

A high-contrast, black and white image of a person's face, heavily shadowed and textured. The image is dominated by deep blacks and bright whites, creating a stark, almost abstract appearance. The person's features are partially obscured by deep shadows, while the highlights define the contours of the nose, lips, and skin texture. A large, white, lowercase letter 'i' is overlaid on the left side of the face, positioned vertically. The 'i' has a solid white dot above it and a thick, white stem. The overall effect is dramatic and artistic, focusing on light and shadow rather than clear facial features.

i



i

DENNIS LETBETTER

















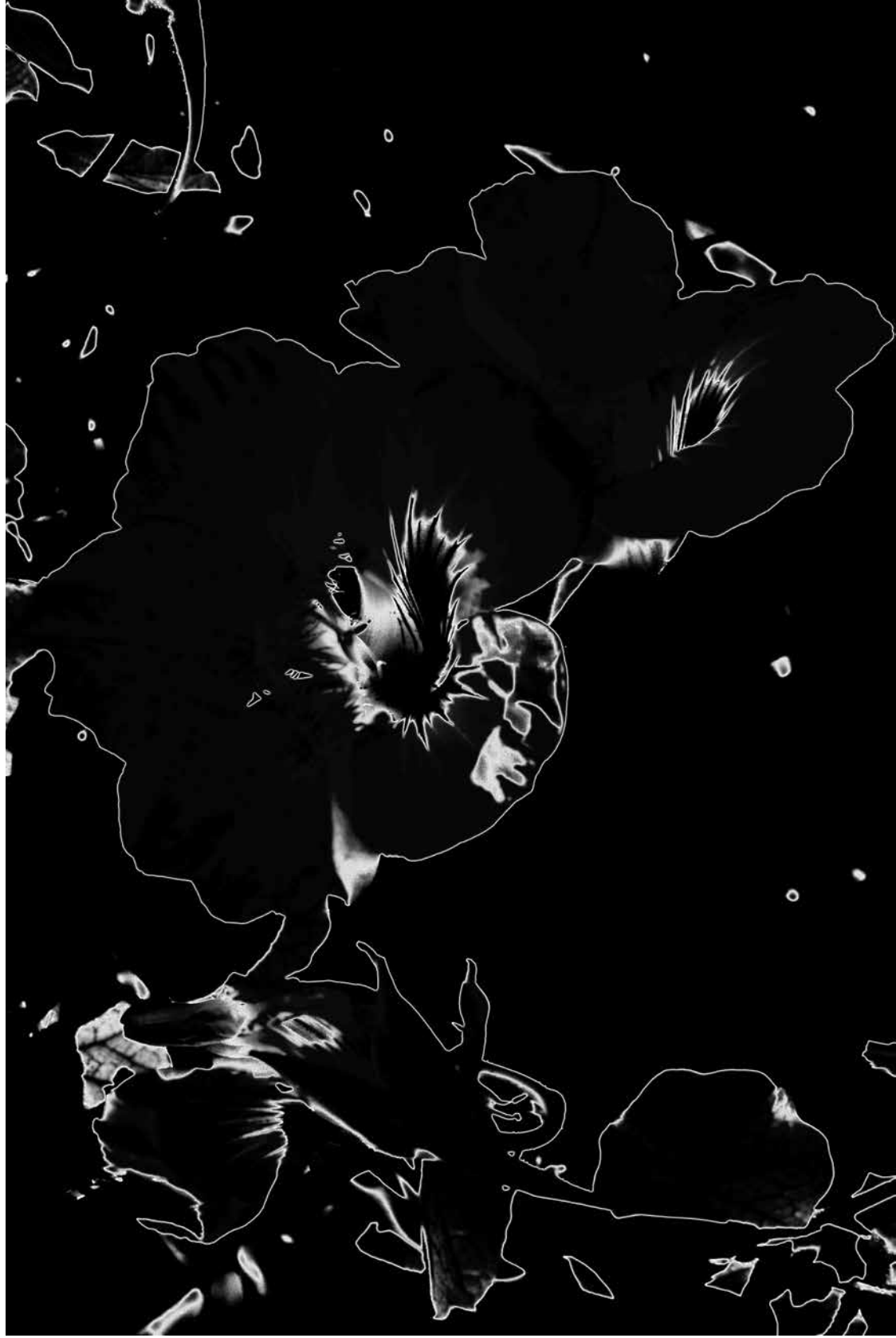










