

## Grass Roots

by Silvia Bombardini



Anthea Hamilton, *The Squash*

In the early seventeenth century in the Netherlands, some single tulip bulbs were worth more than gold or silver. It was the first stage of the Dutch Golden Age, and the bloom set to become Holland's best-known export had recently been introduced from the Ottoman Empire. The rarest of tulips would sell back then for more than ten times the annual income of a Dutch artisan, and whole properties changed hands for handfuls of bulbs. The most precious of them all was the *Semper Augustus*, whose white petals inflamed with scarlet tiger stripes can still be admired in the botanical gouaches and still-life paintings of the period. We now know that its distinctive pigment was due to a breaking virus which would eventually weaken to extinction this flower of which there only ever were so few. But at its peak in January 1637, the sale of a single *Semper Augustus* tulip would have been enough to feed, clothe and house a whole family for half their lifetime. It went down in history as *tulpenmanie*, tulip mania, or madness. In summer 2017, Soulland, the Copenhagen-based menswear label, released a t-shirt in collaboration with Australian retailer Contra, in memory of the *Semper Augustus*: a portrait of the flower at the back, and the word *MADNESS* in pale pink on both sides. It

came along with a pack of stickers, among which was the sentence *'it's all downhill from here'*. It's a reference to February 1637, when the speculative bubble of tulip mania popped: having reached prices so high that no one was left who could afford them, the market for bulbs crashed all of a sudden, and the flowers were worth at once no more than a tenth of their former value. The story of the *Semper Augustus* has since turned into a cautionary tale, to warn investors off financial balloons, when the prices of products too strongly exceed their intrinsic values. Yet on days of cryptocurrencies one has to wonder how effective that warning ever was, and we can't help but look back almost tenderly to the times when wilting blooms and broken petals were the most expensive objects in the world.

### **Poppy, Carnivorous Plant**

Fast forward nearly four centuries, and at the first drop of the spring 2018 collection, Supreme is gifting fans free bags of poppy seeds. 100mg of *Papaver rhoeas*: that's not *Papaver somniferum*, the opium poppy, but it's close enough for redditors to muse on, as the seeds were probably meant for them to do. Hypebeast joked that *"it's highly likely that we'll see resale prices per poppy seed soon on eBay"*, but the bags of seeds are in fact already listed for as much as \$50 a pop on the marketplace. If 100mg are roughly 330 seeds – that puts the value of each seed at around \$0.15. Which granted, it's not much, but considerably more than a single poppy seed should be worth. Meanwhile, a Supreme mustard tee printed with the blurry image of a potted houseplant – perhaps an elephant ear plant, with its large heart-shaped leaves, or possibly a fake ornamental plant in its likeness – sold out last season in only 10 seconds, and according to StockX' data is now reselling for 179.4% its original retail cost. With always limited editions, Supreme is the *Semper Augustus* of clothing in our time. But if we're looking at botanical prints, and for prices that strongly exceed intrinsic values, a better yet case study may be Gucci's carnivorous plant t-shirt from *The Alchemist Garden* collection of fall 2017. Gucci's UK webshop describes it as *"made in washed cotton jersey with small holes in the fabric for a worn-in feel"* and you can buy it for £450.

### **Palm, Tulip, Chrysanthemum**

But in fashion of course there are countless examples like Gucci's carnivorous tee. For instance, Fear of God's palm tree-print drawstring baseball shorts, on sale exclusively at Mr Porter and priced at \$825, sold out in most sizes in a matter of days. Before we dismiss them though, let's think about those palms for a minute. Fear of God being a cult luxury streetwear brand with the seal of approval of rap royalty, it's plausible that the shorts would have sold out fast no matter the price or pattern. But there's something inherently desirable about palms, a universal symbol of the tropics, for the inhabitants of metropolises everywhere, where the streets of streetwear converge, and all the more so in cooler climates. Wearing clothes printed in fronds may be something of a collective urban ritual of springtime – to will holidays into existence by sheer force of mimesis if necessary. The resurrection of Aloha shirts for spring 2018 lends much help to the cause. At Balenciaga, a palm-oasis landscape in oversaturated oranges and reds graces a traditionally printed Hawaiian shirt, with the virtually invisible chest pocket detail, and at Louis Vuitton the Hawaiian shirt is veiled in organza, the palm tree twisted, a small monkey

climbing upon it. Watercolour golden palms with lilac coconuts are found on a structured Harrington jacket at Dries Van Noten, and a single rickety palm as if hastily drawn grows into a seasonal leitmotif at Palm Angels. But with its abundance of black nylon, dark sunglasses and hoods, the latter offsets its breezy beach theme with a more sinister, confrontational edge – titled *Black Sun*, the collection was reportedly based on the 1986 surf riots of Huntington Beach, in California.



Supreme, FW17; Balenciaga, SS18

The shade beyond the sunshine, incidentally, also informs Soulland's *Sunny Nightmares* line for spring, in which the blooms are carried through to a surreal, oneiric dimension, where anthropomorphised tulips in pastel shades smoke cigarettes on tees and long-sleeved shirts, like the hookah-smoking caterpillar of *Alice in Wonderland*. And SSS World Corp, a new label by Justin O'Shea, formerly of Brioni, allegedly inspired by surfers, pimps, and heavy metal, debuts its first *Aloha from Hell* collection on a decidedly post-apocalyptic note: the palms on O'Shea's Hawaiian shirt stand against the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion in the background. Even Prada's chrysanthemums return for fall 2018 licked up by flames on shirts and shorts. But the white flower print is a re-issue from the brand's own spring 2014 show, which had already been themed around a "*menacing paradise*": a reminder perhaps, that Prada had touched ground to the darker side of the tropics long before the rest of us caught up.

