

Flowers in the frame

The search for still-life subjects led the artist Kate Friend to some of the greatest gardens and gardeners in the country, discovers Tiffany Daneff



AN unavoidable fact about working with flowers is their transience. No more so than with a wildflower such as a field poppy, the very fragility of which—the wrinkled silky gleam of the petals, the fine hairs on the stem—is its beauty. When the artist Kate Friend was planning her next project—photographing wildflowers that grew in places that had witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary—therefore, she had to design a mobile studio that would enable her to capture the flowers’ essence before the heat made them wilt. To which end, she built a box that could be transported to a mountain or field and set up as a portable studio.

‘When I went to Fatima [in Portugal], I knew I was going to be in blazing sunshine and I needed a way to control it more,’ she explains from her home in Lisbon. ‘The box is brushed-gold aluminium inside and out to resemble a reliquary—gold also reflects light, keeping the flowers cool. I carry boards in different colours, too, and slot them in.’

‘The box is brushed-gold aluminium to resemble a reliquary’

The genesis of the Virgin Mary series was the imminent arrival of Pope Francis in Portugal and the photographs were shown in an exhibition, ‘There Are Always Flowers For Those Who Want To See Them’, at the Lyndsey Ingram gallery, London W1, in April this year. In keeping with almost all Miss Friend’s flower pieces, each has as its focus a single stem or spray displayed in a small vase against a coloured background. It sounds simple enough, but the thought, preparation and the practicalities of producing each work results in a powerful image that resonates long after viewing it.

‘I knew I’d be picking wildflowers on holy ground, so the moment of picking them becomes a kind of prayer... a form of worship,’ Miss Friend reveals. ‘You’re isolating them and spending time with them and the flowers become the icon—the way in. There needs to be a sense of ceremony. Looking back, the process feels like a madness.’

Most extraordinary was what happened on the drive back down a winding mountain road after her last shoot at La Salette-Fallavaux, which had received a Marian apparition in 1846. The road had recently been resurfaced and she felt the car wheels lose their grip on the asphalt; the next moment, the hired Alfa Romeo had come off the side of the road and she remembers rolling over and down, before, just in time, being saved by a small group of trees. The windscreen was broken, but she and her equipment were unhurt. It was an ➔



Facing page: Morning glory flowers picked by Kate Friend at Fatima in Portugal where, in 1917, three young shepherds witnessed apparitions of the Virgin Mary. *Above:* Sue Stuart-Smith, the author, psychiatrist and psychotherapist, chose *Tulipa ‘Helmar’*



Above: Charlie McCormick selected two of his favourite pom-pom dahlias. Facing page: Botanist Dr Jamie Compton chose *Lilium* 'Beverley's Dream' from his Wiltshire garden

experience that profoundly changed her outlook on life and brought her closer to the earth and to the flowers that emanate from it. 'Where do you go from there? You live again. What do you do with your time here?'

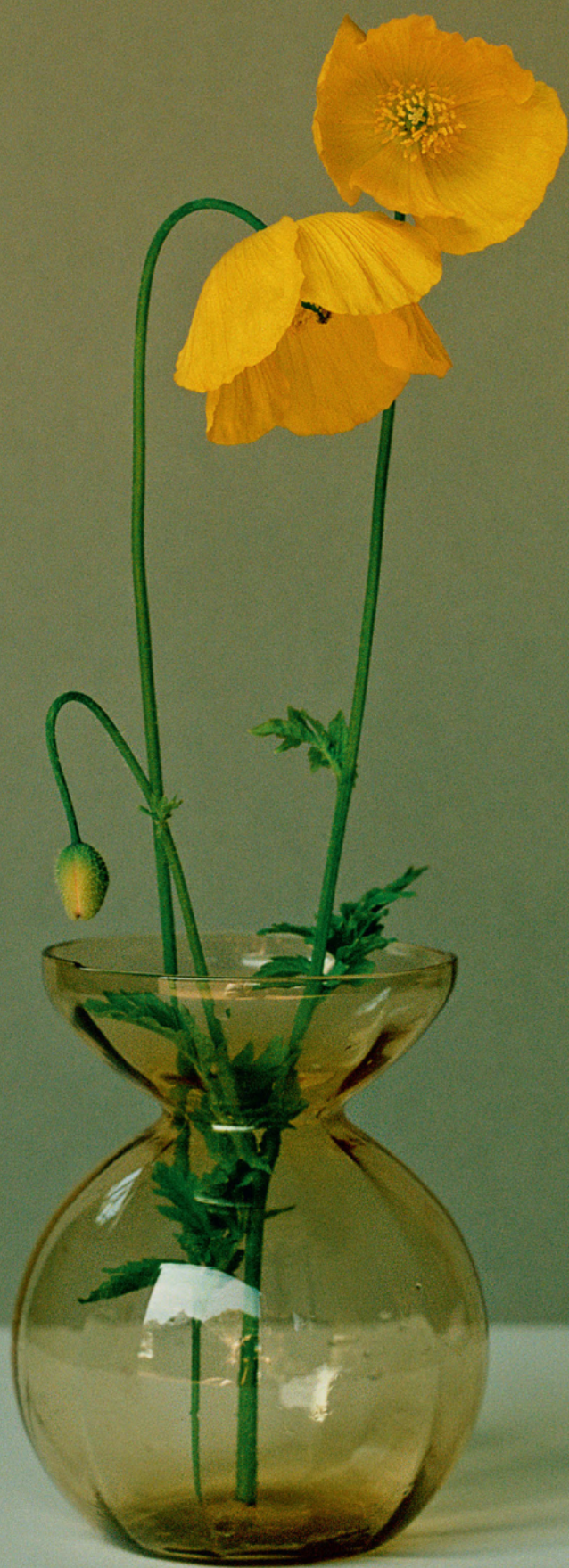
This was a world away from Miss Friend's first beginnings as a photographer in her twenties, when she took on commercial projects in travel or advertising. At the same time, she launched and, from 2010–15, ran a limited-edition boutique magazine, *Mother*, which brought commissions from Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake and Maison Margiela. She had come into photography assuming she would be using an analogue camera, but, after five years of working with digital equipment, as was then the convention, she realised she wanted out. 'I quit and sold all my equipment and had a strange 180 where I didn't know what I was going to do, I had no money, I had all sorts of weird part-time jobs. I had gone from shooting fairly big-budget things and flying around the world to absolutely nothing.'