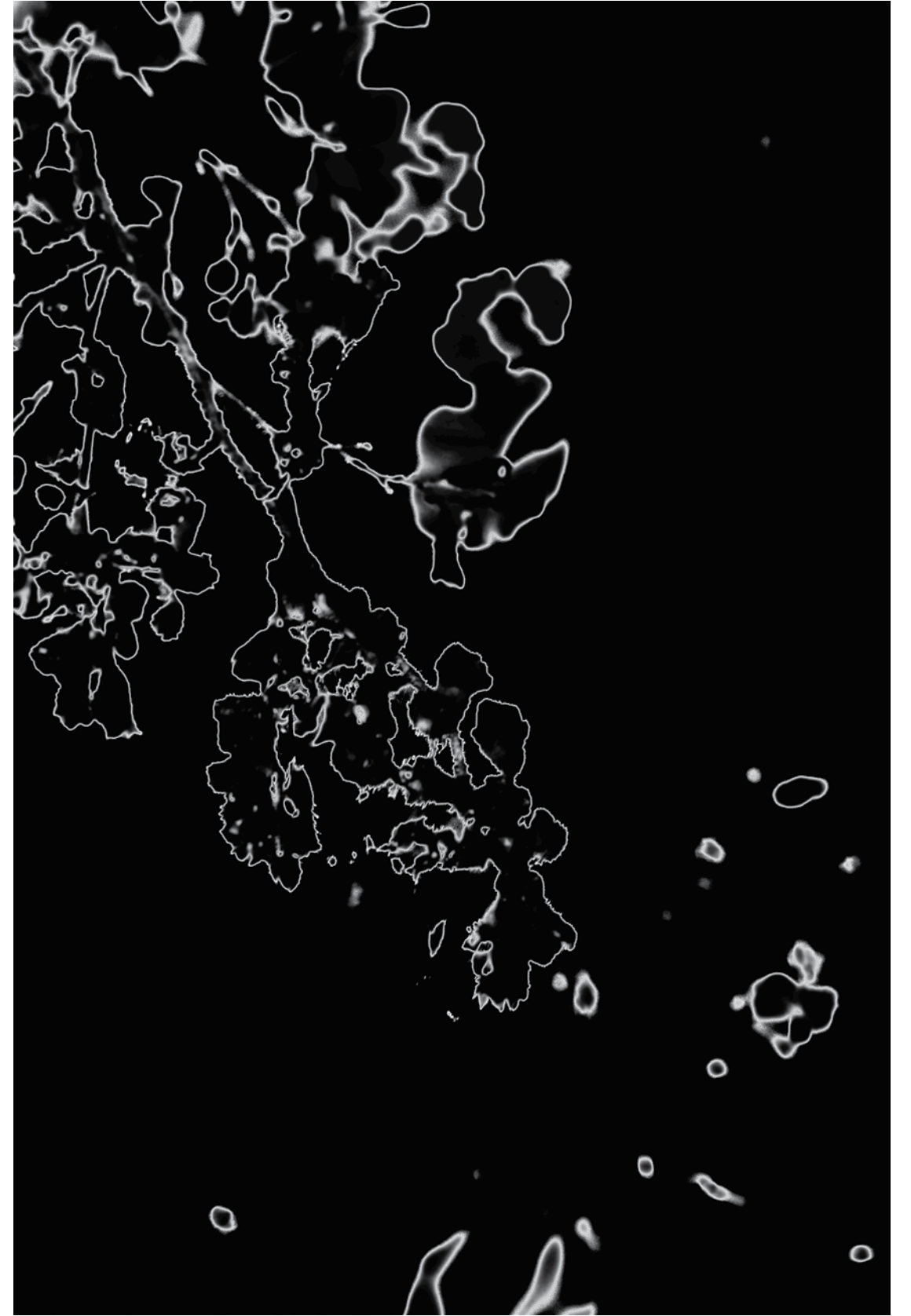






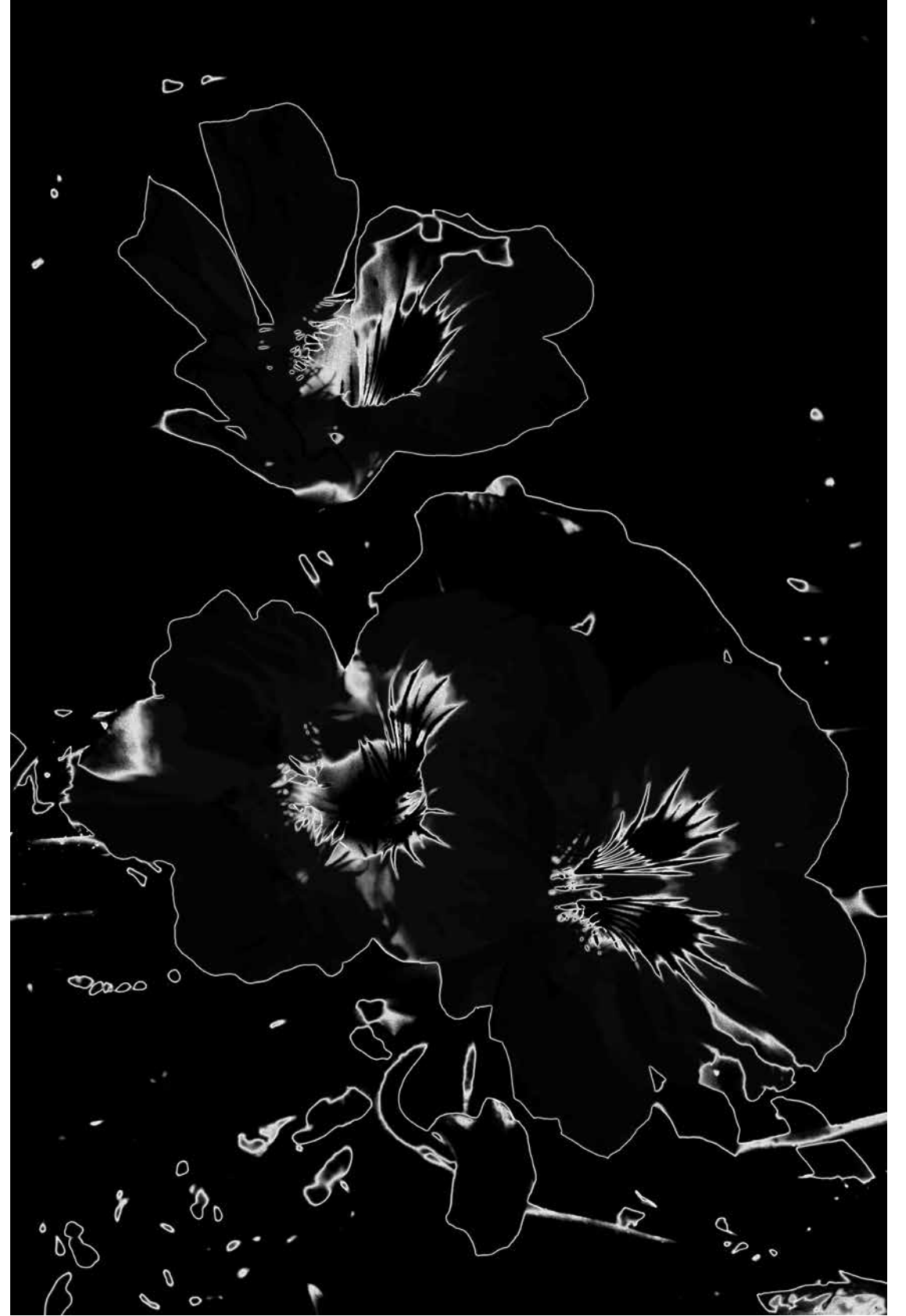


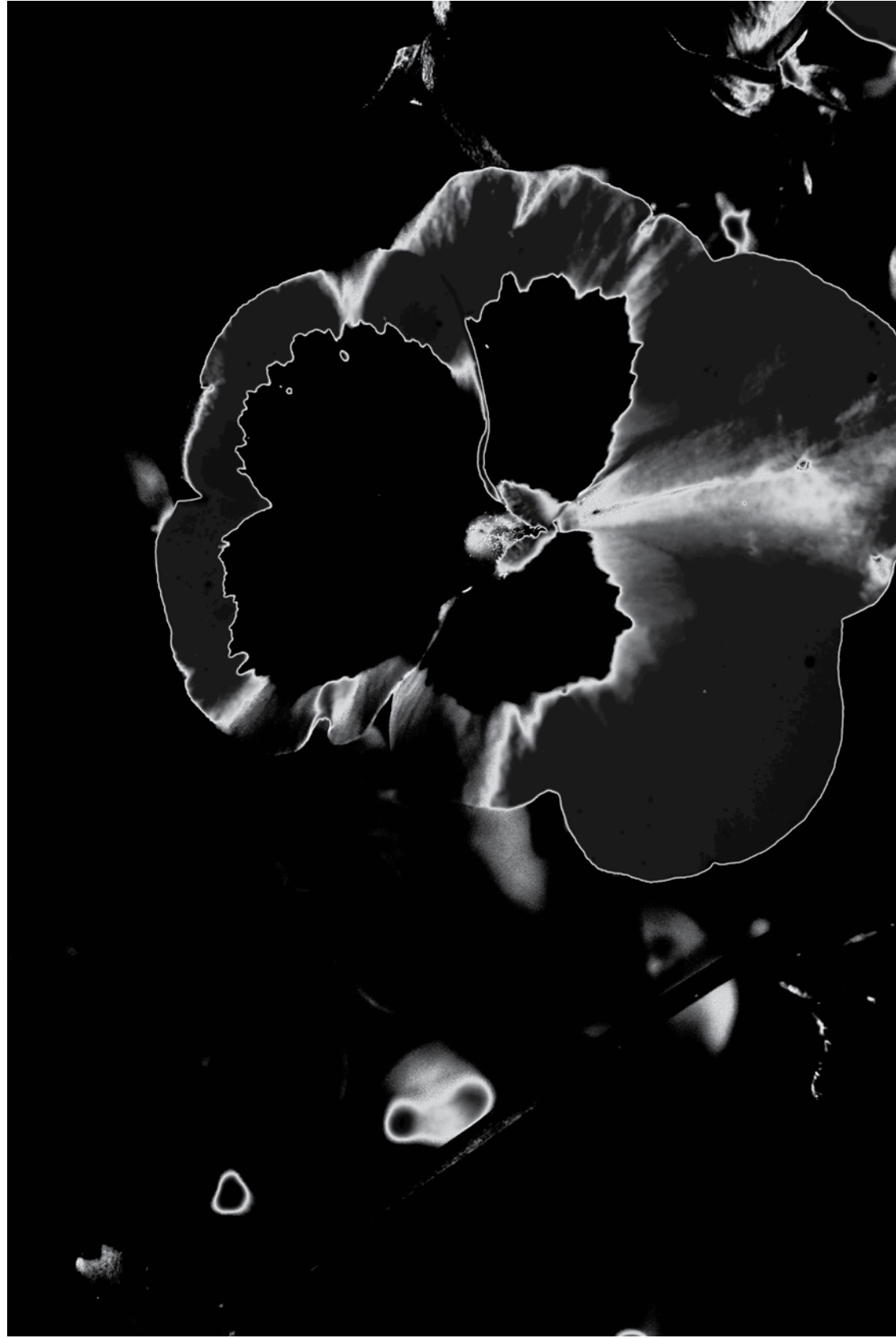




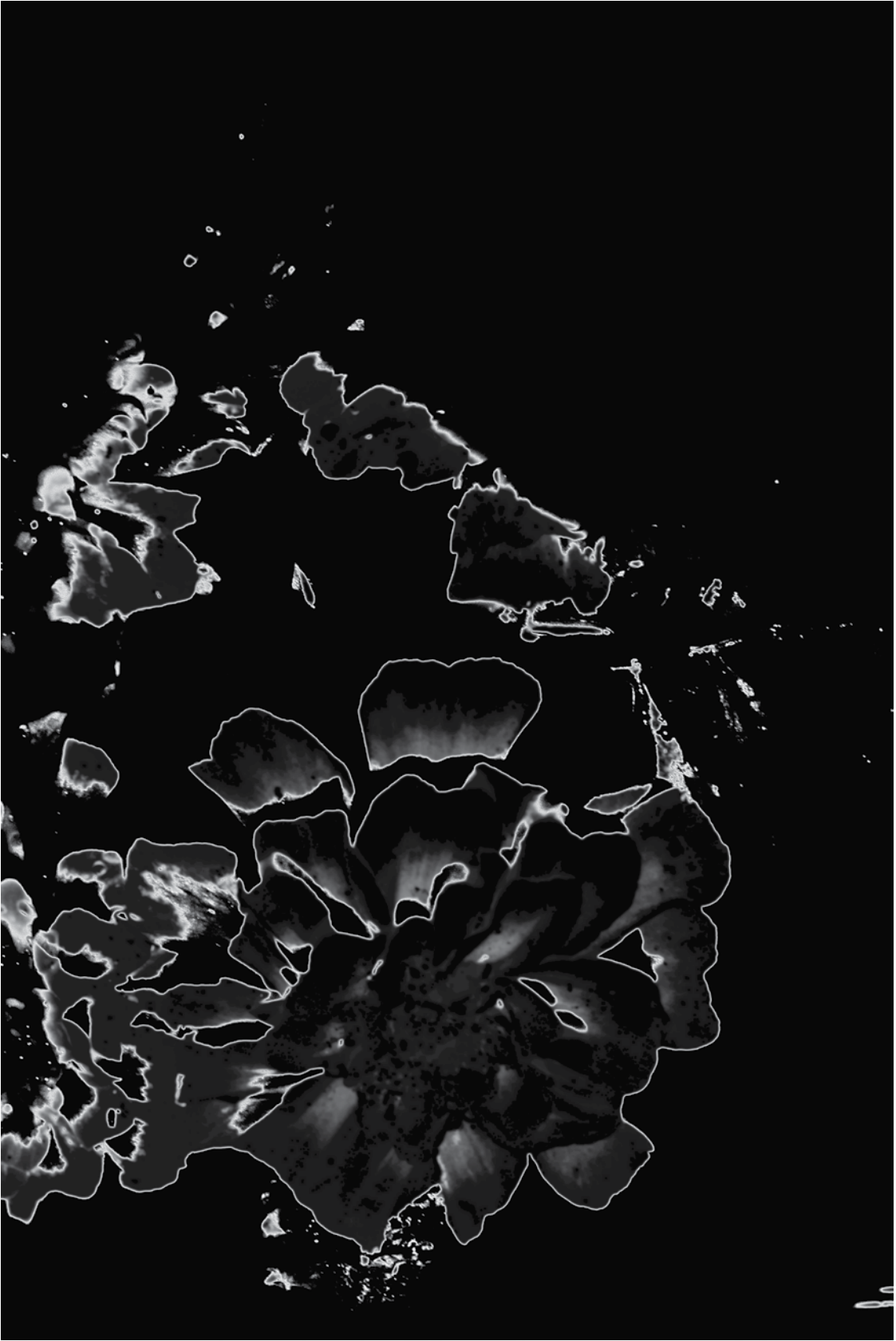
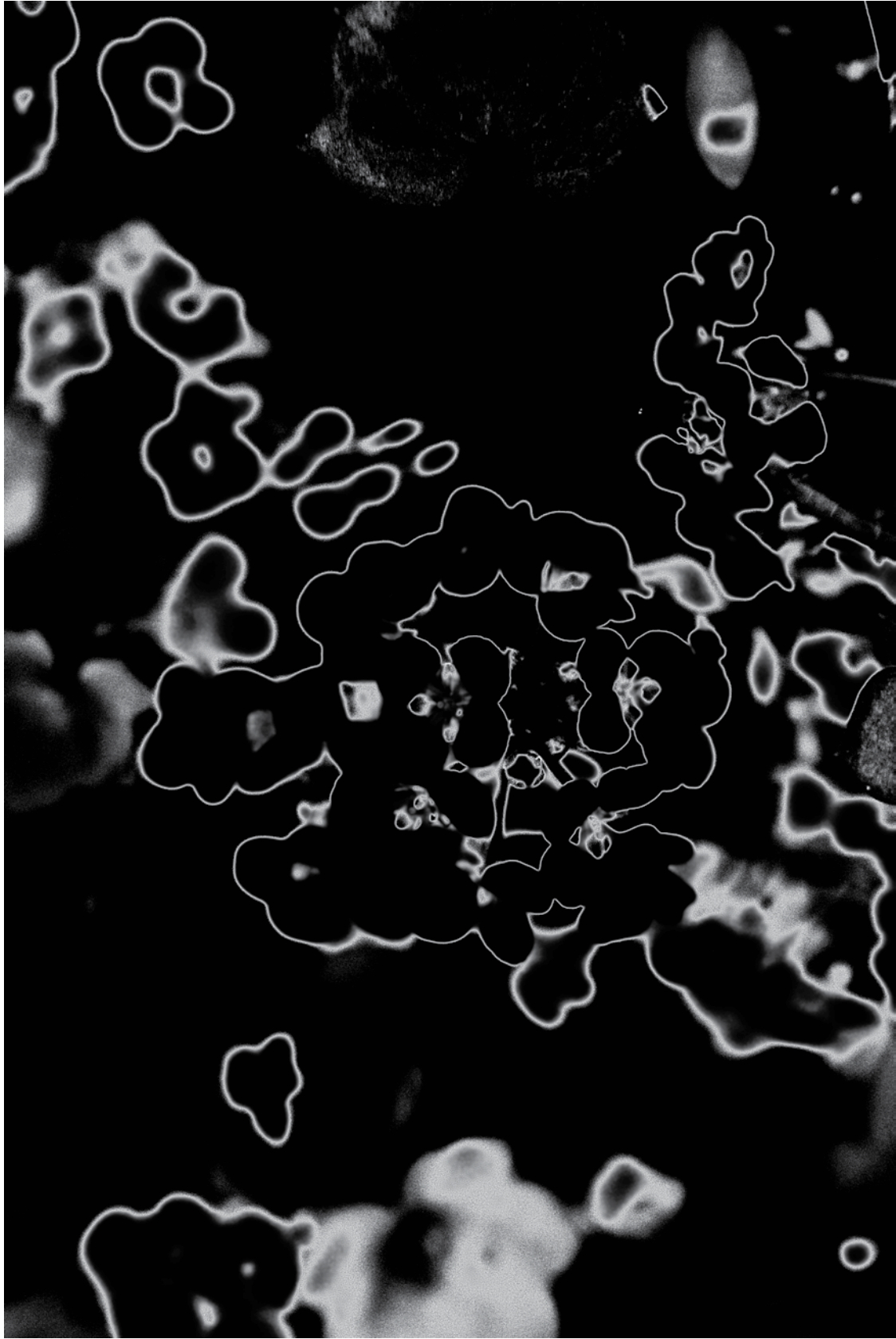






