

ARTFORUM

PANDEMIC FLOWERS

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh on the art of Luciano Perna

October-November 2020



Luciano Perna, *April 22 2020 6:46 pm Schlumbergera*, 2020, ink-jet print, 17 × 22".

A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of evil, which is the basis of intense communication.

—Georges Bataille

NOT REALLY A SURPRISE that my discovery of Luciano Perna's work—a digital chance encounter—occurred under the conditions of Covid confinement. Every other isolated day, just in time, I came across one of Perna's Facebook postings, mostly images of plants and sundry stranded objects, at least momentarily arresting the maelstrom of self-pitying lamentos and self-promoting mementos, the ceaseless acts of autopropaganda that so-called social media now impose more than ever on almost everybody as the first and last resort of a presumably public articulation. An artist utterly unknown to me seemed to suspend his floral semaphores between alarm and seduction. Alarm, since Perna's random specimens were apparently not singled out just by an anxiety over the increasingly precarious ecology of plants, threatened with extinction by perpetually diversified political and economic practices of chemical and climatic destruction, but also by the sense of an aggravated actuality imagining the dangers to life in general under the pandemic. Seduction, since these images not only mobilized flora's momentous transhistorical attractions, but also deployed nature morte's age-old meditative powers to stall the paradoxical precipitation of time under the pandemic's stultifying evacuation of most of the structured functions from everyday life.

Flowers (even more than faces) have been photography's archetypal phototrophic traps since the technology's inception. Silent immobile models, nature fetishized, or fetishes disguised as nature, sexual metaphors and substitutes, photographic florals have promised for more than a century and a half that

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a fusion of nature and culture could be sustained. Or that this opposition could be synthesized one more time, or that the ever more rapid withering of nature could at least be arrested for another moment. Even mere remains of botanic and biotic beauty, accidentally caught, elaborately staged, or systematically administered in archives, could still assure us of our lives. While some eminent photographers (August Sander, for example, or Allan Sekula) would never have dreamed of falling, or dared to fall, for the nonsubject, most of them did. From Aubry to Blossfeldt to Cunningham, from Penn and Porter to Twombly and Tillmans, there is not a letter in the alphabet that could not be associated with the name of a photographer of flowers (or peppers). But unlike Gertrude Stein's rose, a photograph always became and always remained only a photograph.



Luciano Perna, *July 20 2020 8:26 am Night Blooming Cactus (Cereus) II*, 2020, ink-jet print, 22 × 17".

As Perna's additions to the endless lineage affirm, every image of a flower projects the desire for an instant gratification, if not a reunion with an imaginary origin and wholeness, and every photograph annuls that very desire by decisively fracturing access to nature's figments. And the supreme beauty of every image of a flower appears to be born of isolation, vested with the utter refusal or failure to cope with any contextual aspect of the sociopolitical reality of the moment. In this vein, Perna's still lifes (or rather, my attraction to his images) are clearly the blossoms of current confinement and despair. Their near monumental singularity grows from melancholia's conventional compulsion to strip relations and meaning from the objects of the world. Stone-faced subjects in disguise, these blooms reflect the actual violence necessary to forge a living subject's involuntary identification with isolation and precarity, and trigger an incendiary urge to confront the losses, now all the more manifest.

Staged artificially against a black background, these images already exude a whiff of the *pompes funèbres*, as though they knew all too well that this might be their only public appearance before the extinction, if not of the plant itself, then at least of the spectatorial patience to spend even one more moment on melancholic contemplation. Yet dialectically, the chromatic intensity of Perna's still lifes, their technological luminosity as much as their slippery mobility from site to site, might easily antique anybody's desire to possess a printed picture. Perna seems to have grasped the paradox that the still life's ancient mnemonic power of a sudden arrest of time might nowadays find its optimal place and distribution form in the perpetually restless cycles of asocial digitality.

Geopolitically suspended in California between two failed nation-states, his native Naples (Italy, not Florida) and the Venezuela of his youth, Perna's transhistorical and transnational still lifes seem to lack

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not only context but also a grounding in the locally specific traditions of the genre. Being deprived of or detached from immediate access to any of the genre's constructed or imagined conventions frees Perna from the challenge or the burden to sustain and elaborate his work along these tracks, whereas a photographer like Andreas Gursky in Germany can always claim the Sander-Becher axis as the legitimizing foundation of a chromatic and spatial expansion of critical *neusachlich* principles, when in fact he only inflates spectacle's stagnant phantasmagoria.



