

2PROJECTS:
| FLOWERS FROM THE
GARDEN | VANITAS

Lemons and Pomegranates,
After JvH, 2009
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An Exclusive Interview With **Paulette Tavormina**

BY ARIEL SU

Tavormina's still lifes are inspired by the Dutch, Spanish, and Italian still lifes of the Golden Age. But what the prototypes meant in the past remains in the past. We see the past only with eyes on the present.

As T.S. Eliot said, "*The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.*"

The past cannot be relived but can be converted into meaning for the present. The human condition is incessantly evolving, trapped in the gravitation pull of the future. Tavormina's still lifes are her poetic way of expressing respect for the human condition.

- Wayne V. Andersen

**Fiori del
Giardino**
Flowers from the Garden

An Exclusive Interview With **Paulette Tavormina**

Paulette Tavormina is an internationally awarded photographer and recipient of the *Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant*.

Tavormina lives and works in New York City and Connecticut. Amidst the bustle that defines the city and the tranquility of the country orchards, she can often be found searching for the perfectly imperfect flora that characterizes her photographs. Her arrangements often recall the sumptuous detail of seventeenth-century Old Master still-life painters and serve as intensely personal interpretations of timeless, universal stories. With a painterly perspective reminiscent of Francisco de Zurbarán, Adriaen Coorte, Juan Sánchez Cotán, and Giovanna Garzoni, Tavormina creates worldly still lives.

Tavormina also has a successful career as a commercial photographer, recently shooting Gucci's *The Alchemist's Garden*

perfume campaign. She has photographed works of art for *Sotheby's*, fragrances for *GOOP*, and recipes for *The Del Posto Cookbook* (Hachette) with chef Mark Ladner. She has been commissioned by *National Geographic Magazine* and *The New York Times*, among others. Previously, Tavormina was a prop and food stylist in Hollywood, her work seen on the silver screen in seven films, including *Nixon*, *The Astronaut's Wife*, *A Little Princess*, and *The Perfect Storm*.

Tavormina's photographs are held in museum, corporate, and private collections and exhibited in Paris, London, Moscow, Lugano, Madrid, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Palm Beach, Boston, Palm Desert, and San Francisco.

Tavormina's work has been published in international magazines and *The New York Times* and *Architectural Digest* reviewed her monograph, *Paulette Tavormina: Seizing Beauty* (Monacelli Press, 2016).



Flowers, Fish and
Fantasies, III, 2012
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Concert of Birds, 2018
Paulette Tavormina ©
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An Exclusive Interview With Paulette Tavormina

BY ARIEL SU

LENS MAGAZINE:

Thank you for this interview, Paulette. We were highly impressed by your artistic style. In this interview, we will focus on two of your fabulous series, "Vanitas" and "Flowers from the Garden," or Fiori del Giardino, both excellent expressions of your unique style influenced by the Golden Age of the 17th Century and the Old Masters. But first, let's start with your background and passion for photography. What drew you to the fine art photography field in the first

place? Were you influenced by a surrounding artistic atmosphere since childhood? Where did you gain and develop your technique?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA:

Thank you, Ariel; it's a pleasure having this interview. 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



Vanitas, Journeys,
After EC, 2015
Paulette Tavormina ©
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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-and-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.

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BUTTERFLIES SYMBOLIZE METAMORPHOSIS, WINE – THE LOVE OF EARTHLY PLEASURES. THE ROSE AND TULIP – LOVE. I HAVE BEGUN A NEW SERIES INVOLVING MY RAGDOLL CATS. . . THEY ARE VERY MUCH ALIVE AND LOVE BEING ON THE SET.

- PAULETTE TAVORMINA



Merlin, 2019
Paulette Tavormina ©
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An Exclusive Interview
With Paulette
Tavormina

L. M: Your artistic style is influenced by previous centuries and actually gives us a scent of the past from the Old Masters in the 17th and 18th centuries. Considering that you live and work in modern New York, there is an extreme dissonance between the big city lifestyle and the artistic outcome. How would you explain your passion for this artistic style?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: 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.



Anthony and Cleopatra, 2017
Paulette Tavormina ©
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Standing in front of these paintings at The Metropolitan Art Museum in New York or The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I am struck by their strong emotional resonance and ability to transcend time and place. I imagine Coorte, Zurbarán, Garzoni, and their contemporaries as they gathered worldly treasures and quotidian objects to tell of

newfound wealth, passion, and the inevitable passage of time. The essence of these paintings lingers with me as I gather my own flora, fauna, butterflies, and treasured antiques to create the romantic vignettes within my photographs. The Natura Morta images I have made in response to the Old Masters are intensely personal

interpretations of timeless, universal stories. Years from now, I hope the photographs I create will affect someone as profoundly as the Old Masters' paintings have affected me. In one of these paintings, the artist included the words "Eram Qvod Es." The translation resonates within me: "Once I was where you are now."



