



RIGHT: The artist Susan Barmon  
 FAR RIGHT: Lilies & coreopsis intertwine in composition.  
 BELOW: Barmon captures an ethereal white dahlia as it slowly wanes.



**S**USAN BARMON ENTERED THE WORLD of digital art somewhat unexpectedly. She's not a "techie" by any means—until just a few years ago, the award-winning photographer worked exclusively with a film camera and traditional darkroom. Today, although she has yet to buy a digital camera, she's completely immersed in creating botanical prints that are a fascinating marriage of nature and technology.

These dazzling images of cut flowers (which have found homes in both public exhibitions and private collections) are produced on a flatbed scanner, the same kind used in offices to make digital copies of documents. Somewhat surprisingly—and counter-intuitively—the moving light source and optical array of a scanner capture a level of depth and a sharpness of focus that a camera does not, creating the illusion that petals and stems curve right off the page toward the viewer.

Susan created her first prints by simply laying flowers on the scanner bed, leaving the lid open to avoid crushing the blooms. When friends responded enthusiastically to these early works, she began experimenting with more elaborate compositions, eventually engineering a "scaffold" out of Tinkertoys so she could arrange flowers and leaves in multiple layers, creating an even greater sense of depth.

"I have to think about what I want in the foreground, and I just start arranging things, but I don't really see what I have

## illuminated innovator

**Digital artist Susan Barmon scans the botanical horizon.**

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

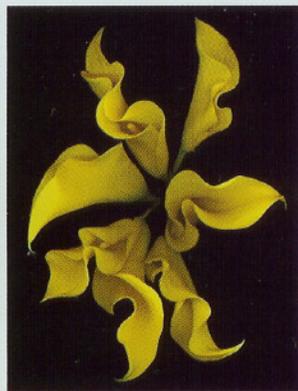
until I've done a preview scan," she explains.

Perfecting each scan can take hours. Once Susan is satisfied with the composition (usually after eight to 10 preview scans), she goes to work on the digitized image, using Adobe Photoshop software to even out the black background, enhance colors, adjust contrast and achieve heightened visual effects.

"There's not an inch of this paper I haven't gone over," she says of her finished prints.

As a result, each of her botanical portraits has the glow of an illuminated manuscript, the detail of a painstakingly rendered botanical illustration, and the realism of a film viewed through 3-D glasses.

## artist in bloom



FAR LEFT: Summer's vibrant color pops against the stark black background in a mass grouping. LEFT: Floating calla lilies converge to form one surreal bloom. BELOW: A single zinnia blazes in oranges and reds.



A self-professed “gardener of convenience,” Susan grows a mere handful of flowers for cutting; she favors zinnias and tough perennials like irises and lilies that don’t need coddling. The rest of her subjects come from grocery store bouquets or are snipped from roadsides and the gardens of friends.

One winter she grew more than a dozen amaryllis bulbs in a sunny bedroom to ensure a steady supply of floral material. Among aficionados, such flowers are often valued precisely for their fleeting nature, and most floral photography aims to preserve the one moment in time that a flower is essentially perfect.

Yet Susan is fascinated with the entire life cycle of a flower and aims to demonstrate the ephemeral nature of plants. In fact, she exploits it in vivid detail, sometimes choosing plants that are wilting and past their prime, if not downright exhausted. Her image of a spent peony is fascinatingly beautiful, capturing in

its drooping petals a sense of motion that is reminiscent of a sea anemone’s constant, gentle agitation. Another print features an amaryllis in an advanced state of decay, its four trumpets collapsing delicately, like a troupe of ballerinas crumpled to the stage floor at the end of an emotional performance.

“Amaryllis are spectacular when they’re dying,” Susan says. “They get all veiny and translucent and they take on all these tissue paper shapes.”

While the art prints quickly captured the attention of gallery owners and curators, the commercial world has also taken notice, licensing Susan’s images for use on gift bags, mugs,

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T-shirts, even needlework kits. These successes have allowed her to take a welcome break from the commercial photography business in much the same way gardeners find an escape from the real world in their own backyards.

“The flowers have provided me with a respite from my life and I need that right now,” Susan confides. “When I’m working on them I go somewhere else. It’s total creative involvement.”

Prints of Susan’s work are available at **The Jennifer Hunt Gallery in Birmingham, Alabama; Soho Myriad Art Consulting Services in Atlanta; and through [www.susanbarmonphotography.com](http://www.susanbarmonphotography.com).**