

# In the Garden

WITH RON VAN DONGEN

BY CLAIRE SYKES

**F**ields of tulips roll out like huge bolts of fabric, striping the flat Dutch landscape in yellows, oranges, reds and magentas. When he wasn't bicycling or playing soccer, Ron van Dongen wandered those fields in the village of Warmond, Netherlands, where he grew up. In August, he'd harvest bulbs for summer vacation money in a place world-famous for tulips.

Van Dongen takes me back several decades while we sit at his kitchen table — his dog, Elliot, asleep at our feet — in the Portland, Oregon home that he shares with his partner, David. Out the window, the late-fall garden braces for winter's frigid rains. With his quiet demeanor and gentle voice marked by a slight accent, he tells me that some of his earliest memories are not of people, just "trees, animals, colors, flowers and plants. I don't know why that attracted me, but it did. And that's never gone away."

Building on the strong mental images from his childhood are the pictures van Dongen has created for the past 25 years. He is best



*Above: Ron in Field, 1966. Opposite: Papaver 'Black Cloud,' 2005*



**Some of his earliest memories are not of people, he says, just “trees, animals, colors, flowers and plants. I don’t know why that attracted me, but it did. And that’s never gone away.”**

known for his black-and-white and color close-up explorations of plants, mainly flowers. Larger than life, they revel in their geometry and poetry. How else could we see so clearly the chessboard pattern of the checkered lily (“*Fritillaria Meleagris*”) or the flamenco dancer’s dress twirling in the flowering kale’s ruffled splendor (“*Brassica Oleracea ‘Nagoya Red’*”? His intimate botanic portraits join his rich oeuvre of human ones. That day in his house, he begins by spreading the latter across his large dining room table, telling the stories of each. In the child that he photographed in the same pose every two years for 16, and the friend whose demise from AIDS he documented, I see tight buds gradually opening and blooms drooping. In his nudes, there’s the simple graceful curve of a stem, or petals unabashedly splayed, exposing everything. And as I turn the large, thick pages of his photo books of tulips, calla lilies, sunflowers and other plants, their faces look back at me.

Twelve monographs of van Dongen’s photos have been published since the late 1990s, several by the esteemed Nazraeli Press. He has shown his work in 15 galleries in the United States, Canada, England, the Netherlands, Japan, Korea and Mexico. *Natural History*, *The London Times*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Elle* and others have published his photographs, and his collectors include the likes of Sir Elton John and Ralph Lauren.

But he is first and always a gardener. “That’s more important to me than photography,” he says. “It’s about the sheer pleasure of growing plants and being actively engaged with my natural surroundings, to get a better understanding of them. And the appreciation of what you take into your body. There’s nothing more rewarding than growing vegetables and bringing them to the table.”

The outdoors finds its way inside for van Dongen, as he uses his home studio to photograph what he grows in his garden. The first time I drove to his home, in a neighborhood of older houses on tree-lined streets, I knew the one with the Henri Rousseau jungle out front had to be his. He says, “I love tropical, hardy, non-

native plants that do well in Portland — like calla lilies and jack-in-the-pulpit. Then I have a lot of succulents, roses, irises and dahlias.” He also grows 40 kinds of tulips, some of them rare varieties from his trips to the Netherlands.

The first plants van Dongen ever saw in life weren’t tulips, but tropical. That was in Judibana, Venezuela, where he was born in 1961 to Dutch parents; his father was a telecommunications advisor for Royal Dutch Shell. When van Dongen was six, the family moved to the Netherlands, into a house surrounded by tulip fields. He got his first pack of seeds then, marigolds, and started gardening; but by high school, he was more into sports. Except for taking a few pictures with an old camera his father gave him, photography wasn’t part of van Dongen’s life.

Not yet knowing his career path, van Dongen studied biology and health science at the University of Delft, assuming he’d teach or work in public health. But before receiving his master’s degree, he wanted to see some of the world. In 1983, he flew to Chicago where he stayed with relatives, learned English and took liberal arts classes at a small college. One was on black-and-white photography, something he had delved into while traveling. He says, “I just loved the whole process, and I was so impressed with my teacher.”

She was equally impressed with him. “There’s always one student in the class who ‘gets it,’” says Lela Hersh, ASA, founder of Museum and Fine Arts Consulting, LLC in Chicago. “That person always stands apart from everyone else. That person always takes a step further than the others. He questions more.”

After a few years in Chicago, van Dongen went back to Delft to finish up his degree. At first he thought he’d return to the States and attend the Art Institute of Chicago, but he landed at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, making a permanent move to the U.S. in 1989.

In a studio lighting class, van Dongen discovered the then-fashionable and now defunct 4x5 Type 55 P/N Polaroid film. With an ambition to be taken seriously as a fine-art photographer, he



## The outdoors finds its way inside for van Dongen, as he uses his home studio to photograph what he grows in his garden.

began focusing on portraits. He says, “I included nudes only because people wanted to show off. It was San Francisco.” Gender identity and sexual ambiguity, body piercings and tattoos bared themselves to his camera. “I looked for Renaissance influences in portraiture, wanting the lighting to emulate paintings from the Golden Age of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.”

So as not to burden his models, he practiced his photography on flowers — subjects he initially thought “too frivolous” for anything else. In this personal work, high-contrast images gave way to white-on-white and black-on-black. Meanwhile, his portrait photos appeared in magazines like *Parenting* and *Might*.

