

photograph

CHRISTINE ELFMAN: EVEN AMARANTH AT GALLERY
WENDI NORRIS

By Glen Helfand



Christine Elfman, *Amaranth Extraction I*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris

The fixed and fugitive properties of photography are poetically contrasted in Christine Elfman's exhibition of recent works, on view at [Gallery Wendi Norris](#) through September 3. She muses on the history of classical objects and the shifting landscape of nature and culture through groupings of silver-gelatin prints, pigment prints, a photogram, and anthotypes. The latter process, which involves using crushed flower petals as a photosensitive medium, is the source of the show's title and one of its key subjects and materials. Elfman has consistently used plants to create images that will intentionally fade and change in unexpected ways. For a number of the works here she used amaranth, a plant that yields gluten-free grain, but which also has more poetic roots—in ancient Greek it means “unfading flower,” and it is cited for its immortality in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The artist grew the plants herself on a boat docked in the San Francisco Bay, where she also exposed the images. Elfman's labor-intensive processes and materials have something in common with the practices at twee artisanal restaurants, but her images inherit a richness from their integrity.

A few of the works are portraits of the plant itself. *Amaranth Photogram I*, 2016, reveals a profile of flowers cascading from the end of a stalk. The image, tinted with the warm red of the crushed flowers, portrays the plant as a visceral entity and recalls Adam Fuss's photograms of animal entrails. That sense of embodiment is further suggested by two gelatin-silver prints, *Amaranth Extraction I* and *II*, both 2016, which capture stages of harvest. An armful of flowering stalks is photographed against a dark background, with only the plants and pale hands visible. There is some potential violence in this disembodied view—these pictures bring to mind Joel Peter-Witkin's nature morte photographs—but also a classical beauty, as Elfman includes a number of anthotypes of figurative sculpture. There are classical Greco-Roman torsos and images of Rodin sculptures that isolate the hands and faces of artists, in particular Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel. They are dismembered yet bathed in the natural warmth of the plant-derived hues.

A similar ambiguity is communicated by inkjet prints of eerie landscapes. *Asb*, 2016, depicts a hollowed tree trunk, a dead object at the center of the frame that suggest something unsavory. Elfman's use of fugitive materials and various media printed at mixed scale adds layers of complexity, and poetry, to her exploration of the fleeting and the fixed.