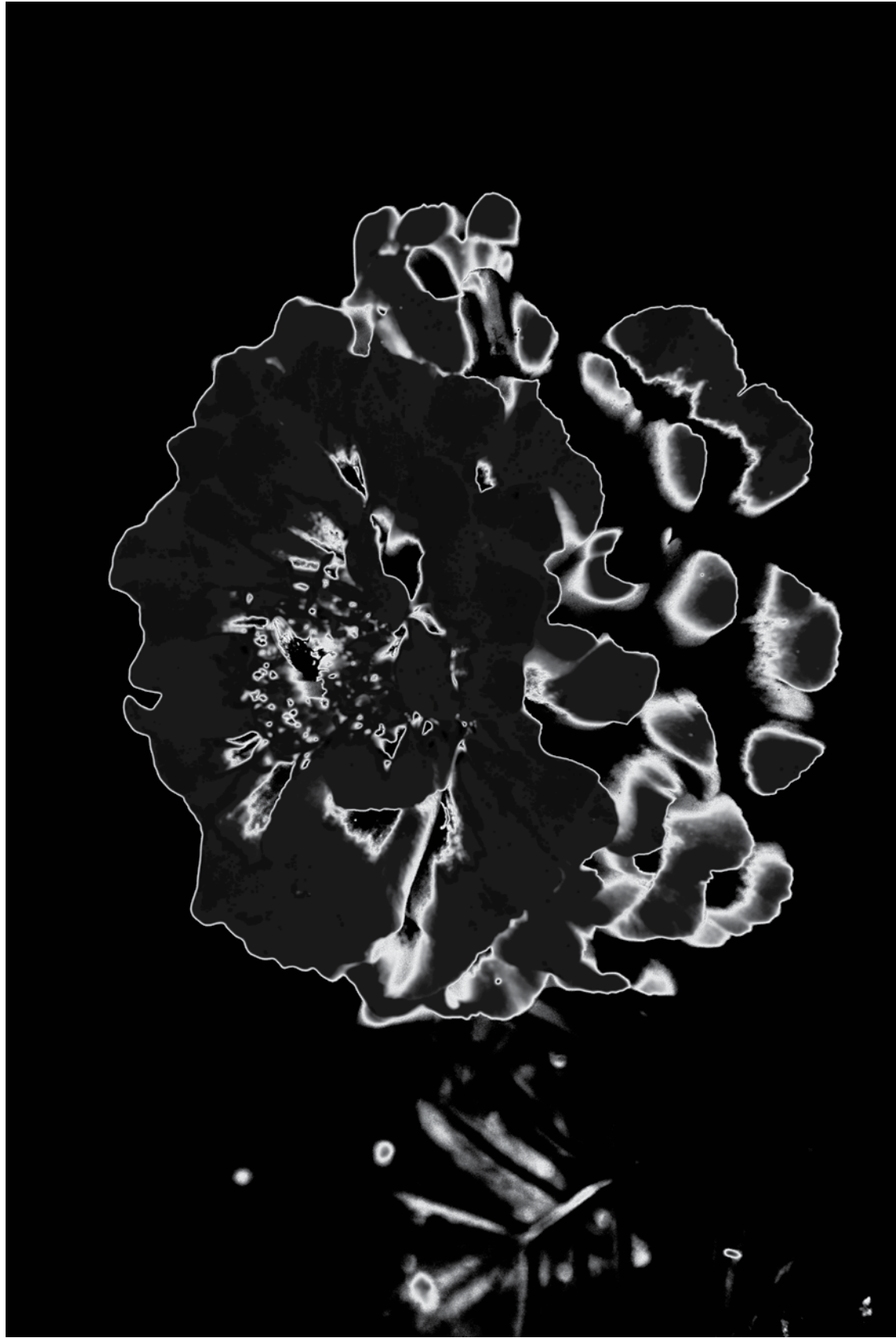