Visiting San Francisco galleries, he saw photographers selling prints of their work and thought, why not me? A friend suggested he try his flowers, which he was still shooting in black-and-white. Reluctantly, he did, and soon he was making sales. “In the beginning, I was a little embarrassed about saying ‘I’m a flower photographer,’” admits van Dongen. “But in hindsight, I realize that taking pictures of flowers gave me respite from the pain of caring for my two friends who had AIDS.”

His flower and vegetable beds started to play a huge role in his photography. “I was so involved with gardening; I think people saw that in my work.” They still do. Rachel Smith, director of Bonni Benrubi Gallery, says, “Ron has the passion and craft to create these luscious images. The fact that he grows all his subjects adds to the specialness of the prints. He is hands-on from beginning to end. That’s what he adds to the genre — his craft and dedication.”

Van Dongen’s first professionally photographed flowers flaunted themselves in lush bouquets. He says, “I was aiming for the rich details and opulent compositions of the Dutch and Flemish Golden Age painters. But soon I discovered it was just too much information. I wanted something simpler —

to focus on a specific theme and develop a style.” He switched to floral portraits of a single species, creating graphic images with few tonal values, photographing in color only for the occasional editorial assignment.

Ten years later, in 2004, a friend suggested that van Dongen try color. Though at first reluctant to do so, he felt he’d exhausted every shade of gray. So he continued the monotonous of his black-and-white work, but now in color — green leaves on a green background, orange petals on orange — quickly realizing the endless artistic possibilities.

Around this time, in a new house with a new garden, he tried photographing his flower subjects outside in their own habitat — but, he says, “It felt too foreign to me.” He prefers the controlled environment of his studio, which enjoys natural north- and east-facing light regulated by window blinds. He chooses flowers and



photography workshops

2 0 1 4

AndersonRanch  
arts center

970.923.3181 | andersonranch.org

**Opposite: *Lathyrus o. 'Unwin's Butterfly Striped,' 2013***



©RON VAN DONGEN

*Paeonia 'Suzanna,' 2001*



*Paeonia 'Barrymore,' 1995*

**“Ron has the passion and craft to create these luscious images. The fact that he grows all his subjects adds to the specialness of the prints.” – Rachel Smith**

other plants at their prime. What you won't see in his botanical photographs are the dying and the dead, except for flowers he's pressed and dried. He notes, "I often choose plants that you normally wouldn't think of photographing because they're not classically beautiful, and find the beauty in them."

Van Dongen refers to a house-paint chip book for the backdrop colors that he brushes on his photographs. In his book *Bloom* (Chronicle Books, 2006), the petals of a red-purple pansy spread themselves against a similarly colored field ("Viola 'Crown Rose'"). In another photo, a passionflower's purple corona filament decides the lavender background that complements the plant's pale, gray-green petals ("Passiflora Caerulea 'Blue Crown'").

"Ron responds to each plant, putting it into a different context by creating a color aura around it," says Charles Froelick, owner of Froelick Gallery in Portland. The gallery first showed van Dongen's work in 2004. "His sensitivity to visual order and impact is undeniable. His compositions always have personality: flowers look back at us, seeking a relationship, through connection, joy, thoughtfulness. He is particular about what part of the plant is in focus, and he is a perfectionist with printing." Van Dongen uses a 4x5 view camera, printing black-and-white images on photographic paper and color images on watercolor paper.

When I first saw his work at Froelick Gallery, it reminded me of stills from cellulose motion picture film that had deteriorated. That's exactly what happened. After he exposed black-and-white Polaroid Type 55 P/N film and pulled it from the film holder, out came a negative and a positive. He washed the former in a water bath and hung it to dry, as required. The latter, the proof, needed to be fixed by rubbing on the chemical solution that comes with the film — otherwise, the image becomes unstable, time rending it with burns, stains and splashes. Van Dongen stopped fixing proofs for two decades, placing them neatly in cardboard boxes. He stored them in his attic figuring he'd never use them again. Then in 2007, he brought the 1,000-odd images to light.

Forty-five of these images are featured in his latest monograph, *Proof* (Nazraeli Press, 2012). Roses, ferns, grapes and other plant life float in a hypnagogic drift, as if trying to hold on to a semblance of themselves that is fast escaping. Froelick writes in the book's essay, "The plants pictured here seem likely to disappear if we blink. They convey a sadness that is touching and engaging, and at the same time, speak of survival and resiliency."

Likewise, it's van Dongen's steady commitment and devotion that have steered his career as a photographer. "I never thought I would be doing it this long, but it's been a great opportunity to make this my life and work. When I think back on everything I've done so far, what makes me happy is that I've dedicated myself to photography, something I really wanted to get to know and treasure."

I ask van Dongen what growing plants has taught him about taking photographs, and vice versa. "You miss a lot in the garden if you don't pay attention. I have to come up with the next subject, and I won't see it if I don't pay attention. And through photography, I've come to see more. I see the first plants coming up, or when I'm cleaning up in the garden I notice the early blooms of the hellebore, and that's when I get excited about photographing. If I ever stopped gardening, I wouldn't take photographs anymore."

Good thing van Dongen has no plans to hang up his hoe. As long as he's sowing seeds and cutting flowers, we get to enjoy what poses in front of his camera. His "Papaver 'Black Cloud'" shrinks me down so I can crawl up the tulip's whiskered stem. I pause at the waxy underside of its petals, then climb that deep-purple, deckled-edge velvet into the inky night.

For more about van Dongen, visit [www.ronvandongen.com](http://www.ronvandongen.com). ▲

*Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider, and Communication Arts, among others.*