

**FORMIDABLE
FLORISTS**

F O R M I

F L O R

D A B L E

I S T S

For my granddaughters Florence Isabella and Scarlett Grace Westacott Basile.

‘The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.’ — Albert Einstein

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With the beauty of the Japanese crimson glory vine in his mind, Keita Kawasaki tried to express a cosmos as seen in two dimensions.

Dancing the flower dance.



INTRODUCTION

My choice of *Formidable Florists* for this book was to draw from my experiences and adventures with those creative people whose workshops I had attended, whose schools I had visited, whose flower shop floors I had swept, whose vans I had helped load. Journeys I had made, meals I had shared, nice dinners and parties. Art exhibitions, famous gardens and flower markets I had visited with them. And then there were those professional genius talents I had read about, watched from afar and felt utterly in sync with from books and magazines, read and collected during my travels. My experiences, my travels, my developed eye and my measured opinions are my own. It's always been the work that has captured me or a clever technique and later, when the professional curtain has lifted, there was the true person to be met behind the veil.

I wanted to invite and include those whom I thought to be significant floral artists, supreme craftsmen or women, designers, innovators. Those who have influenced floristry and the botanical arts in the last two decades. I wanted them to show and curate the work that represented them. Show their favourite piece from past or present, a piece that was a mission to accomplish, something with a special memory, or inspired by a painting, a sculpture, a dream, a new technique, a homage to someone or some place. A piece would ultimately might tell something about themselves, even if they didn't realize it. My wish was to draw out the individuality of each guest in relation to their cultural and geographical landscape, which would, could and might impact on their work. I wanted them to share their philosophies, work ethic, ask them who or what influenced them, how they saw themselves in their profession. My guests might be traditionally trained and able to throw off and break givens, or those untrained, intuitive and open, or those simply creating a new order as floral anarchists. I wanted to show these creative people not only as bouquet makers, whose locals adore them and their flower shops, but also as installation and botanical artists, event organizers, competitors on the international stage, as teachers, inspirers and influencers.

I organized this book for them and invited them to be part of this "exhibition in print". It's my personal selection of some of the world's most flower-obsessed designers, of gardening-mad florists and new botanical brats with something to say. The universality of their professed respect for Nature became apparent when their work and words arrived on my desk. The sameness of all of their working moments is about making beauty with her. Adding more colour and harmony to our lives, creating poetry, cushioning sadness, generating humour, elaborating celebration, creating to please, tease, soothe and stir emotion amongst us.

I didn't envisage it as a book just for florists. I wanted those who love flowers, gardens, sculpture, fashion, those who are travellers, design aficionados, fine foodies, museum goers, bookshop and library browsers to pick it up and look inside. Those sensitive to unity, curious about contemporary society who might and light upon some artists who happen to use flora as their medium. In doing so, I hoped they might discover the keys to an artist's work, to see connections and links with traditions, find freshness, be surprised, see floristry and design in all its everyday simplicity and magnificence and recognize its purposeful place in life and culture everywhere. These are some of today's Formidable Florists.

I thank every one of them for their gift of time, modesty, helpfulness and open enthusiasm for our project. To my muse Gabrielle McKone and the Arts and Culture Editor of this actual publishing house, Lannoo, Niels Famaey. I hope I have fulfilled both your hopes and vision of the project.

ISABEL GILBERT PALMER

Coromandel Peninsula, New Zealand
Beverly Hills, California, USA
Ghent, Belgium
July 2015



Botanical Installation, The lost Eden

A Z U M A M A K O T O

FUKUTSU CITY, FUKUOKA, JAPAN, 1976

BACKGROUND

The Fukuoka prefecture sits on the edge of the coast of Kyusho, Japan's largest island, strung with towns and cities. There is the obvious beach life and, in the heart of Fukuoka city itself, the internationally recognized ACROS Step Garden, while inland, parks of pure nature with rivers and streams, a volcano or two and, as one might expect of Japanese culture and heritage, temples and a famous castle. Azuma Makoto was born in this part of Japan, although he left soon after giving up his early studies in law and moved north. These beginnings may be a clue to his life in flowers. Perhaps it was the cherry tree blossoming, but more likely the wildflowers and his mother's back garden. Later, it was with his work at Tokyo's Ota Flower Market that a passion for flowers completely overtook him.

