended to have a cool tone, which may reflect my expectation or
desire for the weather to get cool. Most of the images I took that day looked like an undersea world.

Figure 6  Xiaohan Chen, *A World in a Flower*, 2017, Print on silk, 53 x 37 inches

Figure 7  Xiaohan Chen, *A World in a Flower*, 2017, Print on silk, 53 x 37 inches
The images I took on September 14 and 21 feature darkness transforming into light (Figure 6 and Figure 7). At that period of time, I was busier than before and I had more assignments to finish. I started to feel pressure but I was still optimistic about finishing the assignments on time. That mood is reflected in my images.

![Images of abstract light transformation](image1.png)

Figure 8 Xiaohan Chen, *A World in a Flower*, 2017, 53 x 37 inches

The images I took on September 27th (Figure 8) have a lot of hard edges compared to others. It combines cool and warm tones. Ones combined with both blurriness and sharpness gave the images shallow depth of field. The contrast of cool and warm tones reflects my feelings toward the season change.
The images I took on October 5th (Figure 9) have a lot of shape repetition because I chose chrysanthemums. As fall comes, there are more chrysanthemums than other flowers. In Chinese culture, chrysanthemums have a lot of meaning, dependent on the varieties and colors. There’s one meaning of chrysanthemums that’s very common, which is to remember someone after they’ve passed away. The repetition of the petals creates a different rhythm from the other images. In addition, it was autumn and the leaves outside had started to turn orange and fall. The feeling of autumn affected the appearance of the images.
My favorite images are those I took on October 12\textsuperscript{th} (Figure 8). I once used purple and orange in a printmaking project, and it was a success. It made me curious how the two colors would work in terms of photography, so I bought purple and orange flowers and experimented using my technique. The result turned out great. It combines the blurry and sharp parts of the image well.

After experimenting with my technique, the images I produced could be sorted into three groups. The first one included the blurry images. The second group included the images that retained both sharpness and blurriness. The third group included sharp images. By comparing the three groups, I think the second group of images was the most interesting. They contrasted hazy and solid edges. The contrast produces images with depth and makes them three-dimensional.

The images I took on October 18\textsuperscript{th} and October 25\textsuperscript{th} were too sharp. After they were printed and hung with other images, I realized they couldn’t be used. I regrouped and was back on the right track November 2\textsuperscript{nd}. There were images from a week that had many curves (big and
small) and dropping effects (Figure 11). I was unable to reproduce the feeling, but I was able to create another emotion of looking through a haze. I used the same flowers the next week, but I didn’t water them, so they dried out. I wanted to experiment with the dry flowers. It’s shown through the direction of the petals. These are the only pictures showing the petals of the flowers going down. For the rest of the images, most of petals are going up.

Figure 11 Xiaohan Chen, *Ephemeral*, 2016, Inkjet print, 36 x 24 inches

### 4.2 Gallery Installation

*A World in a Flower* will present viewers with a dynamic experience of floral light and color through fabric prints. Abstract fabric photographs will hang from the ceiling, filling the gallery space and providing opportunities to explore and discover (Refer to appendix).

I use fabric as the medium in my photographs because of its softness. The fabric I chose is silk. I believe silk compliments my subject as I try to freeze the fleeting beauty. Silk is a very light fabric. When viewers pass between the images, the air in between will be
activated and will lead to the flowing of the fabric, allowing me to achieve the original vision in my mind.

I came up with three different layout designs for gallery installation. I would incorporate 38 images. The size of each image would be 37 inches by 53 inches.
Figure 12 Installation Option 1
Figure 13 Installation Option 2
Figure 14 Installation Option 3
When I photographed my images, I randomly moved my camera. To mimic that process, I randomly drew lines when I designed the gallery installation (Refer to appendix). My intention was to use the images to create irregular spaces. Instead of creating a path to lead the viewers, I planned to let the viewers wander through according to how they felt at the moment they saw my works. My final choice for the gallery installation is the second one because all the images are distributed well without being crowded in a small area.

I explored different methods of hanging. Originally, I was going to have strings hanging from the ceiling. After visiting the gallery, I found that the ceiling was very high, and it would be very difficult to install all 38 images. I changed my plan and decided to use thread runners and clips to hang my works (Refer to appendix).

As I explored the ways to hem the fabric, I met Prof. Teresa Paschke, an expert in textile. We discussed a few options. The first one was to hire a professional tailor to sew the edge. However, the stitches would create an uneven surface at the edge no matter how good the tailor was. She suggested I use “seam tape” to hem the edge and demonstrated the process and effect after finishing. As the edge was flat, I made the decision to use seam tapes.

I made a model for the gallery installation (Refer to appendix).
Figure 15  Installation Model 1

Figure 16  Installation Model 2
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

With this project I explored a new technique that I never tried before. By moving the camera with a long exposure, I hope to integrate both the power of nature and my state of being. The result is unpredictable and reflects not only the beauty of the flowers, but also my feelings. I applied the technique with a macro lens, and created abstract images based on flowers. I was able to change the way people normally see a flower and bring a whole different perspective to appreciate the beauty of nature. By using cut flowers, I felt that part of nature belonged to me and I was able to translate my feelings with it into my photographs. Showing the flowers in an abstract way makes it difficult for viewers to tell what objects have been used. As images are displayed in a 37” by 53” format, another world is discovered through each image.

A flower can contain a lot of information. For example, the size, shape, color, and scent. However, it also carries information that is not visible. For instance, the season it bloomed, sunshine it absorbed, soil it was nurtured in, and the hard work of the gardener. With all this information, a flower is not only a flower. “A world in a flower” encourages the viewers to discover another world through items that people take for granted and reach a different state of mind with their own experience and understanding.
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APPENDIX

A WORLD IN A FLOWER

A WORLD IN A FLOWER INSTALLATION
Thirty 37” x 53” Print on Silk Hung with 3/64” Steel Cable. 2017