‘Luciano Giubbilei provided a GPS and wished her good luck’

Discovering her old Pentax lying in a drawer, she began experimenting. 'I would find flowers in funny places and pick them... I photographed a very beautiful white onion and was obsessed with its form and structure, but I didn't know what I was going to do with any of it.' Exploring further, she realised she needed to go where the flowers were at their best—'Covent Garden flower market was very much not it'—and so began her first project working with head gardeners. 'I did a series of 16 portraits at Great Dixter in East Sussex, Chelsea Physic Garden in London and elsewhere [Fern Verrow in Herefordshire and Houghton Hall, Norfolk]. They set the tone, style and philosophy and practice of ensuring that I prioritise the sourcing of the flower first and above everything.' She had 'an amazing time trailing behind celebrated gardeners and being given armfuls of cuttings... there was no small talk, it was just about the plants and appreciating them in a way we could share'.

The Garden Museum in Lambeth, SE1, suggested a show of her botanical portraits, which ran in 2018. This drew Miss Friend to the attention of Lyndsey Ingram and, in 2021, the gallery presented the exhibition 'Portraits, As Chosen By...'. The idea behind this was seeking out people who had a relationship with flowers, but were not necessarily gardeners, and to ask them to select a flower and a vessel. Margaret Howell (dried hydrangea) was →





the photographer's first subject and gave her the confidence to keep going. The show also included flowers chosen by, among others, the landscape and garden designer Dan Pearson (*Dianthus cruentus* and *Dierama pulcherrimum*); Olivia Harrison (Himalayan blue poppy), who has overseen the restoration of the historic garden at Friar Park, Henley, Oxfordshire; the fashion photographer Juergen Teller (strawberry); and Maggi Hambling, whose cactus was photographed in her studio. 'As Chosen By... Part II' opened at Lyndsey Ingram in 2023, for which the list of subjects expanded to people and plants as varied as their responses.

'Sometimes, people are clear about what they want, such as the psychiatrist and author of *The Well Gardened Mind* Sue Stuart-Smith (*Tulipa* 'Helmar'), for whom it was all about the tulip. Then sometimes I'll see someone like the Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf and he'll say: "I love everything, go into the garden. Good luck to you, see you later." (She selected a Welsh poppy, *Meconopsis cambrica*, for him.) Each visit was very indicative of the person's character and all were very enjoyable for me. I like putting myself in those circumstances, that's the process in which each work becomes a portrait.'

The artist Ai Weiwei gave her an hour with the bloom of a mother of thousands plant (*Kalanchoe diargremontiana*). 'I was under close supervision by his staff, so then you're really under pressure, which can be great for results, because your hyper focus is completely switched on.' The landscape designer Luciano Giubbilei simply provided a GPS and wished her good luck. 'I ended up in the middle of Majorca in a massive storm trying to find this asphodel, but it was also brilliant... I loved that.' She met Fernando Caruncho, the garden designer and philosopher in Madrid in the middle of winter. He selected a pretty pale-yellow, scented, winter-flowering *Chimonanthus fragrans* and took her to lunch in a nearby restaurant. Over wine and good meal, he told her: 'If you can get to the dark heart of the garden then you are really getting somewhere.' Miss Friend remembers: 'His words carried me through the last project and perhaps this project that I'm about to start.'

It is too early to say what this will entail. She is currently in what she calls 'the digesting phase', researching and trying to reflect what is going on in the world. Come the spring—and the beginning of the flowering season—she will be ready to head out again with her mobile studio and Pentax. 🌸

Kate Friend's work can be seen at Lyndsey Ingram, London W1 (www.lyndseyingram.com), and will feature in 'In Bloom: How plants changed our world' at the Ashmolean, Oxford, from March 19–August 16, 2026



Facing page: *Meconopsis cambrica*, the Welsh poppy, from the Dutch designer Piet Oudolf's garden at Hummelo in the Netherlands. Above: Landscape designer Dan Pearson chose the hardy blood pink, *Dianthus cruentus*, from his garden in Somerset