AMANDA MEANS: FLOWER LIGHT
Catalog Essay by: Richard Whelan
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Amanda Means makes her photographic images of flowers in the fertile soil of the borderlands between science and art, where the lines between objectivity and subjectivity, between fact and emotion, blur not because the apparent opposites soften to gray but rather because in their intensified radiance they seem to merge.

Means does not use either a camera or film to make her photographs. Her instrument is a sizeable enlarger whose lens is pointed toward the adjacent wall, onto which is tacked a large sheet of photographic paper. With wood and a black cloth reminiscent of the shroud needed to focus a view-camera in bright light, Means has constructed a large chamber, lined with white paper, between the powerful lamp and the lens. Into that chamber she places an actual plant, through whose leaves and petals the light passes in proportion to their translucency, while reflected light illuminates opaque stems. Since the heat of the lamp quickly wilts the specimens, Means has to work fast and may get only one or two prints before a fragile flower fades, though the images of death at the end of a session are sometimes the finest of all.

The result is a negative image, in which the parts of the plant or flower that block or absorb the most light appear lightest in the print. In this they superficially resemble Man Ray's botanical rayographs, made by layering flowers or plant parts directly onto photographic paper. Ray, however, used flowers more or less interchangeably with bric-a-brac. For Means, the specificity of the plants and flowers is paramount.

Throughout the history of botanical photography there has usually been something like a one-to-one relationship between the size of the subject and the size of the resulting image, but many of Means's photographs of a single flower or plant measure four by five feet. The photographer has written, "I'm trying to make images of plants that are so big and powerful that people have to stop and pay attention to them even though plants are small and silent."

Because Mean's photographs remove the distraction of color, which usually eclipses form in our experience of flowers, the fantastically intricate natural structures are fully revealed. Psychologists say that in our deepest levels of sleep we dream in black-and-white; we seem to dream in color only in the last hours before we wake up. In their reversal of tonal values, Means's flowers are indeed dream flowers, memory flowers, ghosts, glowing ectoplasmic flowers, but also flowers luminous with life-giving light. The photographs are to some extent laments for the extinction of so many plant species; and by confronting us overwhelmingly with greatly enlarged revelations of the miracle of floral architecture Means warns us of the magnitude of our impending losses.

Means's work brings photography full circle back to the non-camera work of Anna Atkins, who produced the 389 images for the three volumes of her *Photographs of British Algae* between 1843 and 1854 to supplement William Harvey's *Manual of British Algae*, published in 1841. Atkins is hailed as the first person ever to use photography to make an extended series of scientific images. She placed her specimens on prepared paper and exposed them to sunlight to make negatives, which were then printed (also by sunlight) on cyanotype paper, used today to make blueprints. Her exquisitely delicate and detailed studies of sinuous algae floating on their blue backgrounds are the fruit of a happy collaboration between the artist and what William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of paper negatives, called "the pencil of Nature," referring to the way in which images had been, as it were, sketched by the Sun.

Means has rightly said of her own work, "This is a different kind of light than the reflected light used by cameras containing film. The light in my photographs seems to emanate from the image itself, in much the same way as the light which comes from within the accumulations of paint in a painting." Means's work brings to mind one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's most glorious formulations. Emerson wrote that we should attempt to dwell "in the most earnest experience of the common day by reason of the present moment and the mere trifle of having become porous to thought, and bibulous of the sea of light."