

Foreword

Lisa McElaney and I have been together since we were twenty and twenty-eight, respectively. My relationship with her is at the core of my life as a man and as an artist. Our love for each other—in all kinds of weather—grounds my resolve to be hopeful and vital, even when that feels like a challenge. She is always my first audience, and I count on her eyes to see things that I may not. A couple of years ago, for her birthday, I made Lisa a picture of flowers—it felt more enduring than actual flowers. In creating that image, I had no idea that a series would follow. However, something in the making of that first photograph gave me a newfound spark to experiment in ways I had not done before.

I chose the subject of flowers because they are lovely things—often exchanged between lovers—and a part of the long tradition of still life in art. Precisely because flowers are such a conventional subject, I felt a strong desire to describe them in new ways. I love how Jan Brueghel the Elder, Édouard Manet, Georgia O’Keeffe, Giorgio Morandi, Irving Penn, Joan Mitchell, and David Hockney reworked the look of common flowers to show unexpected versions of them. So while the subject of my work may be flowers, the photographs are also pictures about perspective, love, jealousy, hate, geometry, sex, life, the passage of time, and death. In choosing to limit myself to one subject, I was able to open doors to a world where I felt inventive, improvisational, and fresh.

Technically, these images involve a number of approaches, such as making multiple exposures to create floral explosions; combining my own painting with living bouquets; and using ink to produce dense *cliché verre* (glass plate) pictures. I believe that new possibilities in art are always around the corner, and these works have been giving me plenty of opportunities to prove that to myself again and again. At the same time, they serve an emotional impulse to show my dedication to the woman with whom I share my life.

AM

Newton, Massachusetts, October 2017

Note: The photographs in the Plates section are sequenced in the chronological order in which they were made, reflecting the evolution of ideas and processes that I explore in *Flowers for Lisa*. For further information about the images, please refer to Notes on the Photographs on pages 128–143.

AFTERWORD

The Gifts of Time and Flowers

The artist I live with is not sentimental. Still, on many anniversaries and birthdays, he's brought me flowers. At first, there was the ubiquitous hodgepodge from the local grocery. Then came more expensive mixed sprays from Whole Foods. Eventually, as sales of art began to supplement our teaching and research salaries, there were overpriced arrangements from boutique florists. While I always appreciated Abe's ritual gestures, I often wished he hadn't bothered.

I love flowers. My husband knows that. He has seen me buy them for myself and others, take pleasure in arranging them, and even try to grow them (with rare success). So his thought to bring me something I love always touched me, especially in times when we struggled to be good partners.

But I could never bring myself to tell Abe that I didn't really like mash-ups of different species squeezed into proximity with one another. I preferred my flowers straight up—all of one kind and modernly spare—the better for looking closely at stalks and stems, petals and buds as they slump and dry into a stiff monochrome. I've never had to defend my practice of keeping flowers past their prime or explain how I find their detritus and decay to be as beautiful as their just-cut former selves. Abe is used to living with my disquieting bouquets.

Before Abe decided that alcohol made it hard for him to fulfill simultaneous commitments to parenting young children, teaching full-time, and making art, I used to give him wine to honor special occasions. He never made light of my lack of sophistication in matters of the vine, but I'm pretty sure he saved most of the bottles I gave him for his annual parties for his students.

A few birthdays ago, Abe gave me flowers of a different sort. They came in the form of a photograph, created for the occasion, and it was an image unlike any he had made or given me before. A digital profusion of dozens of exposures fed to a computer for collaboration, the picture rendered a mixed bouquet that I *could* love. It referenced all the elements I relish about still lifes composed of real flowers: time changing the composition, a conversation between parts and the whole, the relationship between a stable container and the shape-shifting nature within. I had a perfect gift of flowers that would last my lifetime.

The pictures that followed *Flowers for Lisa #1* gave me a new lens through which I could see my sometimes-tortured relationship with love and art. The more I looked at them, the more I found myself understanding my husband's entwined passions and preoccupations—his urge to create something as an expression of his tenacious embrace of me, our uncertain world, and life itself.

Abe introduced me to photography. Not long after we met, he took me to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Our destination was a Harry Callahan exhibition of more than two hundred pictures taken over thirty-five years. Among them were several portraits of Callahan's wife, Eleanor. I couldn't have known then, at twenty, that I would spend my life with an artist, but I was sure I was no Eleanor—ethereal, mythical, comfortable (or so it seemed) on the far side of the camera lens. Still, even as a novice viewer, I remember feeling moved by the relational transaction I believed was taking place in Callahan's rendering of the person he loved. Eleanor seemed to me to be a participant in the picture-making enterprise.

Recently, I paged through the catalog of that exhibition and was struck by an observation John Szarkowski made in his essay. He wrote that the fulcrum of Callahan's work was "located at the point where the potentials of photography and his own private experience intersected." I could say the same about Abe. In this series of images and the many that came before it, it is easy for me to see recurring themes related to exile and a childhood upended by politics; to an imagination let loose by libraries, museums, and music; and to the great release from loneliness that came with a camera. These themes, along with eventful, detailed, and sometimes dark dreams, are what shape the interior landscape that Abe navigates with photography, a medium he loves for its enduring potential to move beyond its apparent boundaries.

It seems to me that photography is a good match for an obsessive thinker. Its technical revolutions in Abe's lifetime, combined with an inner drive to invent, support Abe's photography as a way of making sense of a complex inner reality. The place that relationship takes in the fabric of Abe's creative preoccupations has changed over time, but, like the Eleanor Callahan I imagine, I've always been invited into the artistic process and gradually came to feel comfortable there.

