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PHOTO ESSAYS

The Surprising Beauty of Dead Leaves and Rotting Fruit

by Jillian Steinhauer on January 29, 2014



Tanya Marcuse, *Fallen N° 439*, 2013, pigment print, 37 3/4 x 48"

of photographer Tanya Marcuse, who takes pictures of rotting fruit, dying flowers, and fallen plants. Her tableaux look spontaneous, like the remnants of a picnic from several days ago strewn across the forest floor, and the name of the series, *Fallen* — now on view at Julie Saul Gallery — reinforces this. But they're in fact highly composed images, which Marcuse carefully builds over the course of a few days or weeks, saving withering pomegranates and browning leaves as she goes. She arranges and shoots her final displays in the woods near her Hudson Valley, New York home, "weaving together dead leaves and spring blossoms, adding insects and small creatures to create a tapestry-like density, presenting symbolic patterns of growth and decay in a natural (or perhaps unnatural) landscape," she writes on her website.

There's something to be said for an impeccable still life, a carefully composed scene of blooming flowers and ripe, luscious food. But there's a reason that the form's name in French is *nature morte*: things that don't move are either inanimate or dead. A long tradition of beauty springs from the well of decay.

That's the driving idea behind the newest work



Tanya Marcuse, *Fallen N° 496*, 2012, pigment print, 56 x 71"

Marcuse shoots with the older technology of a 4x5 view large-format camera, but, unlike her previous work, she printed the *Fallen* photographs digitally. This blend of old and new seems to echo the thematic marriage of life and death. It also makes for stunningly clear prints that reveal more the longer you look — a previously unnoticed insect here, a simple small berry there. But even as you zoom in, you're inclined to pull back, get lost in the all-over patterns and rhythms of the work. Marcuse's subjects may be grotesque, but she's also something of a formalist, using worms and mossy tree roots as means to colorfully patterned, exquisitely artistic ends.



Tanya Marcuse, *Fallen N° 89*, 2010, pigment print, 29 1/2 x 38"