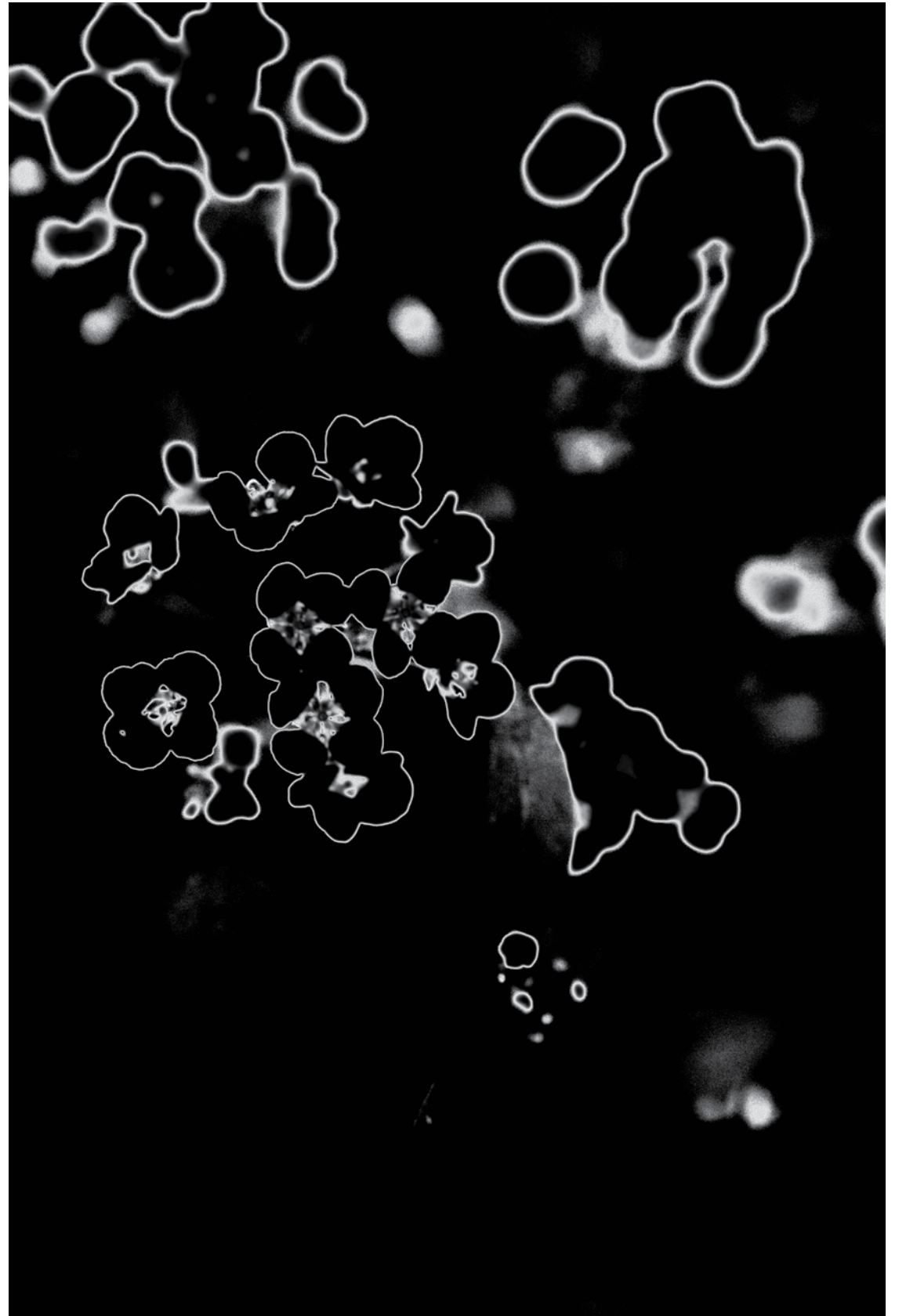


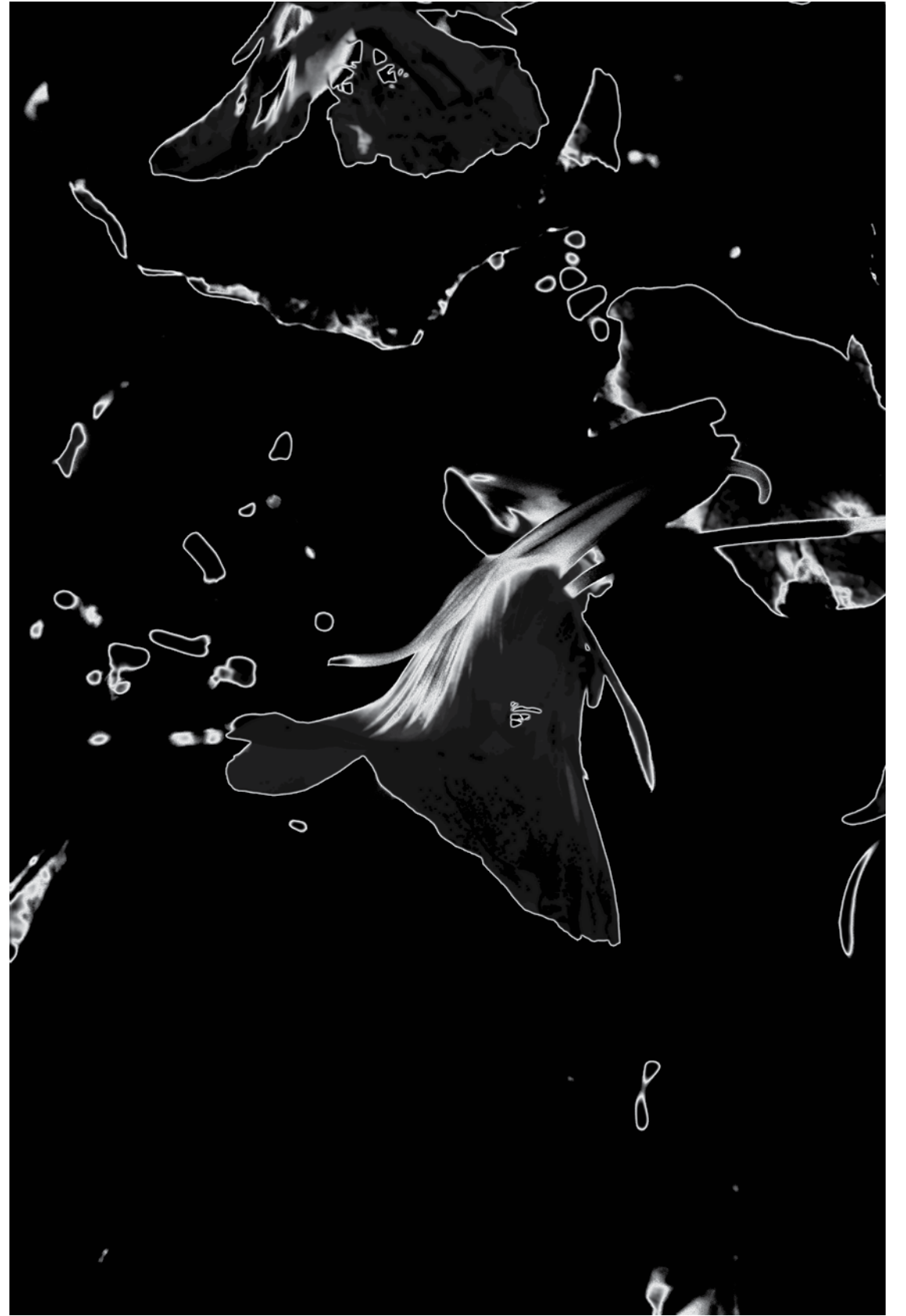
