



Facing Page: *De Feo "Untitled" (Varya Shutova in Prada and Miu Miu shot by Daniel Jackson for i-D Magazine Pre-Spring 2016)*. 2016, acrylic on magazine page, 11.75 x 9 inches.

THE FLOWER GUY

MICHAEL DE FEO

Written by Stacy Seiler
ART EDITOR

In the lifecycle of a flower, germination is crucial. The seed must be planted in the right place at the right time in order for it to grow and develop. So is true for the work of artist Michael De Feo. Over the past 24 years the germination of Michael De Feo's career has earned him many titles: accomplished painter, award-winning author, beloved art educator, but most infamously De Feo is known as "The Flower Guy". Why? It all goes back to a single evening in 1993 when De Feo, a young Graphic Design major at the School of Visual Arts, sat painting in his parent's basement and produced 'the image' that would go on to become his lifetime moniker.

With black paint and brush in hand, De Feo crafted a single, iconic, 5-petal flower that contained a gently hidden throwback to the graffiti tags that once defined New York City in the 1970s and 80s. (Can't spot it? Look for the arrow that forms at the base of the stem.) The image of the flower resonated with him and he knew exactly what to do with it. At the time, De Feo had already been utilizing the walls of New York as his canvas, with the production of his art further fueled by a serendipitous

round of dumpster diving. De Feo reminisces, "I used to work on blueprint paper when I was in college because it was free and I was broke. I had found a huge dumpster near where I lived that was always filled with blueprints of the city, and I was painting imagery on the paper to glue up to the city walls. It made this nice big conceptual circle." The city walls also allowed De Feo to place a population of 7 million in front of his work. What young artist could ask for better exposure!

It was only natural for De Feo to turn his flower into a silkscreen, from which he produced multiple, vibrantly colored graphic prints and began wheatpasting the flower throughout the city. For jaded New Yorkers, this cheerful little creature growing with hope and positivity from the crumbling infrastructure, made the flower impossible to ignore. Like the late Jean-Michel Basquiat's SAMO tags and the subway chalk drawings of Keith Haring, De Feo's flower took on a life of its own and would change the trajectory of both his career and his identity. De Feo explains, "The name 'The Flower Guy' was given to me pretty quickly. At that time my friends would introduce me by



This Page: *De Feo "Untitled"* (Amber Witcomb by Mario Testino for *Double Magazine*, No. 33, SS17), 2017, acrylic on magazine pages, 23.5 x 9 inches.

Facing Page: *De Feo, "Untitled"* (Meredith Mickelson by Ellen von Unwerth for *Leica S Magazine*, No. 8), 2017, acrylic on magazine page, 12.625 x 12.375 inches.

saying, 'Hey, have you seen the flowers around the city? This guy Mike; he does them.' And people would say, 'Oh so you're the flower guy!' And it just stuck." As did De Feo's desire to create art full-time.

For over two decades Michael De Feo's flower has continued to sprout in the streets of over 60 cities worldwide, including Los Angeles, Cabo San Lucas, Paris, Amsterdam, Venice, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires. His works have equally been exhibited at countless international galleries and museums. Yet, as of late, the germination of De Feo's flower has taken on a completely new and unexpected turn after a recent shift in his street art began to catch the eye of an unexpected audience; the fashion industry.

It all began with a simple gesture from De Feo's friend Jordan Seiler, the founder of the street artists collective "Public Ad Campaign". Seiler gifted De Feo a key that opened the glass advertising vitrines to all of the bus shelters in New York City, and De Feo, aware of the true opportunity placed in his hand, paused for a few months to contemplate his next steps. This time, instead of placing his signature flower, De Feo introduced works from his studio practice and slowly began replacing the fashion advertisements of designers like *J.Crew*, *Chanel* and *Christian Dior* with acrylic paintings of colorful flower bouquets intertwined with dense vines and foliage. Pretty soon the removed ads began piling up in De Feo's studio, and their presence, like the blueprint paper, sparked an idea to utilize the materials right in front of him. De Feo recalls, "I figured, let me experiment. I'd painted on photography in the past, but not the size of the advertisements. When I began painting on the ads, I really liked what was happening. I realized that I was subverting the ad by also being harmonious with it."

This 'harmony' can be found in De Feo's choice of highlighting the silhouette of a garment or adorning a model's face while covering their body, as his brush strokes play off of the content and composition of each photo. At times De Feo will also incorporate the dripping marks of *KRINK* pens, a tool that is traditionally used for more aggressive looking graffiti. In doing so, the ads take on a new life as petals, painted in rhythmic pallets, overly, drip and shift in opacity, their overgrowth of flora a delicate reminder of nature's abundant power to overtake man. In return, the flora's presence equally distracts from, or dissolves the branding in a way that the painter and photographer emerge as the true collaborators of the piece.

When De Feo began to place the painted ads back into the bus shelters and document them on his Instagram account @theflowerguy, it wasn't long before the fashion world began to take notice. De Feo reminisces, "The first signal of approval came when *J.Crew* regrammed my post of their ad that I had installed on West Houston Street with a message that went something like, 'Check out what The Flower Guy did to our ad!' That was the first time I got a thumbs-up from a brand and it eventually led to our collaboration." De Feo went on to design an exclusive t-shirt collection for *J.Crew*. *Neiman Marcus* also took notice and hired De Feo to collaborate on





Top to bottom:
De Feo in his studio June 2, 2016.

De Feo, *bus-stop shelter takeover*, *J.Crew*, New York, NY, 2015.

De Feo *wheatpasting* his original flower design at 5 Pointz, Long Island City, Queens, New York, 2007. Photo by Gavin Thomas.

Facing Page:
De Feo "Untitled" (*Julia Fox* by *Greg Manis* for *Playboy*, November, 2015), 2016, acrylic on magazine page, 10.75 x 8 inches.

This coming year marks the 25th anniversary of the first flower and De Feo is taking full advantage of its extended lifecycle. De Feo shares, "I'm working on a book that's going to document my flower project from its start in 1993 right up until today, and show the various iterations of how the project has morphed and changed." In true full-circle form, The Flower Guy's original blossom has recently taken a new step from the streets to the world of fashion as Michael De Feo has teamed up with the fashion label *Milly* to create a limited edition line of leather jackets, which feature iterations of the original flower along with the more recent bouquets. With such longevity and mass appeal, one has to ask, what is it about De Feo's little flower that resonates so deeply with viewers regardless of decade, culture and context. It seems to touch on a larger element of how we as humans genuinely value nature and beauty in our environment, but for De Feo, the flower continues to germinate a visual language that has proven to stand the test of time.

ART EDITOR **STACY SEILER**

two covers for their April 2016 catalog, "THE BOOK" and *Christian Louboutin* quickly followed with an invitation to create original work for their new *Hawaii Kawaii* collection of nail colors. For an added layer of fun, *Louboutin* supplied De Feo with bottles of their nail polish, which he used together with *Sennelier* acrylics to paint on magazine pages. De Feo describes how the shift in scale to magazine ads opened up yet another source of inspiration. "The fashion world

is such a dense world full of creativity. There is so much imagery that I can play with, and because there are only so many fashion ads on the street, I began tearing the pages out of fashion magazines and painting on them as well. As you can see I buy them by the armful." De Feo points to the bookshelf in his studio, organized in a perfect geometric grid of white spines that feature fashion publications such as *Wonderland*, *LOVE*, *ODDA* and *OOB*.

