



SCANNER PHOTOGRAPHY SURPRISES AND DELIGHTS

Art of the garden

By CHRIS NICHOLSON

above: Photographs by scanner artist Ellen Hoverkamp are composed from front to back. She lays down blossoms, buds and berries first, then fills in the picture with an array of shapely leaves.

DEEP IN A FOUR-ACRE GARDEN in upper Fairfield County, Ellen Hoverkamp snips a peony and places it in a large, square wicker basket. The yellow flower joins black-eyed Susans, daisies and stalks of Russian sage, in a semispontaneous bouquet.

This is how Hoverkamp of West Haven spends much of her time — perusing, by invitation, the private gardens of Connecticut. Everything she gathers is destined for the same shiny place: the polished glass of a flatbed scanner in the artist's darkened home studio.

Hoverkamp creates a kind of art that was impossible (or at least technologically impractical)

until the past decade or so. She calls it "scanner photography." By laying arrangements on the surface of her Epson Expression 10000XL, leaving the lid open and extinguishing the studio lights, she fashions still-life images that are crisp and colorful, impeccable in their depth, resolution and detail.

It's a technique she pioneered in the late 1980s, well before electronic imaging equipment allowed for the visual quality she can generate today. Though the genre and the process are interesting, much of the energy in Hoverkamp's art comes from the source of her subjects: people she doesn't even know. Since an article about her appeared in a

local newspaper in 2003. She has received scores of unsolicited invitations to help herself to the contents of gardens in every corner of the state.

"My art is really a testimony to the generosity of strangers," Hoverkamp says. "There's this community of people who are fully engaged in nurturing the beauty of nature. And that's what all gardeners, despite their income level and location, have in common. This passion for gardening is in them, and they want to share it."

BECAUSE OF THE UNIQUE WAY the artist finds her subjects, the gardeners become precious to her. "Every time I look at one of my images, I think of the garden it came from, I think of the person who introduced me to those flowers," she says. "I have a relationship with these people, they become friends. But as many friends as I've created through this project, strangers still continually offer the things that they've grown for my art. And I think, 'Who's luckier than me?' It really is amazing."

Though her technique may sound simple, the expertise Hoverkamp has honed translates into hours of labor spent creating her art. She keeps all collected vegetation fresh in a refrigerator in her air-conditioned studio. When ready to work (usually at night, so she can get the room completely dark), she begins arranging her subjects on the large-format scanner. Because of her medium, she needs to compose from the front to the back — essentially backward — weighing down some pieces and suspending others to create layers and depth. She scans the final composition at an ultra-high 600 dots per inch, then works on the image in Photoshop to remove the inevitable specks of pollen and dust from the black background. The process takes two to four hours per piece.

After she finishes, she often donates the assorted foliage to the students of the middle-school art class she teaches to use as subjects in their own creations in vari-

ART OF THE GARDEN |

ous media. The exception is the fruits and vegetables — those, she says, she eats.

HOVERKAMP'S WORK HAS been shown throughout the Northeast, including an appearance in the Macy's (Manhattan) art show, in Bridgeport's City Lights Gallery and at Alfredo's Gallery of Fine Art Photography in Suffield. It also has been shown at the Alice Milton Gallery in Massachusetts, where all the prints submitted sold out. Additionally, at the Members Show of the New Britain Museum of American Art, her piece "Guilford Harvest" won first prize and is now part of the permanent collection, and this past winter her art won Best in Show at The Carriage Barn Arts Center in New Canaan. As for future shows, she is already booked into 2010.

Hoverkamp sells prints at almost every installation, and occasionally operates booths at regional art fairs and garden shows. She also sells archival prints (some in limited edition) and note cards through her Web site (myneighborsgarden.com).

Not content to rest on her laurels, Hoverkamp has continued to grow artistically. Pushing her technique into new realms, she has begun studying the possibilities of depicting garden insects, rocks and feathers, bird's nests and eggs, homemade fishing flies—even mutant vegetables. Still, these new subjects are coming from the same old sources, sometimes offered by people with private collections. And that is what Hoverkamp finds most precious.

"I have sentimental attachments to many of my images because they remind me of my friendship with the people who supplied the contents," she says. "I'm kind of distilling the elements of the beauty that other people spend their time and love and effort bringing about. And then I'm just reminding others that despite everything else in our world, this also exists, and there's a lot of power in it. The beauty of nature prevails." □

Chris Nicholson is a freelance writer and photographer based in Milford.



CHRIS NICHOLSON

left: Colorful cabbages and ripe tomatoes take on an unexpected vibrancy when they are photographed by Hovercamp.
above: The artist ... in the garden, of course!