



Filigree

by Gunter Chemnitz



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Commentary

One of the great advantages of art making is that it exists with a unique purpose in our lives: In all the affairs of everyday life, we may pursue *quality*, but we don't pursue *perfection*. The cost of perfection is simply too high. In art making, however, perfection is our perennial goal even though we may be forced to accept excellence as a compromise in the light of recalcitrant materials. Art making is the one thing in our life for which we will spare no expense, expand unreasonable amounts of time and effort, and chase subtleties that no one but us will ever see.

This pursuit of perfection often leaks over into our selection of subject material as though the two are inextricably intertwined. We conflate our pursuit of perfection in art with the selection of perfect subject material. Our landscape at home is overlooked while we pursue the perfect moment of weather and light in a more perfect landscape like Yosemite; our neighbors are overlooked while we pursue the perfectly quaint culture and natives of some remote, inaccessible corner of the world. Even in something as common as botanical still life images, most photographers pursue the perfect blossom, the most illuminating light, and the balanced composition which far too often plops the subject in the geographic center of the frame. It's all so perfect, all so predictable, all so unrelenting. It can be a relief when a photographer, like Chemnitz, breaks form and presents us something that recognizes the difference between perfection in art making and perfection in subject selection.

Broken twigs of grass, a slight shadows on the left and right edges, a solitary, stray hair-like something on the tallest stock — this is no showcase botanical let alone a perfect blossom. Instead, we feel like were in the weeds, where *life* happens, early in the morning or perhaps after a heavy rain, with a distant, blurry rise in the landscape to assure us we are on *terra firma*. The entire composition is not centered, but is carefully balanced. I have no doubt this image would set records for a new low score at the average photo club contest, but to my eye it is a marvelous photograph for that very reason.

One of the greatest compliments that can be offered about a photographer's work is that they teach us to see in new ways. Predictable compositions of predictably perfect blossoms have almost no chance of teaching us something new. But showing us the real world with new eyes, at least has a chance of doing so. Eye candy may be fun, but real life is even better.

Are these broken stocks sculptural or calligraphic? Is this a remnant or a beginning? Are the water drops nourishment or a threat to wash away what remains? Are these — as I assume — grass stocks or tree trunks? We have few answers, and perhaps that is exactly right. As Picasso so famously said, "Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."