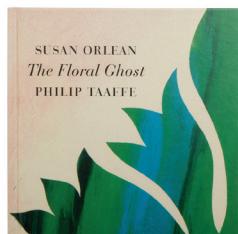


IN BLOOM: TALKING WITH SUSAN ORLEAN ABOUT THE FLOWER DISTRICT AND MEDITATIVE GARDENING

BY SHARON STEEL

TWO YEARS AGO, the Planthouse Gallery, formerly a flower shop itself, asked Susan Orlean to collaborate on a project that would pay homage to the Chelsea space's history. The author and *New Yorker* staff writer wrote a lyrical essay, "The Floral Ghost," which recalled the first time she passed through the Flower District as a new arrival to New York City. The story also became the title of an exhibition featuring the botanical-inspired work of six artists, and was distributed there as a broadside. The piece now takes on yet another form: *The Floral Ghost*, out this March from Planthouse, Inc., is a slim, intimate volume, accompanied by a series of vivid monotypes by artist Philip Taaffe, whose work was also included in the Planthouse show. Here, Orlean reflects on her first floral-inspired work since *The Orchid Thief*, how the Flower District defined New York, and why she procrastinates writing by weeding in the dirt.



The act of buying a bouquet from a flower shop can be very quaint and charming. What appealed to you at that moment when you first saw masses of flowers in a state more directly connected with commerce?

To me, New York at that period was a place where things got made. I think of walking through the garment district and seeing stores with thousands of buttons and thousands of zippers. To see plants and flowers in that same massing was thrilling. It was fascinating that this thing that we think of as so special and precious also had this quality of being a commodity. It felt like what made the city, in some ways, really unique—that sense that huge quantities of things and people and merchandise arrived in New York and was then divided and sent out to the world again.

Some of Philip Taaffe's monotypes were originally part of the Planthouse exhibit that your essay appeared in. In what ways do you feel his work in particular offers the best aesthetic compliment to your text?

I would have been thrilled to have any of the artists be a part of this book, but he's done a lot of botanical imagery in the past, and his work seemed so perfectly suited. Because they're prints, I think there's a meditation on a single image that works really well. And it's very graphic, so it works ideally in this kind of format.

The colors are so striking and luxurious, too.

It's so funny, because I just put a streak in my hair, a couple of months ago, that's a blue-green. It's almost exactly the color of the cover! [Laughs.] It looks like I did it on purpose, like, "Let me do my hair to match my

book." It was sort of coincidence, but it happens that those tones really appeal to me.

Do you think the meditative aspect that's a natural effect of gardening is now even more significant in the digitized age we live in?

Absolutely. I think for all of us sad desk jockeys, it's something creative without being intellectual, or certainly at the level that someone like I garden. My work is really solitary, but gardening, the solitude of gardening, feels meditative. The solitude of writing isn't the same—because your brain has to work so hard, you can't really relax while you're writing. I mean, I can't! Maybe some people can! [Laughs.]

What sort of gardening do you like to do?

I particularly like subtractive gardening. I like to weed. I like to prune. I even like getting tired and sweaty and dirty. It feels like a wonderful balance to the way I spend the rest of my time.

Do you ever often find yourself gardening as a form of procrastination?

It is often my go-to procrastination enterprise; because it's like, well, I'm doing something important! I know I'm supposed to be writing, but I've really got to weed this garden! I think I'm a frustrated farmer, really. But there is an enormous satisfaction in doing something physical, in doing something that has a very concrete narrative. You plant something, you nurture it, you weed it, you see it flower. The accomplishment is entirely personal. You get a pure joy from it, and a satisfaction that's a lot harder to come by in a lot of other kinds of work. ♦