



# NATURA MORTA

Paulette Tavormina



Paulette Tavormina © *Yellow Cherries and Crab Apples, After G. G.*, courtesy Robert Klein Gallery, Boston

**Wendy Erickson:** I am drawn into your images when I study them—I can almost smell the fragrance from the flowers. Your photographs are extraordinarily warm and inviting—I get the feeling these are extremely personal photographs.

**Paulette Tavormina:** They are intensely personal to me as they all tell stories of the fragility of life and love, the fine balance of emotions, passion, vulnerability and the sorrow one feels that life and beauty can be so fleeting—tempus fugit. Being a sentimental person, photography is a way to capture and savor a moment.

I pour myself into these images when I am creating them. Typically, it will take me three days to a week to set up and shoot an image and get it to the point where I love it. In the process, I'll make hundreds of shots, tweaking and refining until I get each element in place and the lighting kissing each surface exactly as I want it.

The photograph entitled *Figs and Dragonfly, After G.F.* expresses my Sicilian family history. This image reminds me of my grandfather's original fig tree that in

turn was grafted and given to my father and in turn given to my brother. Snails on the branches are from my cousin's villa in Palermo, Italy.

**WE:** How were you introduced to photography?

**PT:** I studied art history at school and later worked at Sotheby's Auction House in New York. There I was surrounded by priceless paintings and sculptures from all over the world. Much like working in a rotating museum, I was inspired by the beautiful works of art I was exposed to every day.

My interest in photography began to develop in the 1980's, but I soon realized that I needed to develop my skills and so attended a class at the International Center of Photography in New York. I was intrigued and began shooting whenever I had a chance.

When I moved to Santa Fe a few years later I took a black and white darkroom course to strengthen my understanding of the technology behind image making. A friend asked if I would photograph his collection of historic Indian pottery for a book he was

publishing. For the next year I shot images of historic Indian pottery and Navajo jewelry and my career in photography was launched.

**WE:** Tell me about the inspiration behind *Natura Morta*?

**PT:** Although I shot many still life images for commercial publications over the years, I really just began my fine art career four years ago. It was at that time that I combined my love of 17th Century Old Master still life paintings, allegories of life and my passion for photography. I set about creating my *Natura Morta* images inspired by the sumptuous detail of Old Master painters, highlighting the food as much as the lavish table settings. Painters such as Francisco de Zurbarán, Adriaen Coorte and Giovanna Garzoni were very influential.

**WE:** Some of your photographs pay homage to Spanish painter Juan Sánchez Cotán—were there technical difficulties in making these images?

**PT:** I had long been attracted to the niche and suspended fruit imagery of Juan Sanchez Cotán, ever since seeing his work in my Old Master still life books and then later in museums. Once I began my *Natura Morta* series, I pondered over how best to create photographs inspired by those elements. I designed a niche, which a friend built for me and I painted, and then began experimenting with methods to compose the images. It was certainly painstaking and required every ounce of patience I could muster. Working with the strings, suspending the fruit, balancing the compositions, and getting the lighting right took endless hours.

**WE:** There are insects and shells, objects and vases in your photographs—are you an avid collector?

**PT:** I have always loved the magic of objects and have collected “things” for years whether they are shells or antique dice or antique glass. I have amassed a large collection of butterflies, insects, shells, dried flowers, as well as lots of dishes and glasses from my food and prop styling days for cookbooks and motion pictures. Sometimes I will find an insect on a sidewalk in New York City or ladybugs on the beach. Other times I buy them in a wonderful taxidermy shop in Paris and carefully carry them home. Sometimes I borrow 17th Century Dutch dishes from a friendly antique store.

**WE:** Your choices of flowers are not typical of those found at most local florists. Love lies bleeding, morn-



Paulette Tavormina © *Grapes and Yellow Melon, After J. S. C.*, courtesy Robert Klein Gallery, Boston

ing glories and pitcher plants to name just a few—do you have a garden?

**PT:** I live in a Manhattan apartment and don't have a garden unfortunately. I find most of the flowers, fruits and vegetables from the flower market and farmers'



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Paulette Tavormina © *Peonies*, courtesy Robert Klein Gallery, Boston



Paulette Tavormina © *Peaches and Morning Glories, After G. G.*, courtesy Robert Klein Gallery, Boston

markets in New York City. I have come to know several of the vendors over the last few years and when I have a particular idea, I will ask them to be on the lookout for specific things such as grapes with their vines and leaves attached. When I needed fig leaves and fragile morning glory flowers, I bought a fig tree and a morning glory plant and set them on my apartment windowsill and later harvested them for the *Fig* and *Peach* photographs.

**WE:** For still life images, these appear very lifelike—I sense there is great care in setting up these scenes.

**PT:** For an example, shooting the strawberry image, I spent day and night of the 4th of July weekend just setting it up. As soon as I had cut the leaves from the stems, they wilted and died, so I had to cut more leaves and had to recompose constantly. I had to steam the large insect to soften it so with tweezers I could separate the legs and the antennae that were stuck together. When I placed the insect in the composition, the strawberry above it came crashing down and broke off one of the antennae (that would have happened in nature too, I suppose).

**WE:** What cameras and software do you use to make your photographs?

**PT:** I use a Canon 5D Mark 11 Camera with 100mm macro, 70-200mm and 50mm lenses. I also use Photoshop to tweak out spots and make color corrections.

**WE:** Do you have any advice for photographers finding their way in today's world?

**PT:** I think the only thing that I would say for advice is to find what you are passionate about, stay focused and dedicated to that passion and make it a priority. Incredible things can happen.



*Paulette Tavormina lives and works in New York City. Represented by the Robert Klein Gallery, Boston, her work is widely collected. She has exhibited her work in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Palm Beach and internationally in Moscow, Lugano, London and Paris. To view more of her photography visit [tavorminaphotography.com](http://tavorminaphotography.com) and [robertkleingallery.com](http://robertkleingallery.com)*