

Up Close with Nick Knight Roses From My Garden

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Nick Knight Roses from my Garden will be opening on 4 July at Waddesdon Manor gardens. The exhibition was due to open in March but was postponed due to the Coronavirus COIVD-19 pandemic. Irene Caswell talked to British fashion photographer and film maker Nick Knight about his work and gardening.

Around six or seven years ago Nick Knight started photographing roses with his iPhone and posting the images on Instagram. Taking a stroll in the garden at the weekend at his home in Richmond, he would pick blooms as he walked. Back at the kitchen table he would arrange them into entirely organic compositions in a little vase and photograph them. The ritual still begins with a handful of fresh blooms, sometimes building up to twenty or thirty roses.

“Form and harmony don’t come naturally. Petals fall off and the roses collapse while I work.”

At the start Knight was looking for a simple way to capture his fascination with the romantic English rose. It is painstaking work, however, and he can spend hours building the relationship between one flower and another.

“Form and harmony don’t come naturally,” says Knight. “Petals fall off and the roses collapse while I work.”

Knight has worked with Alexander McQueen and John Galiano, and directed videos for Lady Gaga, and Kanye West. There is a wonderful symbiosis of couture and the natural world in his fashion photography. Some of his images, Karlie Kloss in Versace Haute Couture for W Magazine and Couture (2012), and Naomi Campbell for K V Magazine (2007), have an element of Cicely Mary Barker’s Flower Fairies. Knight’s photograph of Alek Wek for Christian Dior, Haute Couture, (2001) is reminiscent of sharp thistles and brings Arthur Rackham’s work to mind.



Portrait of Nick Knight. Image
(c) Britt Lloyd

Nick Knight Roses

The fragile elegance of roses means the quintessentially English blooms adds an arresting element of tragic poetry to his images. In part allegorical, Knight admits they are rooted in the work of 16th and 17th century Belgian flower painters.

“We’re all influenced by what we like,” he says. “I’m not so interested in looking back as looking forwards to the future and new technologies”. While he admires the work of American photographer, Irving Penn, Knight felt he needed to find his own space and the chance to find something new that ‘doesn’t look like it’s already been done’.

“The iPhone is the camera of our time. It allows me to work without all the professional photographer’s paraphernalia.” Knight no longer calls himself a photographer by definition but rather an image maker. He is used to collaborating in studios with fashion designers and working in conversation. Most of his work, he says, involves getting inside the heads of fashion designers and musicians.

“At first glance, couture clothes are normal, even mundane,” says Knight. Fashion photography is about capturing what doesn’t exist, not what is real. “That’s what you’ll see with the best artists.” Knight tells a story about when he was once asked by the head of a perfume brand to produce a photograph of an ‘angel’. Pleased with the result he presented this to the CEO who asked why he had photographed a ‘whore’. He laughs quietly as he reflects on what that says about him. The point he is making is that a photograph is an expression of the photographer’s personal feelings be it love, anger and so on, and not reality.

It is literally painting on a screen. When the editing process is complete ‘brushstrokes’ appear in the depths of the images. They are no longer simply photographs.

In contrast, creating the rose images is a solitary, personal process. Knight works close to a window and under a skylight for maximum light. “It’s a very flexible way of working”, he explains. “It’s easy to see the flowers and I’m free to move around the table.” The process is similar to creating a painting and Knight finds the creative process a meditative one.

The Process

In the beginning people started liking his photographs on Instagram, including the owners of Albion Barn who approached Knight with the idea of an exhibition. The challenge was getting the photographs printed as big files and the early results were not good enough. Online research brought up Artificial Intelligence software which allows for the overlay of many versions of the same image. Knight goes over each printed image with a china graph pencil to identify blemishes and then works with AI to filter and combine layers, sharpen edges and hide imperfections in the same manner as an artist paints over flaws on the canvas.



Nick Knight Sunday 11 October, 2015 Hand-coated pigment print © Nick Knight Courtesy of the Artist and Albion Barn

“It is literally painting on a screen,” Knight admits. When the editing process is complete ‘brushstrokes’ appear in the depths of the images. They are no longer simply photographs.

“You need to take a close, immersive look, taking time to study them like a painting,” he says, “to see the textures, patterns and patina”.

Knight admits there is a dichotomy in modern images. While we now mainly view pictures online he is producing painterly images using technology, which benefit from being seen in reality to truly appreciate them.

Gardening during Lockdown

During his over 100 days of isolation at home Knight has dug up part of the garden and planted vegetables. Growing food seemed like a sensible thing to do and Knight discovered he actually enjoyed physically interacting with the ‘real, natural world’. He enjoys the contrast to working in a clean, white studio. His garden features different rose varieties but he does not plant them specifically to photograph. While red roses are the language of love these are not featured in his work as it is hard to record the colour with an iPhone, and to manipulate for reproduction on Instagram.

Knight’s garden features a lot of David Austen roses which are very fragrant, although of course there is no fragrance in pictures. Knight’s house was designed by architect David Chipperfield using concrete and featuring dark basalt in the courtyard where the roses grow, alongside ivy and silver birches. In season, there are snowdrops and white daffodils followed in May by bluebells.

“It’s low maintenance and the roses are easy to look after. They just need to be fed, sprayed for pests and watered,” says Knight. He makes it sound so easy as anyone who has battled greenfly will appreciate.

As the interview wraps up Knight reflects that, like so many of us, he has become disconnected from nature. He admits he is privileged in his work and where he lives. He travels well and ‘people are nice to him’, but confesses that it is a little unreal.



Nick Knight Saturday 22 October, 2016 Hand-coated pigment print © Nick Knight Courtesy of the Artist and Albion Barn

“There is beauty in everything, if we choose to see it. There is something almost spiritual about growing plants, the act of creation in the smell of the earth, the rain, and the colours in nature.”

Nick Knight insists he is not spiritual but he is certainly a romantic.

Nick Knight Roses From My Garden

Features 16 images at the Coach House Gallery, the Stables at Waddesdon Manor from Saturday 4 July until 25 October 2020, 11am to 5pm. Entry times will be staggered to allow for distancing. Booking in advance is essential.

All visitors, including National Trust, Art Fund and RHS members must now book Grounds admission in advance due to caps on visitor numbers to avoid overcrowding.

For more information on Nick Knight or Waddesdon

Visit: www.nickknight.com or <https://waddesdon.org.uk>.

*Cover image: Nick Knight Saturday 10th October, 2015 Hand-coated pigment print ©
Nick Knight Courtesy of the Artist and Albion Barn*