### **Hibiscus, Squash**

Alongside palms, sunlit or shady, the Aloha shirts of spring 2018 also bring back to the catwalk as obnoxious a flower of beachwear as the hibiscus can be. Among others it's at Alexandre Mattiussi's Ami, in a collection that

takes its cues from the Parisian tourist, and at Paul Smith, mixed in with subaqueous motifs such as corals and carps, for what would qualify in Hawaiian-shirt circles as a chop suey print. In the relative sexual freedom of our time, thanks to a loosening of social graces and what's allowed to be spoken aloud or isn't, we're much less proficient in the language of flowers than the Victorians used to be. But hibiscuses more so than palms, maybe unfairly, and as much as roses tell tales of romance, speak to us of holidays' hedonism and promiscuity. What contemporary floriography lacks in subtlety, still, it more than makes up for in cheek. Edward Crutchely, who aside from his own line collaborates with Louis Vuitton as a textile consultant – there's a hidden monkey in his patterns too – presents for spring a pompous gender-fluid lineup of men in tightly laced corsets and floor-sweeping gowns. A lush *Cucurbita* vine print crawls its way across most looks, heavy with phallic-shaped fruits: butternut squashes or gourds, the cousins of pumpkins. Kirk Millar too takes to the thorny theme of gender, but from another perspective. To illustrate the pressure on young gay men to fit into society's mainstream notion of masculinity, he lines the insides of Linder's fall 2018 military coats with prints of pressed flowers and scanned pages of poetry.



James Merry embroiders a Fila sweater with magic mushrooms – via nytimes

**Juniper, Baby's Breath, Lavender, Turnip, Bluebell, Radish**

Pressed flowers, in Linder's collection and as a general rule, have more to do with romantic longing and tact than they do with lust. There were some taped to the invites of Kiko Kostadinov's show for fall, an ode to nature titled *Obscured by Clouds*. For his first foray into womenswear, Kostadinov's female models wore elaborate, woodsy headpieces crafted by Katsuya Kamo with branches of juniper and twigs of baby's breath, or *Gypsophila*. But the calf-length dresses in earthy tones and sky-blue sportswear, worn with squeaky new Asics sneakers, were

sensible and streamlined enough to balance their mossy crowns. One of the designer's references, maybe the cause for these silhouettes, was Yves Klein's *The Foundations of Judo*, a written guide to the Japanese martial art by a French painter known for his blue. Still the flower arrangements on his models' heads echoed another Japanese art form, which samurai warriors themselves would practice to perfection centuries ago, in meditation before battle: with its clean asymmetries and seasonal nature, ikebana has long since inspired the sartorial craft – and fashion has still much to learn today, from the patience that floristry requires. Loewe, the 1846-born Spanish luxury house, launched last year from its flower shop in Madrid the #loeweflores series of online tutorials for styling blooms, and published a calendar of compositions shot by Steven Meisel, as a tribute to the legendary 1930s florist Constance Spry. More recently, the label collaborated with artist Anthea Hamilton on seven costumes for a performance at London's Tate Britain, titled *The Squash*. Running from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March to the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, it features a single performer dressed – you guessed it – as a squash, in various colours and shapes and stages or ripeness. Another artist most attuned to the slow pace of botany is James Merry, based in Iceland and best known for his collaborations with Björk. A self-taught embroiderer, he collects vintage sweaters of brands such as Nike, Fila, or Champion, brings them home to his little cabin, and 'fertilizes' them – as he put it, in an interview with i-D. His webshop features the likes of Adidas sweaters hand embroidered with lavender or turnips, Puma with bluebells, Kappa with Radish. They're all sold out though.

### **Stinging Nettle, Freesia**

In the virtual world we live in today, nature is someplace else. We might visit it on holiday, once a year or so for as long as it lasts, perpetually threatened by industrial greed. In such a world where an itch for speed supersedes biological cycles, the dilatory unfurling of petals, the quiet swish of grass and gentle leafing of branches come to represent something uncanny, an almost otherworldly placidity. Nature becomes supernatural. In pictures and prints it's also a warning, a call for action whether or not intentional: if we want to make sure that the images of blooms we recognise today won't be the only thing that remains of them – like the watercolours of the *Semper Augustus* of yore – some things will have to change. In their fall 2018 collection, Berlin collective GmbH celebrate with a pattern of abstract leaves woven or embroidered into their garments the stinging nettle, a survivor plant that grows everywhere however unwelcome. Founders Benjamin Alexander Huseby and Serhat Isik, both sons of immigrants, identify with the otherness of it. But in the old days, despite its sting, the nettle was much respected. It was believed to protect those who carry it against lightening, and bestow courage. In a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, a princess weaves shirts of mail from nettles' flax, which will break the spell that turned her eleven brothers into swans. This reverence for nature, for its resilience and unfathomable talents, is perhaps precisely what we ought to rediscover in the contemporary world. 'We shall not wilt' reads a t-shirt from Bodybound's spring 2018 collection, and at Acne Studios, printed with two freesias at the back, another spells out 'nurture'.