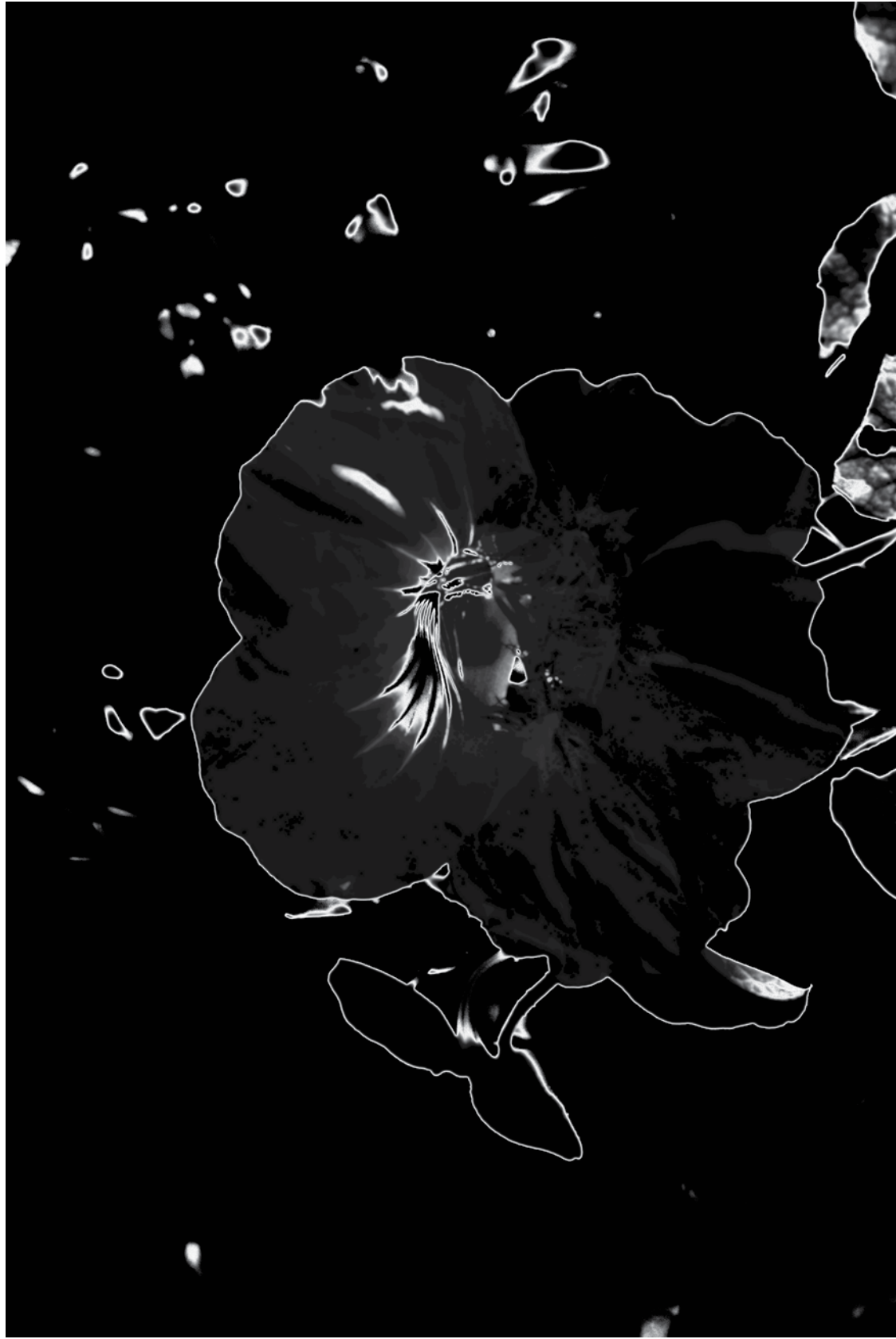




