

## BOTANICAL LEGACIES

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Fine Art, London

Following an exhibition at HackelBury Fine Art showcasing his latest body of work, Cape Town-based artist **Stephen Ingg** talks to Charlie Thomas about his large-scale printing process and the meaning behind the flowers.

Stephen Ingg's photographs aren't what they first seem. Sure, they look beautiful on the printed page, and their textural qualities are visible on a digital screen. But to fully appreciate them, they must be viewed in person. This is largely because of their impressive scale, and the subtle

imperfections that make each one unique.

Ingg makes his photos the old-fashioned way, with medium-format film, light-sensitive paper and chemicals. But he does so at a scale that's unusual. Each 1x1.2m print starts life as heavy-duty cotton paper, which he cuts to size and hand coats with silver-gelatin emulsion.

It's then hung on a wall and projected on to from a distance, before being developed, stopped and fixed in much the same way as your regular roll of 35mm, albeit in huge vats. It's a painstaking process, and one that has plenty of potential pitfalls along the way, but the results speak for themselves.



Opposite **Dark Rose, 2023** Above **Orchid, 2023**

**Charlie Thomas: How did you start out?**

**Stephen Ingg:** My interest in photography came from my father who had a nice collection of Leica cameras. He was a sort of chronicler of the family, so I was always in the photograph. Following on from him, I got my first camera, which was a little plastic Ilford.

I always had an interest in photography, even though I was studying fine art and doing printmaking. My interest goes right back to the beginning of photography – there

wasn't any film in those days, so the photos were actually produced on a light-sensitive plate like an etching. That relationship between printmaking and photography has always been there, and it's always been a part of my practice.

**CT: How do you achieve your large prints?**

**SI:** I've always had Mamiya RZ cameras, which I like very much, and they've got great lenses. I have an enlarger on rails, which keeps

it perpendicular to the wall. I've created a kind of grid on the wall, which I project on to. I tear the paper to a size about 1x1.2m and then place the paper on the wall, holding it there with these heavy-duty drawing pins. This is obviously after doing a test strip. I expose the image and then it goes into a huge bath. It's like producing a normal print but on a very, very large scale. We're talking about 25 litres of chemistry for each bath, so it's quite a lot. >



Ranusuculus, 2023

CT: It sounds like quite a difficult process...

SI: The way I work is physical. When I work with these pieces of paper in the darkroom, it's like working with rugs. They are huge. It's physically [difficult] to actually even hold the sheet of paper, to get it out of the trays and move it from one tray to the next. It is quite a challenge.

The failure rate, or the reject rate as I call it, is very high. Because very often, there are gaps in the emulsion or there's a thicker

layer of emulsion. I've learned to live with that to some extent and you just build the imperfection into the process as being part of the work. I mean, up to a point. You inevitably can't accept every reject that you have.

CT: And you shoot mostly in black & white?

SI: Most of the work I do is black & white. I like the abstract nature of black & white photography because it is one step removed from reality. You're not comparing it [to real

life]. The moment you move into colour, it's got a much closer relationship to the natural world.

CT: For *Botanical Legacies*, how do you select the flowers you shoot, and is there a meaning behind them?

SI: I like the idea of them being an overlooked object and giving a different take on the meaning and the history of the flower.

I live close to Table Mountain, so I walk on the mountain frequently. In spring, there's



Protea in Bottle, 2023

an abundance of new growth – they call it the floral kingdom. So, a lot of the stuff I was photographing was initially taken from that, but at the same time, I was interested in alien species that were invading this floral kingdom, stuff that had been brought from colonial times, from Australia. These various species of plants that were brought out and have taken root – they are very difficult to eradicate.

I also use Coke and beer bottles and things like that. They have a bit of a historical

reference and comment on capitalism, impacting particular cultures and people. These are supposed to be subtle references. I didn't want to move too much from the botanical way of presenting things, using specimen vases or things like that.

But I suppose these choices represent some of those sorts of concerns of the history and impact of colonialism, and the environment here in South Africa. And aside from that, the flowers are just beautiful

objects as well, which I can't get away from because, obviously, I do love objects of beauty.

CT: Do you have a favourite image from the series?

SI: The orchid image is one of my favourites because it has an abstract quality. It's got a physical sort of presence to it. These pods – they are like clouds that haven't opened yet.

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