

Stories Without Words

Natura morta

Colorful and sumptuous, her pictures remind us of masterpieces of 17th-century painting. Photographer **Paulette Tavormina** creates worlds – and brings them to still life.

Photos Paulette Tavormina Text Bettina Bono

*«It is in the
nature of
things that
objects fall.
The secret lies
in keeping
the balance.»*



*«Dramaturgy
and lighting
create
the resemblance
to 17th-century
oil paintings.»*



Paulette Tavormina scours markets and antique shops in search of perfectly imperfect objects



*«The longer
your eye dwells
on a picture
the more
secrets it will
reveal.»*





There they lie, the fruits of summer. A little plum peeks out from between some plump peaches, and its stem seems to be reaching for a pear. A tiny ladybug is resting, cuddled into the fuzzy skin of a peach. And then it happens: the fall. The hapless little ladybug slips down into the bottom recesses of the fruit bowl. Within a matter of seconds, hours of work are ruined, and Paulette Tavormina has to start over. The seeming effortlessness with which this New York photographer's still lifes are arranged is deceptive: «It is in the nature of things that objects fall. The secret lies in keeping the balance.» For days at a time she will hole up in her studio and rebuild her compositions from scratch. Flowers, fruits, leaves – everything needs to be procured afresh, every day. Her obsession with detail and attention to authenticity as well as painstaking research have been ingrained in Paulette Tavormina for many years. As a food specialist in Hollywood she has collaborated with Oliver Stone (Nixon) among other filmmakers. Time and time again the same scenes would be reshot, always requiring the «identical» grilled steak in its place on the plate and the proper period crockery to adorn the film set's table.

Why she likes to photograph foodstuffs?
Paulette Tavormina: «I have an Italian soul – I love to eat!»



Paulette Tavormina dedicated her favorite picture to her mother. Some of the objects portrayed in it belong to her.

«Used objects have a certain magical quality»

passion for objects. Paulette began to collect: tiny pieces of crockery, postcards, dice, shells – her girl's bedroom becomes a museum for small objects. She would arrange her finds in such a way that they told stories.

THE MAGIC OF OBJECTS

Her siblings made fun of her passion. And apparently they continue to do so, but now they provide their sister with items from their home country: snails, honey bees and butterflies from the family estate in Palermo, pomegranates from their cousin's garden at Menfi. It can take Paulette Tavormina months to gather the suitable objects for one of her compositions. Often these items will be found on travels and at flea markets. Like the little Swiss chalet that allows you to listen to the tinkling of cowbells – a souvenir of Switzerland and her uncle Peter in Zurich, her first cheese fondue and a stroll through a herd of cows on Lucerne's Mount Pilatus. Or the porcelain pitcher painted with the orchards of Versailles, a lucky find at a Paris flea market: «I like the idea that Marie-Antoinette may have looked at exactly these trees.» Another object that Paulette Tavormina fell in love with in Paris is a small brass scale. Later she will spot its twin in a Vermeer painting. Paulette was working as a commercial photographer and food stylist for cookery books when she came to know more about the works of classical 17th century artists. She is particularly fascinated and inspired by the compositions of Gio-

HER FIRST LOVE: ANTIQUES

Afternoon naps, chocolate cookies, tea with milk – and antiques. These are Paulettes's favorite childhood memories. Despite her Sicilian roots she was born in the heart of New York and raised on Long Island, often spending her afternoons with her grandmother. When she was eight years old her granny took her to visit her first antique store: «I remember exactly. The shop was chock-full of stuff and untidy – a paradise.» Back then her grandmother bought her a little wooden table, not unlike those Paulette Tavormina uses to arrange her items on today. This was the origin of her

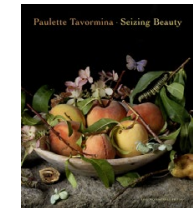
First she worked for an antique store, then for the auction house Sotheby Parke Bernet. It was only later that Paulette Tavormina discovered photography. Combining objects so that they tell a story, however, is a skill that she developed as a little girl.



vanna Garzoni and Maria Sibylla Merian. «I was thrilled. They were the reason I wanted to create my own Natura Morta – in photography, of course.»

LIKE THE OLD MASTERS

Despite the fact that flowers, being both delicate and intractable, present a real challenge to photographers, Paulette Tavormina really enjoys working with them. And so, it hardly comes as a surprise that her favorite photograph depicts roses, her mother's pearl necklace, sealed letters – and the little brass scale from Paris; a composition that she has dedicated to her mother. Here, too, the highlight on one of the rose petals proves that Paulette Tavormina – like a 17th-century painter – applies the same dramaturgy and dedication to coax the light to delicately kiss the objects as in the works of the Old Masters. And just as Paul Cézanne once claimed: «I will astonish Paris with an apple!» we now know that Paulette Tavormina can do this with a full bowl of fruit. ✨



The new book of Paulette Tavormina's works: «Seizing Beauty» (in English), published by www.monacellipress.com