

EXTERIORS

SHOOTING STARS

A new series by photographer Kate Friend puts a botanical twist on the celebrity portrait, capturing artists, musicians, actors and designers of renown through the garden blossoms and trimmings of their choosing

By Amy Merrick

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Sue Stuart Smith's tulips and a variety of vessels in her garden in Hertfordshire

The ground rules that photographer Kate Friend set herself for her new series of botanical portraits were simple enough: she would visit a range of creative figures and ask them each to choose a flower from their garden, alongside a vessel from their home. She would then shoot the flower on location with her Pentax 6x7, in a makeshift studio comprising a few coloured boards atop a steady surface, wherever the natural light fell best. She would do no corrective editing, letting the images stand unadulterated as a testament to place, person and flower. Some came easily, the flowers behaving, the light soft and natural and the participants obliging. Others posed a bit more of a challenge, unyielding stems, vases off-scale and the occasional massive cactus thrown into the mix. (No-one said nature had to always play nice.)



The series of images are now collected in a book, *Portraits, As Chosen By...*, published in September ahead of an accompanying exhibition which has just opened at Lyndsey Ingram gallery. Simple as the project seemed at the outset, the resulting portraits are anything but.



Shot in his Covent Garden office amid myriad books, objets and artworks, Paul Smith's plant of choice is a delicate lily of the valley – the flower his wife had in her wedding bouquet when they married

Fashion designer Simone Rocha's coral garden rose is tightly in bud against a bone-coloured backdrop, more leaf than petal and languidly facing off camera, with an air of detached independence. Actor Angelica Huston's rose is splashy pink, fully open and voluptuous, dramatic even, against its blue ground. Garden designer Tania Compton's is pale and delicate, a blushing, cupped spray of rambling blossoms arching gracefully from a well-formed vase. Three women, three roses. In Friend's series, a rose is not a rose is not a rose.

The decision to capture both plant and person was rooted in Friend's strong attraction to flowers with distinctive identities. Living in London she was unable to find the characterful varieties she longed to shoot. The flowers so often sold at Covent Garden lacked the vim and personality of those tended for pleasure; their bends and bumps ironed out for the sake of commercial conformity. She decided to reach out to gardeners, asking if they could spare a stem or two, and so the seed for her botanical-portrait series was sown. In 2020, she decided to cast a wider net, and the project evolved into one equally concerned with people, their personalities and memories expressed through their pick rather than their pose. She started a wish list of sorts, with the likes of Margaret Howell, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Sir Paul Smith alongside horticultural greats, such as Dan Pearson and Piet Oudolf.



Yinka Ilori's daisies – simple geometric arrangements of contrasting colours – echo and complement the bold hues of his north London studio, where they were shot



'Rosa "Sunstruck" was given to me by my neighbour Lisa Smith to commemorate the passing of two of my favourite animals,' said actor Anjelica Huston. 'It's a beautiful rose, salmon pink and unassuming, and often surprises me off-season with its blooms'

The portraits themselves have boldface naturalness and, stripped of all context, they still speak volumes, if you listen. A striking pair of *Fritillaria meleagris*, the snake's head fritillary, asserts itself across a dunn-coloured background, their purple chequerboard-cupped heads bobbing downwards, sharply cut petals forming a geometric zigzag along their bottom lip. Amanda Feilding, the grande dame of drug-policy reform and a champion of LSD, delights in them as they grow in clumps along the moat at her Tudor home Beckley Park – they remind her, she says, of a fairy land. There's a spritishness to them, certainly, but only of the ancient mythical sort: mischievous, otherworldly and with a whisper of darkness. Tinkerbells they are not.

It almost feels too easy to draw connections between the participants and their floral representatives. While some pairings seem to reflect one another quite harmoniously, flowers are a fickle and funny business, and the truly passionate could never be easily reduced to one lone cultivar. Choosing singular 'favourites', indeed, is a troublesome if nearly impossible task, and Friend breezes past this quandary, allowing nature and spontaneity to lend a hand if a subject seems overwhelmed by the options. One does not ask a parent to pick a favourite child.



Fading hydrangeas sit in Margaret Howell's home in Suffolk, selected for the grace of their transition into old age. As the designer puts it, 'their vivid pink and blue flowers become papery and pale, and turn a subtle shade of sage green'



Background colours are trialled in search for the shade that will best show off the spectacular electric blue of the Himalayan blue poppy that grows plentifully in Olivia Harrison's rockery at Friar Park, Henley-on-Thames

Friend is not a stickler for rules either, even her own, and so it's with a small sigh of relief that plantsman and garden designer Dan Pearson is released from having to choose only a single flower. The portrait of his *Dierama pulcherrimum*, or angel's fishing rod, splashed across a glowing ochre backdrop, sings the sweetest of his lot, with its graceful, willowy bend and lipstick-pink petals just beginning to unfurl. It is an achingly graceful plant in the garden, quivering grass-like with spangled, dangling flowers, light as air. Its seemingly transparent, shimmering nature is hinted at through a opalescent bottle – with Friend's own tiny reflection glimpsed in the glass. One can't forget her role here: the evoker of mood, the caster of spells.

The magic of some flowers though, cannot be bottled; cannot be distilled into a photograph or vase. One of Pearson's first choices was a black opium poppy, the seeds of which he gathered as a child. When cut, though, its inky black petals closed shut, concealing its fringed stamens and alluring green seedhead. Some flowers have a mind of their own – which makes us respect them all the more.

'As Chosen By... Part II' runs from 5 November–22 December 2023 at Lyndsey Ingram, London. For more information, visit lyndseyingram.com. A book of the same title, including all 41 works from the photographic series, is published by Ridinghouse