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**Harold Feinstein's**  
Hundred Flowers

# Urgent Purpose

By Leslie Hunt

## Harold Feinstein's Hundred Flowers

Open the window, it's warm as a greenhouse in here. Harold Feinstein's new book lies open on the table. Page after page of lush botanicals flutter in the breeze from the undulating fan. In the brilliant color images of *One Hundred Flowers*, rosy lips beckon, sweet nectar glistens, and tiny pistils spill tufts of yellow pollen. Even the common pansy reveals her wanton ways. It's enough to make a horticulturist blush.

**"I believe we were born smart and taught to be dumb."**

*One Hundred Flowers* (Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown; \$50) is a big, beautiful collection of blossoms that Feinstein, a member of PPA, digitally captured with an old wooden Linhof 8x10 view camera and an experimental digital back. The photographs are accompanied by an essay by gardening author Sydney Eddison, who describes the blossom's "urgent purpose": pollination; botanical notes by Greg Piotrowski; and an introduction by media critic A.D. Coleman, a longtime admirer of Feinstein's black-and-white photography, especially the Coney Island series, a work-in-progress for more than 50 years.

"These flowers took me by surprise," Coleman said recently. "Harold's influential works have been small camera, classic black-and-white social documentaries. These flowers are spectacular."

The Stephen Cohen Gallery in Los



"White Tulips"

**"I find that prosperity is not contradictory to creativity. When I was young, I bought into the script that says artists are irresponsible, that they live in poverty for their art, and that nothing outside themselves matters. Age has let go some of the ego, and my primary technique has been a prayer of gratitude. It's making my life a wonderful canvas."**

Angeles has just opened an exhibition of images from *One Hundred Flowers*, which runs through July 15 (concurrent with "Skin," a photographic collection by Laurent Badessi; details: 323-937-5525). The House of Photographic Arts in San Juan Capistrano, California, also hosts a Feinstein exhibition, June 8-August 1 (949-496-5127).

"Harold Feinstein's flowers," said Beverly Feldman of the Stephen Cohen Gallery, "take us beyond the physical, sensual flower, into the life of the flower itself. His intense and reverent gaze at these gems of nature is a reflection on living."

W. Eugene Smith, a mentor and early champion of Feinstein's work, made a similar observation about his black-and-white work, saying Feinstein had "the ability to reveal the familiar in a beautifully new, strong, and honest way."

Feinstein was just 19 when Edward Steichen bought a selection of his photographs for the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This spring, the Smithsonian Institution also acquired a selection of Feinstein's digital prints.

### **"Technique is the servant of our vision."**

Feinstein began using digital capture in 1995 to archive and catalog a body of photographs that span 50 years. Already a renowned master of printing and photo-montage, Feinstein found in the computer a new "servant" of his artistic vision. The Adobe Photoshop imaging application proved as seductive as the darkroom.

For most of his career, Feinstein carried 35mm SLRs. At the moment, he's running an Olympus 2.5 megapixel C-2500L SLR through its

paces. A proponent of Mamiya cameras, Feinstein is looking forward to using the new Mamiya 645 autofocus camera with the Phase One LightPhase digital back. The photographer has been a fan of Epson Stylus ink-jet printers since he began using digital equipment. The new Stylus 1270, which outputs photo-quality prints up to 13x19 inches, "is a miracle," he says. Best of all, the combination of the new Epson six-color Photo Inks and heavyweight papers makes prints good enough for Feinstein to sell and archive.

### **"Follow your bliss."**

It's not every career that takes off in new directions after 50 years as Feinstein's has. A companion book to *One Hundred Flowers* is in the works, this time featuring digitally photographed foliage, cacti, and seeds.

Meanwhile, Feinstein continues to collect the opus he began in 1946, the black-and-white photographs of Coney Island and its habitués, with an eye toward publishing them as a collection.

What is it like to look back at a life of such tangible accomplishments as these photographs? "When

"Pink-Yellow Begonia"



## Behind the Cover Image



"My primary technique is a prayer," says Harold Feinstein, who always keeps things simple. Take the shooting setup he used to capture the images in *One Hundred Flowers*: Camera—an old wooden Linhof 8x10 view camera fitted

with a prototype digital back (under private development); background—cardboard, spray-painted matte black; lighting—one 100-watt tungsten light bulb in a photo flood reflector placed directly over the blossom. The light was brightest next to the lens, gradually fading toward the edges of the blossom—a simple and effective way to add dimension.

The camera back was tethered to a Macintosh computer, where the images went directly to Adobe Photoshop. The program gives an immediacy to Feinstein's work, and affords him the freedom to experiment with little investment in materials and relatively little investment in time.

Ask Feinstein how he photographs as he does, and he'll tell you what he tells his students: "You look through the viewfinder, and when your mouth drops open in awe, you click the shutter." Simple.

you're 40," says the photographer, "you finally become a mensch; you reach your maturity. In your 60s, you begin to exercise it. In your 80s and 90s, that's when the wisdom comes. In the meantime, follow your bliss. I have never met a person who followed what his heart desired and regretted it. Never."

### "Hardening of the categories causes art disease."

In New York, Harold Feinstein's photographs reside in The Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of the City of New York and the International Center of Photography; in Rochester, New York, at the George Eastman House; in San Diego, at the Museum of Photographic Arts; and in Paris, at The Musee d'Art Moderne.

His portfolios, photo essays, and articles have been published in (among others) *The New York Times* and *Life*, *Audubon*, and *l'Illustrazione* magazines. ■

**"When I was doing black-and-white printing, I remember someone asking if I didn't miss color. I told him that when I look at a beautiful black-and-white print, I see all the colors of the rainbow. Now that I'm using color, I love it deeply."**

—Harold Feinstein

Honors and media attention aside, what PPA member Harold Feinstein cherishes most in his career is teaching young photographers at his studio in Arlington, Massachusetts, where he lives with his wife Judith Thompson, a founder of the non-profit organization Children of War. You can e-mail the photographer at [haroldfeinstein@mediaone.net](mailto:haroldfeinstein@mediaone.net).

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