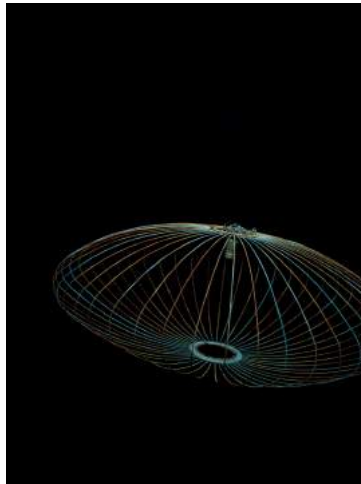
Luciano Perna, *Cosmonaut Glove and Seashell*, 2020, ink-jet print, 22 × 17".

But Perna also deviates from more comparable artistic and photographic contemplations of the current conditions of object experience. The casual and aleatory constellations of Wolfgang Tillmans's *natures mortes*, for example, still sustain a residual narrative that promises to reconcile us with an object world that retains moments of context and motivation, however implausible. Presumably these chance arrangements accidentally encountered—albeit only momentarily seen by the privileged eye of the photographer—serve as evidence of a present, and perhaps even a providence of a future, subject-object cohesion. By contrast, the deictic isolation of Perna's still lifes frustrates the primal desire for this type of conciliatory spatial grounding and temporal calm and reminds us of the pernicious causality between melancholy and depoliticization and the potential vacuity of any iconically mediated consolation. Or, in another comparison with a practice that at first sight might appear similarly engaged with photographic genre conventions, it becomes obvious that Perna does not dispense with the glacial and consequential rigor of Christopher Williams, one of his peers during their studies at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1980s. Williams has consistently transferred Michael Asher's analytical lessons—which brilliantly elucidated the ever-expanding abolition and pervasive controls of public social space, once the domain of critical sculptural thought and production—from the sculptural and architectural registers to the regimes of photographic representation. That transfer necessitated an intensity of de-skilling correlative to and coeval with the actual loss of public experience that Williams could achieve only by outsourcing the very concept and practice of photographic mastery to commercial studios, so that industry standards replace artistic agency, and the photograph itself acquires the epistemological status of the readymade.

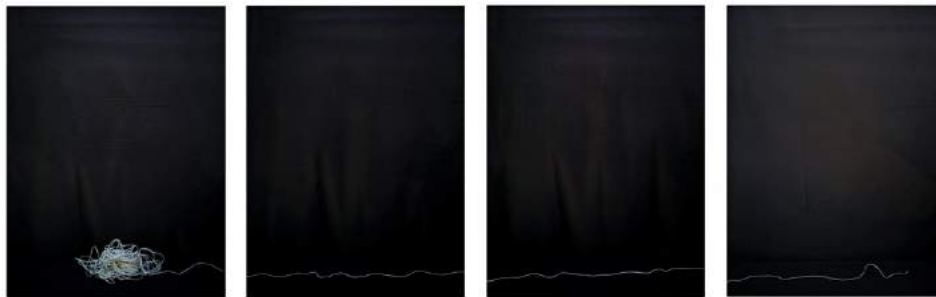
By contrast, Perna retains or feigns some semblance of agency, however estranged, especially in those images that shift from the life of plants to the death of objects of daily life—most strikingly in *Bye Bye*

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George Nelson, 2020, in which the wiry skeleton of a hanging lamp by one of America's most productive designers, who treated the nation's corporate and domestic spaces to a monotonously similar biomorphic cure, takes on an uncanny (and to sculpture scholars most likely unwelcome) similarity to one of the central icons of modernist history, Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction no. 12*, ca. 1920. Perna's careful photographic exposure of the ribs of the once-luminous elliptical cage, having shed its plastic, faux-Japanese-paper skin, appears like a minor ruin of domesticity, its design now voided of its utopian deceptions. If Rodchenko's *Hanging Oval Construction* defined sculpture as the construction of mathematically exact stereometric objects, invoking cosmic order to induce a phenomenology of collectively accessible spatial equality, Perna's space skeleton subverts these orders, or rather their banal echoes in American interiors, with a sardonic literalism, if not a clownish derision, comparable to de Chirico's travesties of Cubism. Perna might not have been able to completely suppress his Italian rhizomes after all.