By coincidence, Fukuoka also happens to be the home of Japan's metal rock bands, so it comes as no surprise that Azuma Makoto, Japan's most original floral designer and international avant-garde florist phenomenon, belonged to one and is known to jam it up when the mood takes him. This musical aptitude adds some weight to his view of the connection between flowers and music. "A sound plays and disappears in a moment and flowers are by their nature also short-lived." He likens the temporal nature of a note or musical phrase to the temporal nature of botanicals. "Hearing is an important element for me, I am aware of the *sounds* of flowers."

PHILOSOPHY

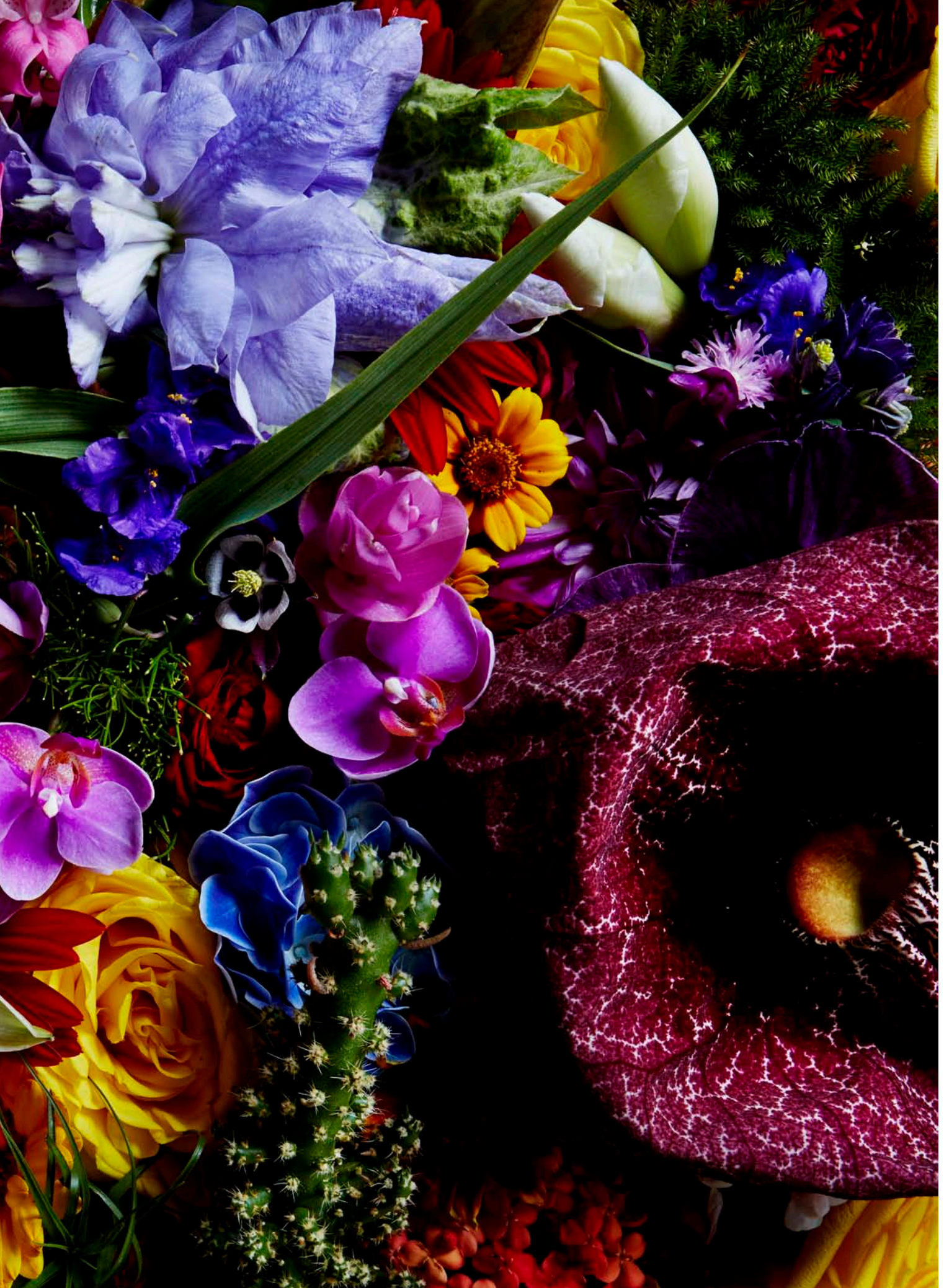
Azuma Makoto compares his work to that of a composer. The latter gathers sounds and layers them, and he gathers flowers and layers them in the same way. His creativity is driven by the beauty of fleeting moments, grounded in the Zen aesthetic of Wabi Sabi and the transience of all living things. The underlying principle of his work lies in the close "proximity of life and death", the experience of arriving and leaving. Whether making a bouquet for a private client, a commissioned installation or experimenting in his Botanical Research Institute (AMKK), he is attuned to the minute changes and evolutions that take place during this natural process.

