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Following the Flowers

Libby Ellis finds beauty in all of life's stages. BY NATHANIEL READE

I'm not saying I had any reason to mistrust Libby Ellis, but when I first saw her pictures of flowers, I did not believe that they were photographs.

Hanging in Schule Chapel on Martha's Vineyard, Ellis's images of cosmos flowers look more like nineteenth-century etchings or the ink-brush paintings of some ancient Zen master. That's in part because Ellis photographs her flowers in black and white, but also because she has managed to create an other-worldly look that is unique, loaded with emotion, and strangely comforting.

Ellis, a bubbly person in a butterfly face mask, grew up in the Midwest and California. She first moved to Martha's Vineyard decades ago, quite literally after closing her eyes and pointing at a map. She says she



ABOVE: *Daucus carota* | *Queen Anne's Lace #4736*, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print. **LEFT:** *Cosmos I, August*, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print.



chose to make her portraits of flowers in black and white because it allows her to focus more on the shapes, moods, forms, and feelings. "When you take away color, you can see things you might have otherwise missed," she says. Ellis deliberately uses only the barest ingredients—an SLR camera, a paper backdrop, natural light—without any manipulation by computer, "only flowers I meet on the ground." She doesn't even arrange them; she lets them arrange themselves.

Ellis denies she's anything other than a vehicle—"I just follow the flowers," she says—but the meditative relationship she develops with her subjects produces images

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Sunflower I, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print. *Tulipa | Flaming Parrot Tulip II*, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print. *Cosmos VI*, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print. *Cosmos #660*, 2020, 22"W x 22"H framed, archival pigment print.



that are more than decorative: they speak about life, in all its strange stages. In one of my favorites, a cosmos has gone soft and droopy like a funeral shroud, while its partner is open and alert, and unopened buds wait in the wings.

At a time when mortality is heavy on our minds, these images remind us that the value of life is not all in youth and blooming. Looked at from the right angle, the most seemingly insignificant things have worth—even a wilted bloom or a gnarled seedpod. Libby Ellis's flowers don't judge or fear their own passing; they just do what they do, and it's beautiful.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Libby Ellis's show, *Cosmosis*, takes place at the Schule Chapel at Featherstone Center for the Arts in Oak Bluffs, Mass., through June 27. For more information, visit featherstoneart.org. She also has work on exhibit at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, Mass., through June 20. For more information, visit ccmoa.org. To see more of Ellis's work, visit libbyellis.com.