L. M: Where does the inspiration come from? More than Giovanna Garzoni and Maria Sibylla Merian, are you influenced by any specific artists or photographers?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: I was very inspired by the 17th Century still life artists such as Pieter Claesz, Balthasar van der Ast, Georg Flegel, Jacob van Hulsdonck, Juan Sanchez Cotan – there are many. The photographers I love are Irving Penn, Edward Steichen, and Josef Sudak, just to name a few.

L. M: In your work, we are witnessing the use of many live elements, including snails, birds, owls, and butterflies. What is the philosophy behind each element and motif? Where did these animals come from? I'm sure our

readers would like to know that they are alive...

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: I have used live birds...Zebra Finches and a yellow canary for two of my photographs. The Zebra Finches flew the coop and slept on my bookcases at night...I captured and photographed them but decided to use taxidermy birds and owls going forward! I have used real fish in several photographs... had to buy a 10-gallon fish tank. They all lived happily after they were featured. My vignettes have used many fruits, animals, butterflies, bees, dragonflies, turtles, insects, crabs, shells, and flowers. Pomegranates symbolize prosperity, peaches – truth and trinity, quince – a symbol of love, figs – a fruit of knowledge, and sweetness of virtue. Butterflies symbolize



metamorphosis, wine – the love of earthly pleasures. The rose and tulip – love. I have begun a new series involving my Ragdoll cats...they are very much alive and love being on the set. It has been interesting, to say the least.

Left Page:
Orchard Pears, 2016
Paulette Tavormina ©
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Top: Zebra Finches
and Tulips, 2027
Paulette Tavormina ©
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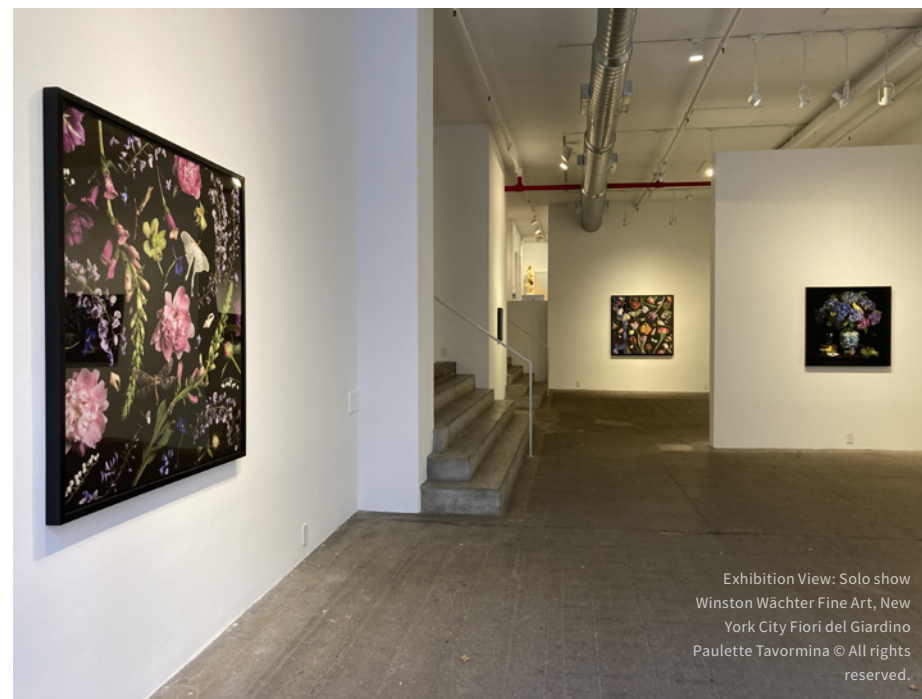