Another approach to his work can be seen in an installation in a hillside cave, to which he shipped a fifty-year-old Bonsai pine tree and then organized a rock concert around it. His dedication to this kind of experimentation is endless.

"I create things 365 days a year, and for me it is not work, because flowers challenge and inspire me. I ask myself, how can I find new aspects and draw out the allure of a flower that nobody has seen before, not even the flowers themselves?" This perpetual questioning keeps him searching for new possibilities, new magnificence, so his addiction to beauty causes him to dream up ever more curious concepts. A project to fly a bouquet into space from Nevada's Black Rock Desert was simply because he "wanted to see beauty and the movement of plants and flowers suspended in space".



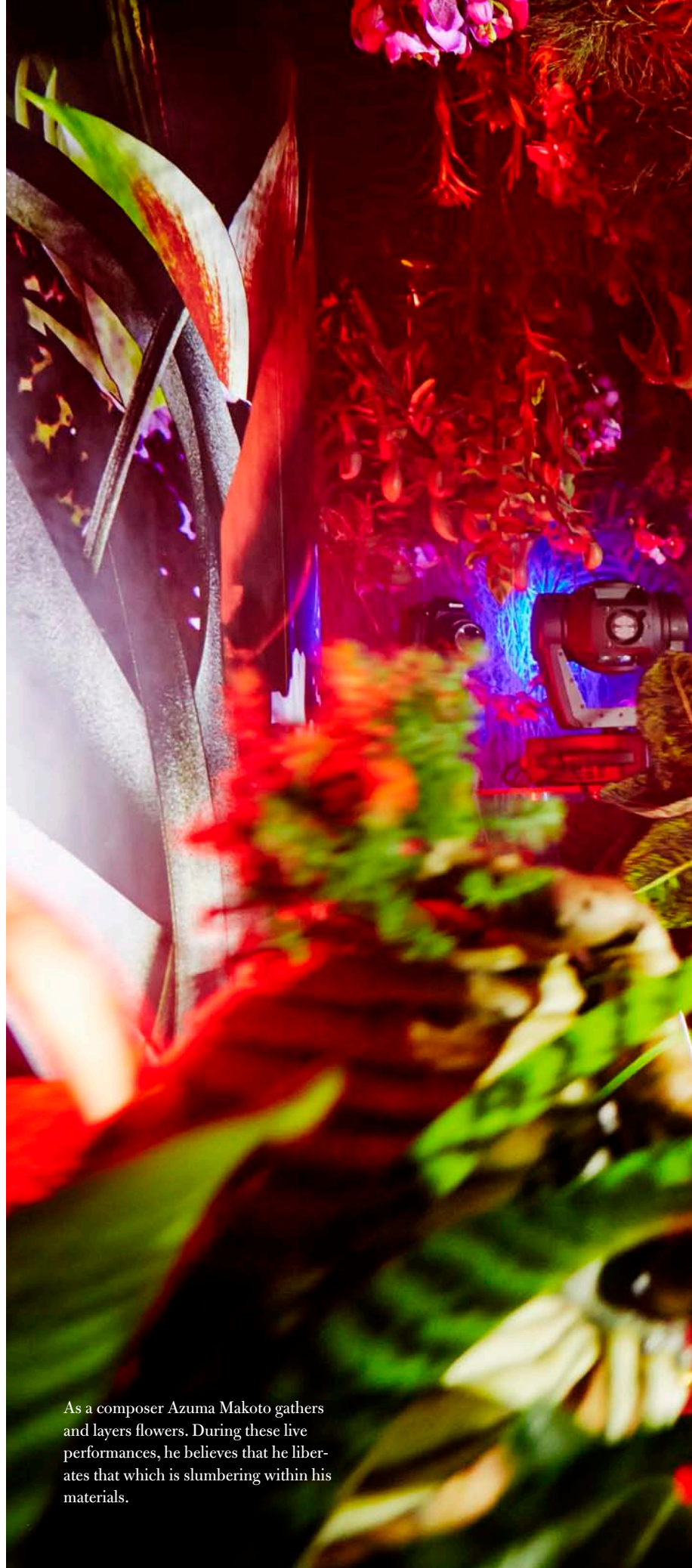
An exotic signature piece of floral anarchist Azuma Makoto: a disciplined and controlled kaleidoscope of colours, which gives you a glimpse of the 'nouveau' Japanese floral design.