Luciano Perna, *Bye Bye George Nelson*, 2020, ink-jet print, 22 × 17".



Luciano Perna, *String in Four Parts*, 2020, four ink-jet prints, each 22 × 17".

Similarly, with *String in Four Parts*, 2020, in what could easily be misread as yet another spurious lament for the historical avant-gardes, Perna performs an equally literal recoding and re-metaphorization of a different, no less important device of modernism, one of its materials originally charged with pure subversion: string. Once, as in Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* in 1913, it functioned as the most cunning materialization of drawing's counter-concepts and the most radical assault on authorial intentionality. Thenceforward, all the way from Arp to Eva Hesse's work of the '60s, string served as drawing's subversive substitute and the signal device of the craft's de-subjectivation. Seemingly continuing this tradition, Perna provides us with an abstract photographic quadriptych that merely

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traces the linear extension of string across four equal-size panels. But in a fifth, separate photograph, the artist displays the source of the radical self-referential spatial extension: a ball of twine that now appears in the company of a pair of substantial metallic scissors (inevitably calling up the Fates or the Norns). Additionally animated by a Caravaggio's plasticity and luminosity, Perna's reversal of a former self-referential precision provokes the question not only of whether such an inversion is epistemologically desirable, but also whether mobilizing mythical terms in this moment might not simply resurrect reactionary thought altogether.



Luciano Perna, *Scissors and String*, 2020, ink-jet print, 22 × 17".

The imperative to be alert to these questions becomes even more urgent in an encounter with a series of rephotographed late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sepia-tinted albumen prints of sculptural objects from various museums in Naples, images that, given Perna's still-life pursuits, appear utterly heterogeneous at first. Rephotographing, the quintessentially allegorical act first formulated and practiced by Sherrie Levine in the early '80s, cathected more or less randomly on icons of photographic modernity (e.g., Eliot Porter, Rodchenko, Edward Weston). Perna's appropriated museum photographs shift from a medium of production to a register of institutional and discursive dissemination. The artist seems to have detected a peculiar correspondence between the institutional obsolescence of the museum and the collection photograph as a communicative device. Repicturing the photograph and the postcard itself obviously resonates with an allegorical regression, with a bemused reflection on the fate of this particular obsolete carrier of messages (from the heartfelt and heartbroken to the banal pride of having been somewhere) sent from everywhere since 1870. But Perna's selection of sculptural objects and reliefs, such as *Psyche*, 2020, from the museums of his birthplace, concretizes and emphasizes the local specificity of the institution, thus infusing the project with a precarious quantum of specious sentiment of origins and belonging. Perna knows full well that preserving geopolitical relations and territorial bonds is the most treacherous territory he could have entered. Just as in de Chirico's travesties of the transhistorical presence of the classical cultures of the Mediterranean, Perna's rephotographs of sculptures from the vaults of his hometown museum invoke the Greco-Roman tradition. They are clearly driven by nostalgia, but also by the growing comprehension that these heroic Eurocentric lineages of culture, mythologies, and religions stand on the corpses of colonialism. And just at the moment when the experience of the first global pandemic of this century has given us a sense of what a truly postnational identity and existence should look like, mourning the shards of a hometown museum in Naples might be one of the more retrograde choices an artist could make.

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Luciano Perna, *Psyche*, 2020, ink-jet print, 22 × 17".

But Perna seems to be fully aware that the museum and the objects of his and all of our childhoods are doomed, just as the postcard, the most advanced communicative tool of a previous era, appears grotesque from the perspective of the digital present because of its differentiated complexity (handwriting on the back of a printed photograph of an exquisite object in a local museum collection mailed through various post offices and hand-delivered by a person to an avid and grateful recipient). All the more paradoxical is the fact that in some instances Perna perforates his rephotographed photographs and leaves us wondering whether these echo Lucio Fontana's or Alberto Burri's postfascist burns and lacerations of what were once utopian spaces, or whether they are his own contemporary inflictions on the images of objects of the past in recognition of things to come.



