

Daniel Brown

Daniel Brown's digital animations of natural motifs, including the 'Flowers' series, offer us what Alice Rawsthorn has described as "soft, organic, sensual, romantic digital images". Brown investigates the infinitely varied permutations of growth patterns in the natural world. Like John Ruskin, he observes the endless cycle of growth and renewal by which natural forms transform themselves from acorn to oak tree, bud to blossom. Brown does not recreate these processes in the spirit of a naturalist, carefully plotting their progress; rather he does so to extend the possibilities of image-making with technology, seemingly performing an alchemical transformation to create teeming life from base, inanimate code. These synthetic life-forms seem to possess the life-force or 'breath of life' that animates all organic beings. However, Brown's illusory flowers almost seem to surpass the delicacy and beauty of their living counterparts, intensifying reality by recreating it once removed. In 'Thinking the Unthinkable', his two variations upon the 'flowers' series might be seen to echo Carroll's estrangement and embellishment of the natural world in 'Alice in the Garden of Live Flowers'.

Brown's animations go against the grain of web-based and digitally generated images. Rather than creating action, he creates a complete sensory environment for us to inhabit. The pace of Brown's animations is gentle and contemplative. As each flower buds, grows, blossoms, and then dissolve into nothingness, it is as though they wash over us in waves. This effect is amplified by the sense they possess a gossamer lightness. The artist creates a tension between the legato, meditative progress of each piece, and the sense that each flower's fleeting life-span has been accelerated, as if seen through time-lapse photography. As with time-lapse photography of flowers, Brown seems to reveal the unexpected drama and life-force of what we ordinarily think of as 'inanimate' objects. We intuitively accept these illusions as convincingly real because of the sense of light, texture, and three-dimensionality with which he imbues each work. The carefully judged variety and subtlety of his palette of greens and browns allow us to become wholly absorbed in what Brown calls his "virtual window" onto another place.

In 'Thinking the Unthinkable', 'Flowers' are presented as room-sized projections: our encounter with them is conducted at an intensely physical level. The result is to immerse us into an entirely separate world, where it feels as though our experience of nature had been distilled and intensified. Brown's work creates a complete environment: we feel to be entering a place where the passing of time seems to operate differently. The sensation is overwhelmingly meditative: the hypnotic rhythm of growth and decay makes our heart rate feel to lower, our breathing to slow down. It's not a huge overstatement to say that 'Flowers' requires a similar investment on our part to an encounter with a Mark Rothko painting. Like Rothko's late canvases, 'Flowers' are wall-sized environments which we 'walk into', demanding our complete absorption to yield their imaginative returns. They are also experienced in lowered light so that we become submerged in the work. Sat in a darkened projection space, our eyes delight in the luscious play of colour and texture offered to them, eliciting a dream-like wonder and exhilaration. We intuitively view pictures of 'inanimate' objects through a particular spectatorial mode. Brown's flowers disrupt these visual habits and require a form of attention more appropriate to viewing panoramic landscapes. The effect is akin to that of our entire consciousness rather than just our pupils being 'dilated' – that is to say, enraptured and open to unfamiliar experience.

Brown has remarked that he wishes people to view his works "like music", and 'Flowers' recall ambient music, as well as the impressionist works of Erik Satie and Claude Debussy. The artist takes natural motifs as raw material with which to create magical, fantastical images, recalling Baudelaire's remark: "the visible universe is nothing but a storehouse of images which must be subordinated to the imagination and put into order, [as] an *incitamentum*, an alarm-clock for the slumbering faculties." Indeed, viewing Brown's work recalls our experience of music in several aspects. Not least, it is durational and environmental. Durational, as our experience of the work is primarily determined by rhythm – the slow, pulsing rhythm of the flowers' emergence and disappearance. 'Flowers' builds cumulatively in intensity over time through repetition and change. It is structured around variations on a theme, like a symphony, where a range of motifs are reconfigured to create a complete composition.

Whilst all cinema is 'environmental' at one level, Brown amplifies our sense of immersion way beyond that offered by narrative cinema or traditional animation. Narrative cinema requires a compositional centre of gravity and a beginning and end; 'Flowers' by contrast makes our eye drift across the entire picture surface in limitless time. Unlike cinema, the work feels to occupy our own space as much as provide a window-on-a-world. The flowers' raking perspective and ivy-like spread means they feel to move out of the screen at us, breaking with traditional compositions of fore-, middle, and background. Rather than encountering discrete elements, we experience the work as a total environment: 'Flowers' can recall Baudelaire's synaesthetic aspirations for painting: "[experiencing an artwork] is as though a magical atmosphere has moved towards you and is enveloping you."

Stills from 'Flowers' series, 2005