

ABOUT

MAGAZINE



BAROQUE





PAULETTE *Tavormina*

And her exquisite still-life
photography work
inspired by the Baroque

Interview by [Luciana Cartolano](#)
Photos by [Paulette Tavormina](#)

Inspired by the works of the old masters, Paulette's captivating photographs are an invitation to interaction and discovery, and with each observation an exercise in a different visual and narrative encounter.

The subjects of her work range from the whimsical to the symbolic, tiptoeing the line between old and new, telling stories of the natural world and its constant cycles of renewal. Most objects are meticulously selected and nothing is random. From the flowers and their special care, to the insects and other objects (we can find a skull too) that -as she points out represent "their own story."

If an image is worth a thousand words, Paulette Tavormina's are not just a jumble of adjectives, but stories trapped in the play of light and shadow/darkness, color, among others.

In this interview, we will delve into her artistic process, her years dedicated to researching and studying 17th century still lifes - particularly those created by artists of the Dutch Golden Age.

We will discover what it took to achieve her own golden age of still life.

If you could describe Paulette Tavormina's artistic approach in 5 words, which words would you choose?

- Inspired
- Timeless beauty
- Evocative
- Whimsical
- Meticulous
- ...(This is the hardest question!)

**How did you get started as a fine art photographer?
What drew you to the art of still-life?**

When I first became aware of Natura Morta still life painters of the 17th Century and viewed their paintings in museums, they instantly touched and fascinated me. Their stories and the beauty of their subjects became a part of me.

It took me years to finally feel comfortable creating my own imagery inspired by them. As a photographer, I can be the director, set designer, researcher, and composer to create my own vignettes.

My images encompass everything I love - antiques, beautiful flora, butterflies, animals, art history, romance and personal expression.

My first love was antiques. My grandmother used to take me to an antique store near her home; I remember it was very cluttered. She purchased a miniature wooden table for me, similar to the ones I use today as the surface for all the other elements in my photographs.

Then, I began collecting things -shells, old keys, dice, lobster claws, ephemera, and tiny ceramic dishes-. There is magic about objects that evoke memories and connections. Both my grandparents were avid gardeners, winning blue ribbons for their Dahlias and Roses... so as a youngster, it was a special environment for me. I lived in New York City and started working at the Sotheby's auction house. It was the perfect environment for me, surrounded by beautiful works of art and working for the legendary chairman and chief auctioneer, John L. Marion.

My interest in photography began in 1990 when I took a black & white photography class and darkroom technique while living in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

I was immediately transfixed when my images appeared on paper bathed in chemicals.







During this time, my dear friend, Sarah McCarty, an extraordinary still-life egg-tempera painter, introduced me to the works of seventeenth-century painters, particularly Giovanna Garzoni and Maria Sibylla Merian, whose palettes and compositions inspired me. I was gobsmacked and decided then, to create my own "natura morta" still lifes photographically.

It wasn't until I moved back to New York City seventeen years later that I began my fine art photography, where I concentrated on my dream of creating still life-inspired images.

How did you become involved in photos/projects with such a Baroque approach? As we see in your work, it is influenced by previous centuries, mostly from the Old Masters in the 17th and 18th centuries. What were (or still are) your influences? What are some habits you've developed in your artistic work that help you to stay inspired?

I was very inspired by the 17th Century still life artists such as Pieter Claesz, Balthasar van der Ast, George

Flegel, Jacob van Hulsdonck, Juan Sanchez Cotán.

Francisco de Zurbarán use of dramatic light, Andrian Coote, placement of objects, Giovanna Garzoni's color palette and photographers I love are Irving Penn, Edward Steichen, and Josef Sudak, just to name a few.

I love viewing books on the Old Masters. There are always new ones to inspire and visiting museums which have collections of Still Lives. I recently went to the Metropolitan Museum in NYC to see their newly renovated galleries of Old Masters...it was quite a treat - seeing Vermeers, Clara Peters, Pieter Claesz.

Can you describe to us your process for crafting a piece from start to finish? What are some common elements you find yourself drawn to time and time again (we know you use many live elements like flowers, birds even fruits? What do those symbolize for you?

I take months imagining my next image or series; I do, at times, make a sketch of the image. I then search for the antiques to create the scene. Once I have a multitude of props, flowers, animals, etc., I can begin.



It takes a long time to set up the table, background, lighting, table set, and camera, which is tethered to the computer.

