

FLEETING SEASONS

PAULETTE TAVORMINA'S STILL LIFES
HONOR THE OLD MASTERS

BY ROBERT KIENER



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Daulette Tavormina is sitting comfortably in her open-plan kitchen and dining room in Litchfield, Connecticut, about to take a bite of quiche. She suddenly puts down her fork. Her deep brown eyes sparkle and she says excitedly, “I have to tell you. I was gob-smacked! It was the turning point of my career.”

Tavormina, 73, is a highly acclaimed still life photographer whose limited-edition prints fetch up to \$18,000 apiece. She explains how she transitioned from working as a studio and commercial photographer in New York City to beginning a second career as a fine art photographer.

“It was 2008, and I was shooting works of art for Sotheby’s auction house catalogs. In my spare time, over weekends, in my tiny Manhattan studio apartment, I began assembling and photographing still life compositions. I was inspired by my friend Sarah McCarty’s paintings as well as a range of 17th-century Dutch, Spanish, and Italian old master painters who had produced such lovely still life or ‘natura morta’ [Italian for ‘dead nature’] paintings.”

“I loved everything about the works—their composition, their use of dramatic light, their color palette. I immersed myself in 17th-century still life paintings by learning as much as I could. I combed through art history books and visited museums. To find just the right elements for

my compositions—from fruits to vegetables to small objects, even preserved insects—I frequented shops, stalls, flea markets, and antique stores throughout Manhattan and Europe.

“I didn’t want to merely copy the old masters work. I was trying to be classically reminiscent, creating my own contemporary take on their wonderful still lifes. I wanted my photographs to represent some of the same themes as these paintings did, such as the fragility of life and love and the swift passage of time.”

Tavormina pauses to take a bite of quiche and then continues: “After a lot of trials and errors, experimenting with lighting, balancing the compositions, and with helpful support from my knowledgeable coworkers at Sotheby’s, I eventually began producing work that I was happy with. I entered three photographs in an employee art show at Sotheby’s, and the managing director fell in love with one and bought it. He was my first client.”

“Now for the *really* amazing part of the story,” says Tavormina. “Friends helped convince me that I should look for gallery representation. I decided to start at the top and sent off an email with online links to some of my work to Robert Klein, a long-established, well-respected photography gallery owner in Boston. A few days later I received a return email from him entitled ‘Representation.’ I was stunned.



He was offering to represent me! I couldn't believe it. That was the day that my life—everything—changed on a dime!”

MAGICAL STORIES

Thanks to Klein, Tavormina says, she received a crash course in the gallery world of fine art photography: “He taught me about pricing, limited editions, what paper to use, and so much more.” She is now represented by several galleries in addition to Klein.

Her photography has sold widely, has been exhibited

internationally, and is in the permanent collections of the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art, the U.S. Department of State's Art in Embassies, the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, and in numerous corporate and private collections. She's received commissions from *National Geographic Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and other publications. A few months ago, Gucci flew her to London to photograph an advertising campaign for its Alchemist's Garden collection

of luxury fragrances.

Tavormina's work has been praised extensively. A review of one of her shows in *The New Yorker* noted, “Everything seems poised between voluptuousness and rot, at once gorgeous and doomed.” Another writer pointed out that it's the “intersection of fleeting transience and timelessness” that holds the power of her work. “Tavormina, capturing the poetry of a moment in a shot, invites the viewer to reflect serenely on the ephemerality of existence and of love and on the importance of savoring

both at every moment—like the Flemish masters,” one critic explained.

“Best of all,” explains Tavormina, “is that people got—they understood—what I was expressing. I've always wanted viewers to see beyond the beauty. I want them to see as I see. For example, I hope they feel the emotion I feel when they see how a leaf is carefully, delicately balanced so it almost touches another, like the two hands in Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and—at the same time—points

to the next narrative that is part of the whole photograph.” In one of Tavormina's favorite photographs, “Watermelon Radishes,” the roots and radishes are arranged so that all touch one another. “Each has a relationship to its neighbor—they are not alone, they dance together,” she explains.

Like the work of the old masters, Tavormina's photographs are rich with symbolism and allegory. Almost every carefully chosen object, from the flowers to the food to the bits and pieces—even the insects—are selected for what they can represent and, as she notes, “to tell my own story.”

Butterflies, one her favorite elements, and wild roses can signify the shortness of life. A skull denotes mortality while figs, pomegranates, and lemons are a nod to her Sicilian heritage. Peonies remind her of her childhood because her mother's gardens were generously stocked with the colorful flowers. A goldfish that has just leapt out of a bowl represents the times she herself felt, as she confesses, like a fish out of water.

When asked if she puts any less obvious personal messages in her work, she quickly nods her head and answers, “In every picture.” When asked, “Such as?” she smiles and whispers, “Some deep secrets that I have always kept to myself.”

She sometimes writes a personal note to herself and includes it in the composition. And there are surprises: In one of her photographs she discovered there was a reflection of herself in a vase. She left it. Making one photo, she noticed a live inchworm had fallen from one of the flowers and





landed, perfectly positioned, on a bare green branch. “He snuck in, but now he’s immortal,” she says.

A self-confessed lifelong collector of objects that fascinate her, Tavormina explains, “I love the magic of things that tell a story.” Her studio is chockablock with display boxes, cartons, and drawers crammed with everything from dried flowers, well-preserved butterflies, and shells to bird nests, eggs, and even a human skull nicknamed Merlin.

“Friends and family are constantly giving me things they know I may find useful,” she says. “They’ve brought me lots and lots of bird’s nests and hard-to-find objects such as an Italian plum or Norwegian oyster shells.” She laughs when she remembers the time she found an intact dragonfly on a windowsill and a dead praying mantis on a street in New York City: “My lucky days!”

Details matter. For one photograph, “Still Life with Bread and Chocolate, After L.M.,” Tavormina wanted everything to look authentic, so she baked the bread and made the chocolate herself for the composition. “It took me weeks to get them both just right,” she remembers. “There was lots of experimenting.”

She also keeps a large garden at her Connecticut home, surrounded by a high, deer- and bear-proof fence, where she’s planted many of the flowers and vegetables she uses in her photographs. Instead of relying on flower stalls or farmers’ markets, she picks her own quince, kale, figs, watermelon radishes, morning glories, pitcher plants, and more.

Photographing a still life can

take Tavormina three days to a week. Before beginning work in her studio, she can spend weeks visualizing the photograph.

Choosing the objects, arranging them, adjusting the lighting, balancing colors and textures so the composition works and pleases her is all part of the process. And because flowers wilt and fruits and vegetables mold, she explains, “I am always in a race against time.” As she replaces flowers or fruit, the scene changes many times during a long shoot. She makes hundreds of captures as she tweaks and refines the composition and lighting.

STILL LIVES OUTLIVE

Lunch is almost complete, and Tavormina, who is finishing the salad she made with tomatoes, carrots, and kale from her garden, is reflective. When asked about her legacy, she explains, “Years from now I hope that my photographs may affect someone the same way the paintings of the old masters have affected me.”

She mentions a photograph she made that included a small note scribbled with the Latin phrase “Eram quod es.” “I found an old masters painting which included the same phrase on a small note in the foreground and added one to mine,” she explains. “Translated, it means, ‘Once I was where you are now.’”

“It made me think of that 17th-century painter realizing that he would disappear, but his painting would live on. That connection really resonated with me. That’s what this is all about.” •

Robert Kiener is a writer in Vermont.



Paulette Tavormina

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