



Orchid Cowboy



WHEN THE SMITHSONIAN ACCEPTED
JONATHAN SINGER'S OVERSIZED BOOKS
OF 250 BOTANICAL PHOTOGRAPHS,
THE ONCE-OBSCURE BAYONNE PODIATRIST
BECAME AN INTERNATIONAL
STAR ON THE FINE-ART STAGE.

By CHRISTOPHER HANN



Bayonne is a shot-and-a-beer kind of town, a brick-and-mortar industrial peninsula, hardly the place you'd expect to find one of the planet's most celebrated botanical photographers. And to think that just two years ago Jonathan Singer was a fairly anonymous foot doctor whose off-duty work behind the camera registered not a peep from the cultural

cognoscenti. "I was wallowing in nothingness," Singer says. Then, conjuring an even worse fate, he adds, "in averageness."

Not anymore. In the past year Singer has collaborated with the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. National Arboretum, and Sweden's Royal Academy of Sciences. He's been profiled in *Vanity Fair* and featured on the CBS show *Sunday Morning*. To the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History he donated the first issue of *Botanica Magnifica*, his five-volume, leather-covered, hand-bound set of 250 photographs

of flowers from the museum's collection. These days Singer is shooting another esteemed crop, the National Arboretum's bonsai, and working on another book, a collection of tulip portraits titled *Tulipae Hortorum*, the first issue of which he'll donate to the Royal Academy in Stockholm. The kicker? Singer recently got word that a Japanese businessman has offered \$2.5 million for the second issue of *Botanica*.

Yet the guy who calls himself the Orchid Cowboy insists that all the acclaim misses the larger point.

Globba Radicalis
(opening page).
Dendrobium
Smilliae (facing).







Primula Auricula, Dilly Dilly.

The Scandinavian cameramaker Hasselblad honored Singer with a Laureate Award last year for his contribution to fine-art photography and to the furthering of the public's perception and appreciation of the botanical world – the first time the company bestowed such an award.



Singer wants to use his pictures to spread the word about the global need to preserve the environment. It's a mission inspired by his alliance with John Kress, the Smithsonian botanist and curator who arranged for Singer to photograph the institution's flowers. "As a research scientist," Singer says, "he first said to me, 'You're a great photographer, but you don't know anything about botany.' Listening and learning to what he said, I became

ded box on the floor cradles the \$40,000 Hasselblad camera that Singer credits with enabling him to make photographs whose color and composition evoke paintings by the Dutch masters. "He really captured light and form and color in a very special way," Kress says. "People do ooh and ahh. When we turn a page in *Botanica Magnifica*, there is an immediate emotional reaction."

Singer, 60, is a large man, well over 6 feet tall. He's wearing

**"IN THE END WE SEE NOT THE INTIMATE DIVERSITY OF LIFE,
BUT RATHER STEAL A GLIMPSE INTO CREATION ITSELF."
—JONATHAN SINGER**

acutely aware of the situation in the world — because he's been there. He's been in the jungles. He's watched what is happening. We now have a story to tell, and that story has to be heard from a person like Kress who is exceptionally well-trained and knowledgeable and with the use of my cameras."

In an upstairs office inside his house in Bayonne, cut off from the hurly-burly streetscape, Singer is seated at a computer. A pad-

blue pajama pants with a floral pattern and a white T-shirt beneath a black house jacket from Shanghai, his silver-and-gray hair pulled in a ponytail. From a gold chain around his neck hangs a Chinese *bi* (pronounced "bee"), a flat, donut-shape jade figure. The computer screen displays the point-blank images of tulips he shot for *Tulipae Hortorum*. He dedicated the book to Carl Linnaeus, the 18th-century father of taxonomy, a Swedish na-



Hybrid Tulips, part of *Tulipae Hortorum*, the folio Singer is donating to Sweden's Royal Academy of Sciences.

tional hero. “It’s almost as if Linnaeus were looking at the flower close-up with a magnifying glass, so you see every little structure, every cell, if it’s possible, every detail,” Singer says. “It’s a different concept in design to make a book just on one species.”

Tulipae is hardly the first mold that Singer has broken. *Botanica* was printed with handmade ink on handmade, oversize paper, roughly 26½ by 39 inches, a dimension known as a double-elephant folio. It’s the same size employed by John James Audubon for his seminal *Birds of America*. The similarity is no coincidence. Singer likes to compare his own art with that of the renowned wildlife illustrator. (Kress dismisses the comparison, noting that Audubon was a self-taught ornithologist who tracked his subjects in their natural environs, whereas Singer works mostly in greenhouses.) “What he did for wildlife conservation back in the 1800s,” Singer says of Audubon, “I’m now doing for botanical conservation in the 2000s.”

The phone rings. It’s Tiger Craft, calling from London to thank Singer for a photograph he’d sent upon the birth of Craft’s son. Craft is the grandson of Eileen Ford, the Oldwick grand dame who co-founded (with her late husband, Jerry) the Ford

Modeling Agency. Eileen Ford and Singer are dear friends, both having frequented a favorite nursery near her home. It was to Ford that Singer dedicated *Botanica*.

A few years ago, at the same nursery, Singer met Marc Hachadourian of Hillsdale, the curator of glasshouse collections at the New York Botanical Garden. Hachadourian, 35, has championed Singer’s work ever since. Without his assistance, Singer says, he would never have achieved all that he has.

Singer is unapologetically impatient about getting his work before the public. His haste may be warranted. A few years ago he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. He says the condition has not slowed his work schedule, though he concedes it takes a toll. He says he doesn’t have good days — “just days and bad days.” On the bad days, his legs go numb, his left hand shakes, and he tires easily. If there’s a silver lining, it’s this: Singer will never again need to worry about wallowing in averageness.

View more of Jonathan Singer’s photography at botanicamagnifica.com. He is represented by Westwood Gallery in Westwood (westwoodartgallery.com) and Throckmorton Fine Art in New York (throckmorton-nyc.com).