Luciano Perna, *Fauno Resonate*, 2020, postcard with perforations, 6 × 4".

What is it that we could currently still call abhorrent kitsch with conviction? The spectrum of socially prescribed, solicited, and celebrated inauthenticities expands along a heretofore unimagined scale of technological seductions and antiquated cultural satisfactions. On one end of the extreme dialectics of mass deception, we are forced to recognize that the age-old, once-revolutionary promise that

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photography would provide for everybody's right and desire to have their own portrait seems to have found its most nightmarish technological fulfillment. Its artistic opposite is to be discovered in highly individuated artistic painterly practices that convincingly claim to articulate the long overdue, politically urgent emergent subject, but those practices lack legitimation in aesthetic terms when measured against the actually given, historically formed communicative conventions and the actually available speech competences of the collective subject. It is not certain that Perna's strategies to avoid these politics of representation by regressing into the still-life genre of flowers and dead objects, and into the documentation of museum photographs, might eventually unleash the revolutionary subversive powers of obsolescence that Walter Benjamin in the '30s could still optimistically ascribe to Surrealism. But it might not turn out to be the smallest virtue of Perna's work that it at least provides a pause in which to question convictions and consider one's lost causes, or actual causes lost, both those resulting from the automutilation of internalized ideology and those necessitated by the desperate struggles to overcome the seemingly inexorable ideological internalizations of place and nation-state, of race and class.

Having been something of a lifelong bystander and outsider to the art world, Perna has accumulated a rather substantial yet haphazard photographic archive documenting major people and minor events (and vice versa) in the art world of the '80s and '90s (primarily in Los Angeles and New York) as well as various people, known and unknown in Italian cities and other sites. These archives constitute the somewhat erratic but substantial counterweight to the artist's refined still-life concoctions. Distinctly Warholian in their utter indifference to social hierarchies, as much as to quality control, the mostly black-and-white pictures record those moments when it didn't matter all that much who was where wearing what. A photography of standardizing negligence, these images in hindsight unveil the extent to which fashion and design in their photographically mediated circulation have become means of social control, enforcing the principle that only the spectacularized subject can legitimize and sustain claims on public subjectivity. In the manner of one of his admired precursors, Erich Salomon, who also recorded historical events and persons anecdotally en passant (sometimes with a camera hidden in his hat), Perna recorded the random encounters of diverse figures, seemingly unobserved. Some of them are young men in the streets of Naples, forever unknown; some, like Williams and Stephen Prina, are captured en route to future fame; and some, variously at ease or at odds with these circles, are the mentors of Williams and Prina's generation (e.g., Michael Asher, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler in Los Angeles). On the occasion of discussion panels during the era in which postmodernism was formulated, Perna photographed the late Douglas Crimp in conversation with Levine and others. He recorded similarly crucial encounters between the grand figures of the market before it was called the Industry—for instance, the late Ileana Sonnabend with her future archrival Marian Goodman.

Perna's photographic cumulus of art-world players, winners, and losers by now might have acquired an unexpected topicality, since the archive faithfully records the long-gone circumstances of a socially cohesive collective of drifters, artists, and entrepreneurs, ludics and Luddites. Symbolically changing or correcting the rules of the game, defining or seeing new artistic practices, the heterogeneous participants of that collective shared only some aesthetic concerns, fewer political commitments, and even fewer economic motivations before that mixed milieu was corralled into extreme professionalization. Now that those bohemian promises of independence and self-determination have been replaced by the vacuum of the monopolist structures of a global capitalist art market and its crowds of parasitic speculators, Perna's archive might appear to current spectators like a photographic version of Henri Murger's 1851 *Scènes de la vie de bohème*.

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Luciano Perna, *Ileana Sonnabend looking at a Christian Boltanski installation and Marian Goodman, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 1987, ink-jet print, 22 x 17"*.



Luciano Perna, *"Pictures" panel discussion at UCLA, Los Angeles. Sherrie Levine, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, John Brumfield, Barbara Kruger, and Douglas Crimp, 1981, ink-jet print, 17 x 22"*.



Luciano Perna, *Coroglio, Naples, Italy, 1973, ink-jet print, 17 x 22"*.

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