

FLOWERS In Black & White (Book Review)
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by John Zheng

Leo Touchet is an American photographer living in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, who has published seven books of photographs including *Rejoice When You Die: The New Orleans Jazz Funerals*, *Chasing Shadows*, and *People Among Us*.

As a professional photographer, Touchet has traveled to more than fifty countries to shoot pictures. His photographs have appeared in national and international magazines, such as *Life*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *New York Times*, *Der Stern*, *Panorama* and *Popular Photography* and in corporate publications as well.

Most of Touchet's books have people as subjects, catching moments of their happiness, sadness, surprise, or poverty, but *Flowers in Black & White* shifts its attention to nature with a selection of flowers themed for this small collection of 28 black-and-white photographs taken in Louisiana, New York, Illinois, Florida, and Canada.

Touchet seems to think and shoot in black and white. Even after he began to use a digital camera, he still prefers to convert the color shots into black-and-white images, as he did for *Flowers in Black & White*. In real life, we are delighted by the colors and varieties of flowers in a botanical garden, but in the garden of Touchet's flower photographs, we are delighted by the close up shots in black and white. The difference in our delights is that we see the flowers with our naked eye in a botanical garden, but we see the flowers in our mind's eye in the black-and-white images. This is an aesthetic experience of beauty which involves creativity and imagination.

One of the challenges in photography is the decision to be made to portray a flower in color or in black and white. In the introduction Touchet mentions his aesthetic experience of beauty through black-and-white photographs, "With film cameras, I needed to use two cameras to shoot both color and black & white at the same time. This required me to think differently for each. It was like having a second brain. After a while, I realized I really did not like photographing in color. I'm much happier thinking in black & white."

His words tell us how he wants us to view his flower garden and to experience his way of thinking and looking. Touchet's creative thinking in black and white shows his aesthetic attitude toward an art expression as well as his awareness and observation of nature around him. The close-up images accentuate shades and shadows with a possibility to create a spatial relationship between the subjects and the black background and to engage the viewers' eyes more focally on the highlighted images.

Many of Touchet's photographs in *Flowers in Black & White* are characteristic of abstract art and appeal to imagination. Some of them highlight a solitary state of nature. The crocus (p. 6) ready to bloom holds a moment of aloneness in the calm morning and its luminous veins of the folded petals give an effect of warm shine of sunlight in contrast to the stillness of the deep black background. Another photograph of crocus is on page 18. It's blooming. The six petals are wide open to welcome the sunrise and the three stamens represent the production of life. It's veins, effected by the light, exaggerate a self-expression or even a human expression of joy. These two photographs seem to show an interactive communication between the photographer and the images as if both enjoy a moment of aloneness together or a satisfaction of being alone with each other.

Two other photos I like most are the cucumber flower on page 8 and the snowdrop on page 22. The first reminds me of my farm experience more than four decades ago when I was sent to the countryside for reeducation (in China). However, what catches my attention especially I not the flower but a tendril that stretches above the flower like a question mark, which immediately establishes a visual communication with the photographer or the viewer. The second gives an effective contrast of black and white. The deep black background sets off the bell-shaped white flower which droops as if from nowhere to engage you to see into the tranquil beauty of nature.

In short, Touchet's black & white photographs are delightful to the eye and the mind. I think they essentially reveal the joy of solitude in nature and in human nature as well.