

*Absorption and Delight:*  
*On Jean Sousa's Peony Blossom Series*  
by  
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To look at Jean Sousa's Peony Blossom Series is to be progressively dazzled and seduced. With their mix of elegance and visual delight, these photographs draw on the anatomy of the flower, its forms, structures, and ravishing colors, to create images that express a remarkable range of sensations and emotions. Begun as close-up digital photographs of the peonies in her garden, they are then manipulated to varying degrees using Photoshop. The first works in this series feature larger formal elements that convey an almost figural quality. More recent works, evidently more extensively worked, feature many smaller, imbricated forms that evoke the sense of an intimate yet vast surface—a skin stippled, rumpled or folded. In her very latest photographs, Sousa returns to larger forms, placing them in a deeper, more sculptural space than before.

While the immediate source of this remarkable series may be found in the conjunction some four years ago of the marvelous show at the Art Institute of Cy Twombly's late work (including particularly his enormous peony paintings) with the blossoming of peonies in her garden, Sousa's photographs are the product of an ongoing artistic investigation informed by a sophisticated understanding of the tradition and conditions of contemporary art, further enriched by her familiarity with the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which she recently retired. It is difficult to look at these works without being reminded of Claude Monet's six Grainstacks paintings, as well as the three later paintings of water lilies in the museum's collection. Indeed, the progression of the Peony Blossom Series seems to echo that of Monet's development, as they move from simpler, monumental forms, to the complex shimmering fields of the later works. A more obvious association might seem to be Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings, but while O'Keeffe makes still monuments of her blossoms, Sousa's seem to breathe or shiver in a momentary present.

The Peony has traditionally occupied an important place in Eastern painting and poetry where it is associated with female beauty and romance, good fortune and prosperity, and even nobility. Blossoming (abundantly) in the spring and early summer, it is associated with youth and fertility as well. It has long been known as a medicinal plant both in the East and West. Its western name is taken from Greek mythology and refers to Paeon, a physician of the Gods.

While these photographs are evidently concerned with nature, they are not still-lives, or landscapes. As in traditional iconography concerning flowers, they are about the sensual, physical life and its temporality, about the consuming, yet ephemeral power of beauty. They are also, crucially, about art as the domain in which these qualities can be most fully realized and preserved. They celebrate sensuality, but also mastery. The artist's hand and eye, her patience and her judgment, are felt in the images both internally—in the choice, the joining and the elaboration of the peonies' floral elements, and in her

ongoing exploration of the images themselves. Their range is remarkable, from boldly contrasting forms and colors, darks and lights, to the subtlest of shimmering, seemingly iridescent fields.

The choice of the vertical format allies them, as Sousa has noted, with Asian traditions of scroll and screen painting. It also ties them to earlier works she made, in which vertically aligned naked bodies appear transformed to stone or vegetable matter. Even without an overt reference to the human body, the vertical format of the Peony Blossom Series encourages us to make that association. Within the vertical frame, movement is predominantly rising and falling, rather than, as in a traditional, horizontal landscape format, from side to side, and suggests the cycle of plant (and not just plant) life—rising, budding skyward, and then progressively drawn back to earth.

Prior to and parallel with her career as a museum educator, Sousa has pursued her art, moving from performance, to film, to digital still photography. Her work celebrates our entanglement in the world. To take only two examples of her films: *Swish* (1982) uses close-ups of a naked body in motion filmed with a moving camera with an open shutter resulting in each frame being a different image, turning the figure into an incandescent, whirling vortex. Conversely, in *Spent Moments* (1984) an apparently straight-forward narrative of a young woman pursuing sundry activities in her small house filmed in ravishing, richly halated black and white, takes on haunting power through the juxtaposition of terse title slides with beautifully composed, languorous passages. In this film the light, the space, the weather, even the woman herself, together with the staccato passages of text become a haunting evocation of a season, a world of intense personal introspection. In Sousa's early still photographs, bodies become stone or vegetable matter, or are captured as shifting presences dissolved to atmospheres. In both her film and her still work the point of view is one in which boundaries between living subjects and their environments are blurred, contravened, or even denied.

There is a deep continuity in her work in which the mysterious relationship of the photographic medium to our experience of time is explored. The painstaking process of working through the stutter of nearly identical single frames in film repeats in Sousa's equally painstaking construction of formal fields in the Peony Blossom Series. Emphasizing the mystery of how repeated photographic stillness gives way to movement, or of how an instant can expand to represent a totality suggests the way in which our lived present is shaped and stretched by sensational elaboration.

In a number of these images Sousa contrasts the flowing forms of the petals with perfect spheres of dew resting upon them. In a few they multiply to become almost equal partners with the undulant surfaces on which they rest. While acknowledging the essential fragility and ephemerality of life, they also suggest perfection, cleansing, and refreshment. They are a wonderful metaphor for the artist's gaze, that lingering caress, and for ours as well as we rest in the contemplation of these inspiring and consoling works of art.