These heightened performances, as he calls them (ever the rock musician), are essential to his mission to liberate what he believes sleeps within his materials. He thinks it is possible to unlock their inner essence by changing their context. Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), the famous Japanese artist and sculptor, also approached marble and stone with the same idea – to unleash hidden spirits. Azuma takes flowers off the table, pedestals and sets, and sends them elsewhere to shine more brightly. American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), in a similar vein, took his paintings off the easel and worked on the floor, claiming that “the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. My painting does not come from the easel”. Three artists, similar philosophies, similar creative intentions, different times.

“I am aware of the sounds of flowers.”

As a composer Azuma Makoto gathers and layers flowers. During these live performances, he believes that he liberates that which is slumbering within his materials.





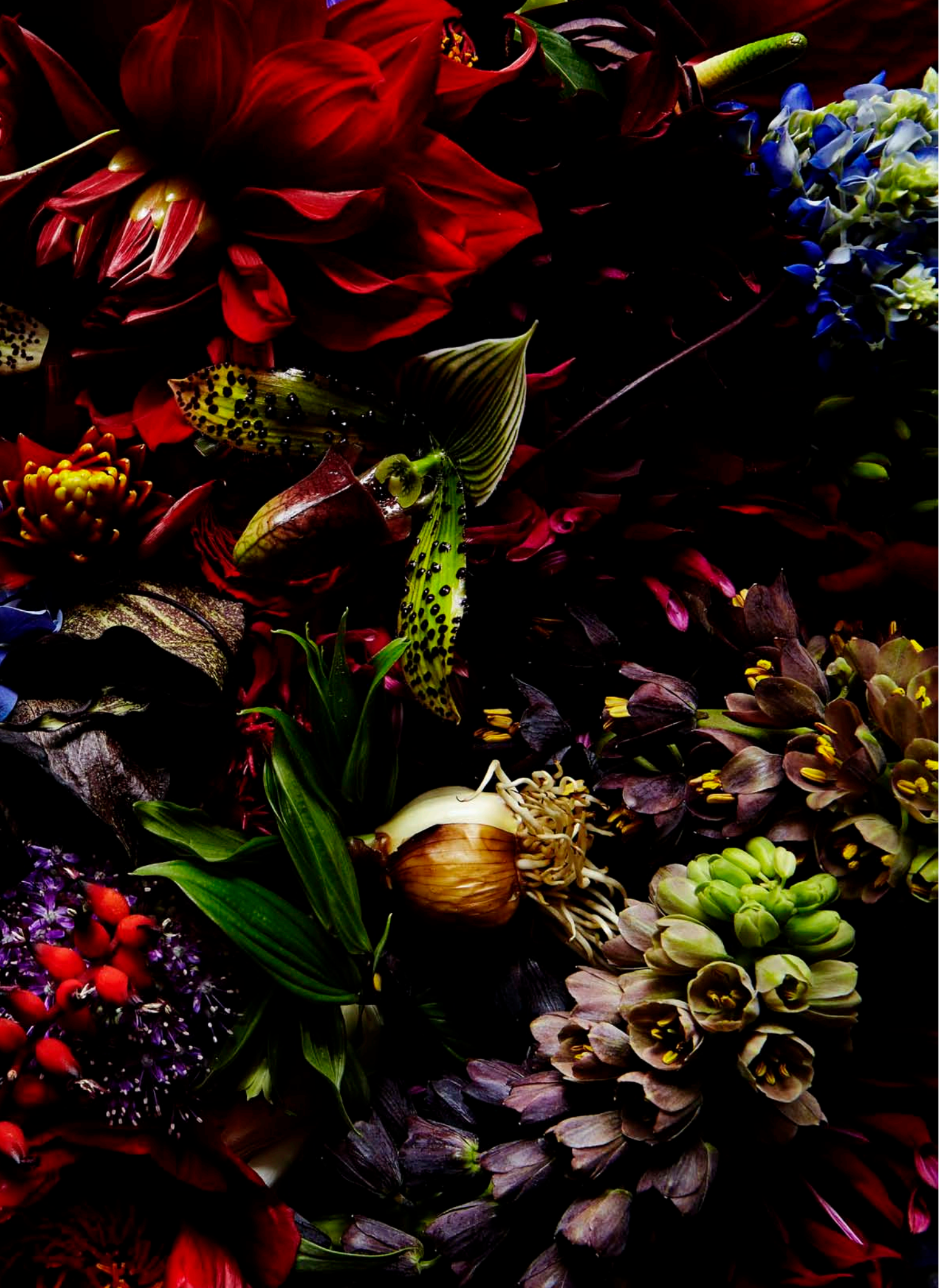
Order and disorder, construction and deconstruction, figuration and configuration. Two opposites meeting in a sensual flower crush.







