

ART

# Vivid Images That Aren't Old Masters — but Look Just Like Them

By GAY GASSMANN APRIL 20, 2016

The photographer Paulette Tavormina began her professional career working with antiques, food styling and photographing works of art for an auction house. She's also spent many years collecting bits and pieces — the insects, objects and flowers that fill her studio — from markets and little shops. Her new book “Seizing Beauty,” out next week, took six years to photograph and brings together all these experiences: It features 65 sumptuous color images inspired by old master still lifes. (The book's release coincides with a show at the Academy Art Museum in Easton, Md., which opens April 23.)

At first glance, you might easily mistake one of Tavormina's images for a Zurbarán or a work from the Dutch Golden Age of painting — many of the book's photographs are built up with flowers, fruit, insects, objects, jewelry, butterflies and broken bits of porcelain. Others are inspired by the symbolic Vanitas paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries, with skulls and the reminder of death and the passing of all worldly goods.

“I'm in love with the old masters, totally fascinated with them,” Tavormina says. “But I create my own personal story within each work. The themes are so universal — love, loss, death — so it is all pretty simple.” Each image takes several months to produce: several weeks to conceive, research and gather the props from flower and farmer's markets, followed by sketching the image out in pencil, staging it and then setting it all up. The process of getting the lighting and composition just right takes days — sometimes so long that the flowers wilt, the fruit changes color and she has to start over.

The artist also includes a third series of works, “Botanicals,” which are much more contemporary in feel, shot from above on black backgrounds and inspired by flowers from her mother’s garden. They, too, are deliberately constructed (and Instagram-friendly).

*“Paulette Tavormina: Seizing Beauty” is out April 16 (The Monacelli Press, \$65) and is available to pre-order at [monacellipress.com](http://monacellipress.com). “Paulette Tavormina” is on view April 23-July 10 at Academy Art Museum, 106 South Street, Easton, Md., [academyartmuseum.org](http://academyartmuseum.org).*

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