An Exclusive Interview
With **Paulette
Tavormina**

L. M: In your series Vanitas, you create a more profound, even a bit dark atmosphere, which almost looks like it was taken from the alchemist's desk/ lab in the 17th century. What is the philosophical idea behind this project?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: The Vanitas paintings created in the 16th and 17th centuries depicted the transience of life, and the message is that we cannot take our worldly

possessions with us. This was an important genre of painting at the time. I knew that I would need many artifacts to create the images, and luckily, I was awarded the *Pollack - Krasner Foundation* grant which allowed me to purchase many props for the series. I bought an hourglass, tiny scales, and tiny taxidermy birds from the Paris flea markets, clay pipes and Dutch glass roomers from Amsterdam, antiques and vellum books in London, and butterflies and dragonflies from



Exhibition View: Solo show
Winston Wächter Fine Art, New
York City Fiori del Giardino
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Deyrolle in Paris. For the purchase of the skull, I needed a medical letter. I named it Merlin as I knew I would live with it for some time. The dark, mysterious atmosphere illuminates the serious subject. Life and death are a part of the human condition.

Left Page: Dutch Tulips
and Goldfish, 2021
Paulette Tavormina ©
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Top: Botanical VII,
Tulips, 2013
Paulette Tavormina ©
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L. M: Can you describe your workflow, step by step, from the stage of the idea to the final outcome? Do you make sketches and plans before arranging the still life at the studio?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: I can spend 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.

” YEARS FROM NOW, I HOPE THE PHOTOGRAPHS I CREATE WILL AFFECT SOMEONE AS PROFOUNDLY AS THE OLD MASTERS' PAINTINGS HAVE AFFECTED ME.

- PAULETTE TAVORMINA



GUCCI

THE
ALCHEMIST'S
GARDEN

L. M: What can you tell us about your studio? Do you have a permanent team working with you?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: 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,



GUCCI

THE
ALCHEMIST'S
GARDEN

Gucci's The
Alchemist's Garden
Paulette Tavormina ©
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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!

L. M: What kind of editing/post-processing do you use? What gear do you use, and is there any favorite software?



Gucci's The
Alchemist's Garden
Paulette Tavormina ©
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PAULETTE TAVORMINA: For Editing, I have worked with LTI Lightside NYC for all the post-processing since 2007. They are incredibly professional - their expertise and dedication to excellence are paramount to my work. Once the images are color corrected, I then work using Adobe Photoshop on the highlights. My gear is a Hasselblad X1D 11 50 camera, 120 Macro lens, Broncolor strobe lights, and Broncolor soft boxes; I use Phocus software from Hasselblad.

L. M: You've gained great success in recent years through solo exhibitions and commercial projects for known brands, such as the Ricci Jewelry rings collection, Sotheby's wine auction, and the latest Gucci's The Alchemist's Garden perfume campaign. How did you receive this exciting opportunity with Gucci, and what can you tell us about the process of this project? Were there any particular challenges in creating the concept?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: 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. 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.



Dahlias & Figs, 2021
Paulette Tavormina ©
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Peaches and Morning
Glories, 2010
Paulette Tavormina ©
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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. It was quite a magical, fantastic photoshoot! The whole production team, Gucci and Coty were wonderful to work with.

” **THE VANITAS PAINTINGS
CREATED IN THE 16TH AND
17TH CENTURIES DEPICTED
THE TRANSIENCE OF LIFE,
AND THE MESSAGE IS THAT WE
CANNOT TAKE OUR WORLDLY
POSSESSIONS WITH US.**
- PAULETTE TAVORMINA



This year, they asked me to photograph new fragrances for "The Alchemist Garden" perfume campaign, which was quite an honor. I worked with the same creative team, and it was another fantastic experience. I love their perfume!

L. M: Congratulations, Paulette. Your solo show will be exhibiting the series "Fiori de Giardino" at the NYC-based gallery Winston Wächter Fine Art, on view from 16 Nov 2023 to 6 Jan 2024. 530 West 25th Street, NYC. What size of prints will you be exhibiting? Will it be lithographs signed and numbered?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: The photographic prints are archival digital prints that are all editioned and signed.

The print sizes are 16x20, 22x30, 24x24, 36x36, and 52x52 inches.

L. M: What advice can you give the young photographer trying to make his way in the field?

PAULETTE TAVORMINA: My advice to young photographers would be to have a passion for your vision and to be persistent. It is essential to research, visit museums, libraries, and galleries, and allow yourself to take risks. There will be failures along the way, but it is the process, those failures can take you to places you never thought you would be, which can be invaluable.

Top: Blue Hydrangeas & Yellow Canaries. 2022
Paulette Tavormina ©
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Right: Vanitas VI.
Reliquary, 2015
Paulette Tavormina ©
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- PAULETTE TAVORMINA



Paulette Tavormina

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