What started as a solution to one year's "What shall I give her for her birthday?" problem turned into a multiyear fixation. Sketches strewn about the studio would suggest images to come. I looked forward to the trial and error, undoubtedly more than Abe did; the struggle to get each image right led to new conversations, to giving each other things to read and looking at the history of art together. Some of the images that resulted evoke aspects of love we seldom celebrate—complexity, darkness, even loneliness. Others suggest the playfulness, reverie, and humor that can form the ballast that sustains intimate connections over time. The pictures illustrate our story.

Early in our life together, I had a different relationship with the obvious third partner in my marriage. Then, art was my beguiling, necessary rival. It had the power to make Abe his best

self, to keep him constantly enthralled. It never burdened him with resistance the way I did at times. It waited for him patiently. It's not that it didn't place demands on him; it did, but the pressures felt in the studio never bore the weight or obligation that human interactions do.

In the messy years—when children arrived and friends were lost to AIDS and cancer, when a chronic illness emerged and work that meant so much to me required far more of my dogged effort than my creativity—I was jealous of Abe's art. It offered him escape and nourishment, and he used it for both while doing his part in managing the logistics of our shared, complicated family life. In our marriage's more recent chapters, however, with reflection on how I want to live a hopeful last third of my life, I find myself accepting my husband's essential preoccupation in ways that make me happy, in ways I could never have predicted.

When the *Flowers for Lisa* series began, I was wrapping up a second stint in graduate school and was in an internship as a psychotherapist. I had my own ongoing obsessions, and Abe could certainly see that. *Flowers for Lisa* #59 and #60 feel like faux Rorschachs, and while not a tool I will ever use in the work I do related to early attachment, I felt Abe's reference to a psychological instrument in his photographs signaled his joint attention to matters that are important to me.

As the *Flowers for Lisa* pictures grew in number, I began to worry about the day when the stream of surprises would stop. What would happen when Abe felt he'd said all he had to say about flowers and love and the inevitable impermanence that surrounds us? Would it matter to him that I had come to depend on the ritual reflections he was making visible? His experimental ruminations on love were something I did not want to end.

There were almost daily delights as iterations of final versions piled up. Abe would bring me sketches, drafts, and many almost-but-not-quite-right attempts to extract from his imagination the image that would eventually land in a frame. I recall many nights pulling in from work and wondering what new rendition of flowers might be waiting. I have to pass by Abe's work space to get to our apartment, and as the flower pictures were emerging, I know I initiated more than my usual number of studio visits. I didn't want to wait for the frequent invitation: "Hey, babe, can you come take a look?" And I began to be more assertive in my suggestions for photographs to come. I love the paintings of the German pre-expressionist Paula Modersohn-Becker. "Couldn't she inspire a picture?" I remember pleading more than once, but to no avail. He tried, but Abe was never able to make an homage to Modersohn-Becker that felt right to him. Her frequent use of sunflowers, though, is something Abe incorporates in this series.

The intimate colloquy Abe and I were having as he made his flower pictures felt like an unanticipated reward for having paid our dues. It made me wonder what our lives would be like now had I walked away that time when our firstborn was not yet one and I fled with him to my parents. A rift growing from ruptures Abe and I didn't know how to repair pointed us down a road we did not take, and I'm not sure why. I don't think our choice to remain together was totally conscious, and the terms of our continued engagement weren't especially

well navigated. Still, they held us in each other's hearts fervently enough and long enough to withstand what could easily have done us in.

Perhaps not surprisingly, even in the equanimity of the connection we have now, Abe and I still perceive many things differently. *Flowers for Lisa* is no exception. I think that, for Abe, beyond the impetus to make love visible, his project is the manifestation of an artistic dare he posed to himself. With each new idea or technical discovery, through painstaking trial and error, the pictures let Abe delight in what he believes is photography's transforming power to show something new about reality.

I, on the other hand, see *Flowers for Lisa* as evocations of particular passages in our co-biography. To me, they are less still lifes than the portrait of a shared life, a narrative still in the making. To my eye, number 7 is about the year our daughter sang Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*—ad nauseum. Number 3 captures what it felt like to walk nighttime streets in Maine the winter we first met. Number 30 is about a painful argument; number 29, about an argument just starting to be resolved. Number 18 transports me to the artist's residency in Umbria after years in the parenting slog, when the simple joy of eating together outside made stored resentments evaporate. And so on.

While I imbue each image in the series with a sterling memory or weighty resonance, their creator approaches them as exercises in devotion. I see them as keepsakes, proof positive that what connects us is real; Abe treats them as tools for tending the fields of love and commitment. At the crux of things lies perspective, our separate takes on the time we've spent learning to be better together.

The Magnetic Fields is a group of indie musicians whose 1999 triple album, *69 Love Songs*, was a favorite in our household. Stephin Merritt, the group's leader and composer, said in an interview that the songs were actually not about love at all; rather, they were about *love songs*. With seventy-six pictures in my possession now, and as delighted as I am with the objects themselves and the years of shared reverie and close looking that they recall, I know that they are more than *Flowers for Lisa*. As much as they are sincere tokens for me and reflections of many of Abe's passions and idiosyncrasies, I see that they are also carefully created tributes to photography and the expansive place Abe keeps for art in his mind and heart. It is a space I feel happy and lucky to share.

I have no comparable gifts for the person I love. These pictures, what they represent to me, to him, render the ineffable. I can only say that I am grateful, not just for the images and the impetus behind them but most of all for the man who made them. His uncommon vision, his unquestioning acceptance of me and of my aspirations and preoccupations, his faith in us—unwavering always—have been the true gifts in all the time we've shared.

Lisa McElaney

Newton, Massachusetts, October 2017