If I am working with flowers, either from my garden or the flower market in New York, I place them in the refrigerator until I am ready for them on the set. Getting the composition and lighting just right can take a day or two.

Flowers are the most challenging element to work with. They are already dying when they come out of the water and balancing them all together is difficult. I usually take hundreds of images. It is finished when I fall in love with it.

I then take out all my boxes of butterflies and insects and experiment with different shapes and colors until I find the perfect ones to go in the composition.

I then edit all the images and select the ones to send to my lab in New York (LTI Lightside). When it is printed, I work with them on color correction, etc., using Adobe Photoshop. After it is perfected, I then use Adobe Photoshop to highlight areas in the image.





How long do you spend setting up an individual still life and what do you think first: place, light, seasons, etc among the hero of the image? Do you take many images to get the one which you'll ultimately use?

Once I have purchased the antiques, flowers, fish, etc. It usually takes days to set up my photo set. To get the right camera angle, experiment with the props and flowers and work to have the composition the way I imaged.

When I photographed my Fiori de Fiori - season was a large part since I used flowers I had grown in my Connecticut garden - Dahlias, Tulips, Hydrangeas, Fritellaria, Peonies. The light I always use is a strobe light and a reflector to gain the dramatic light that I like.

I can take up to 500 photographs to achieve the image that I will ultimately use. I must love it in order to feel it is finished.

Could you describe to us your place of work, what working with Paulette looks like? Do you work alone or with a team? Is there any favorite tool you use for editing/post-processing your images?

I lived in a studio apartment when I began photographing in NYC in 2007. I had my equipment, lights, props, and all my gear in a small space.

My tripod was set up at the foot of my bed, with my set six feet away. It was there that I produced many intricate photographs for years. I bought fig trees and morning glory plants that were placed on my western windowsill so that I could harvest the leaves and flowers for my images. It all seemed to work. I married five years ago and moved into a home in the Connecticut countryside three years ago

I now have a large studio with closets and shelves to place my many boxes of props...owls, birds, shells, artifacts, insects, butterflies, old coins, etc. Now having a garden, I planted many flowers: Dahlias, Dutch Tulips, Lily of the Valley, roses, daffodils, peonies, morning glories, and fritillaria to grace my images.

When I photograph my fine art, I work alone. It takes days and extreme concentration. I have recently started a new series with my Ragdoll cats...my husband has helped me as the cat wrangler!

Through the years you've gained great success and recognition with either solo exhibitions (your latest Fiori del Giardino) and commercial projects -Sotheby's wine auction, and latest Gucci's The Alchemist's Garden perfume campaign-. How did you manage and receive this opportunity with a brand like Gucci? How was the challenge in creating the concept and what can



**"MEMORIES CAN BE
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you tell us about the process of this exquisite and amazing project.

I was contacted by The Style Council, an advertising agency in Paris for the Gucci project. They were looking for a photographer with my Old Master inspired images. Gucci then wrote and asked if I could come to Europe to photograph their perfume campaign. I worked with The Style Council on the imagery, the prop person, the flower person and the production team, etc., for months in preparation for the photo shoot. I brought along my own small props to add to the tableau. I also went to the prop house, picking out taxidermy birds and butterflies in London.

On the first shoot with them, they had a videographer. After I created an image and it was approved by Gucci, the table was wheeled into the video studio, where real birds and butterflies were carefully added to the opulent set by the handlers.

The challenge was working with such a prestigious company and not knowing what to expect - it turned out far more wonderful than I could have imagined.

It was quite a magical, fantastic photoshoot! The whole production team, Gucci and Coty were wonderful to work with. What an honor to be asked to work with them twice.





Are there any secrets to still life photography that amateurs might not know that you're able to share? What advice would you give to an artist just starting out in your medium?

Some of the most important factors in being a still life photographer is patience, attention to detail and a sense of being a storyteller.

When working with flowers, since they are dying as soon as they are taken out of the water, the composition must be completed before placing the fragile elements in their position – they are kept in a refrigerator. The placement of the simplest objects is paramount to the composition and how they all relate to one another.

Purchasing enough flowers or props and variations is important since you never know which will work out the best once you place them.

I think the most important and valuable element is to immerse yourself in the world of art – visiting museums, galleries, auction houses, reading books – educating your eye and one's self.

Being confident, finding imagery that you are passionate about and persevering is essential. Failures are blessings and can lead you to places you never imagined. ●



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