The eventual fading of live flowers disguised in a garden of earthly delights.





pp. 18-20
Juxtapositions 1, 2, 3: Azuma Makoto
creates new beauty with a selection of
existing flowers.





WORK & STYLE

His enormous sense of pleasure in the use of bold colours and textures is clearly visible in the creation of his riotous baroque arrangements, his voluptuous structures, fifty shades of green masterpieces and frenzied jungle garden inspired works of art. With his creative courage, his luscious and crammed images of ripe tropical and exquisite flowers and leaves are nothing but a visual feast and acres away from the restraint of traditional Ikebana, normally associated with Japanese floristry.

“I cut off the lives of flowers, fresh in from the fields, perfectly beautiful in their natural state, and transform them into something more beautiful.” Elsewhere he has described this act as purely egotistical, but although unmistakably experimental, he does follow a golden rule. “I borrow materials from nature and follow one inviolable rule, their existence will never be mistreated. Flowers give pleasure to the eye and touch the heart with their brief existence, and they are worthy of full respect.”

When working, he contrasts natural and manmade materials in a combination of art, science, technology and photography, where at any time all or part of a plant is used. From seed to root, leaf, stem and flower, and then fungi, mosses, ferns, wayside weeds, or bonsai, he deliberately places them with extremely hard industrial attachments, not the kind seen in contemporary floral design: beads, wire, glue and glitter. Instead, he uses clamps, surgical equipment, industrial devices, water immersion, tubing, humidifying pumps and special lighting. Surprisingly, when put together, what evolves is a modern experience of beauty. The innate beauty of his natural materials is highlighted by the odd supports that surround them. Connecting the cosmos, nature and contemporary technical life in a way only a clever, sensitive and original florist can.

Azuma Makoto continues to travel to collaborate with international Haute Couture companies and for commissions in France, Belgium, Italy, China, and for pleasure to Mexico and the Amazon Region especially, in the guise of a modern plant hunter. As you might expect, his workspace in Tokyo is far from usual. “My studio is underground so as not to be affected by the outside air and it can maintain a fixed temperature to some extent. We use organic EL lighting with high colour exposure and we keep the humidity at around 60% for the flowers. There’s also a sound system that can produce sound outside the human audible range.” He and his assistants work in laboratory coats or rubber aprons; the environment is that of a sterile laboratory. “Everything is designed to maintain the flowers in their best condition.”

Besides his botanical research and experimental speculations, he is at heart a real florist and remains client focused. His greatest joy is when his flowers make his clients happy. Ever thoughtful about the world we live in, he and Shunsuke Shiinoki, his creative florist partner and photographer, and ex-band buddy, began to document their working processes from the first cut of fresh materials to the final moment of their dark decay. Admitting to the dramatic changes he sees in nature, they later devised an ambitious project in the form of the *Encyclopedia of Flowers 1 and 2*. These are a collection of glossy close-up images of what they describe as “man’s fingerprint on nature”. Before their eyes, “cherry blossoms have gradually got whiter”, and the “competition between unusual specimens that grow in the wild and those that are artificially developed” has accelerated. They felt that all these flowers needed to be recorded in modern times for the future, classifying both endemic species and manmade ones produced by hybridizing and development.

Azuma Makoto, his philosophy and his work will continue to influence, pique curiosity, stimulate discussion and be controversial. It is destined to raise awareness of what floristry and art can be at this moment of the twenty-first century.





Makoto's *Wunderkammer* of Amazonian plants, including roots and dead flowers. An installation as a tropical plant hunter, one of his passions.