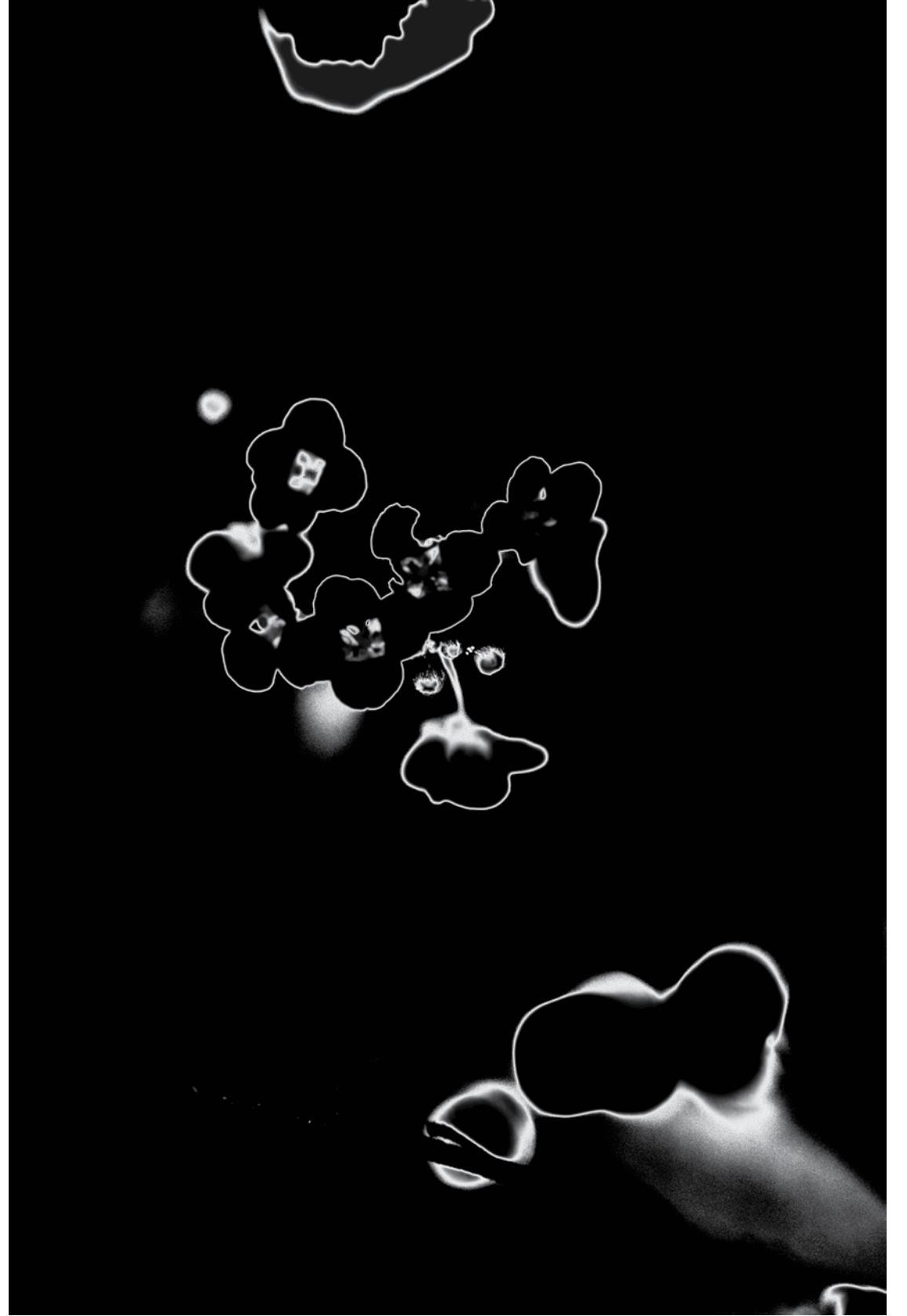














Black Flowers

He said – long ago – that
myth was dead. He meant it.

“Myth is dead!”
“Long live myth!”

They are playing out
something. Legendary.

Picks up her glass. She
has a glass, with coffee,

ice and milk in it. Thinks
about the refugees on the

road. Road to what, to
where? With nothing but

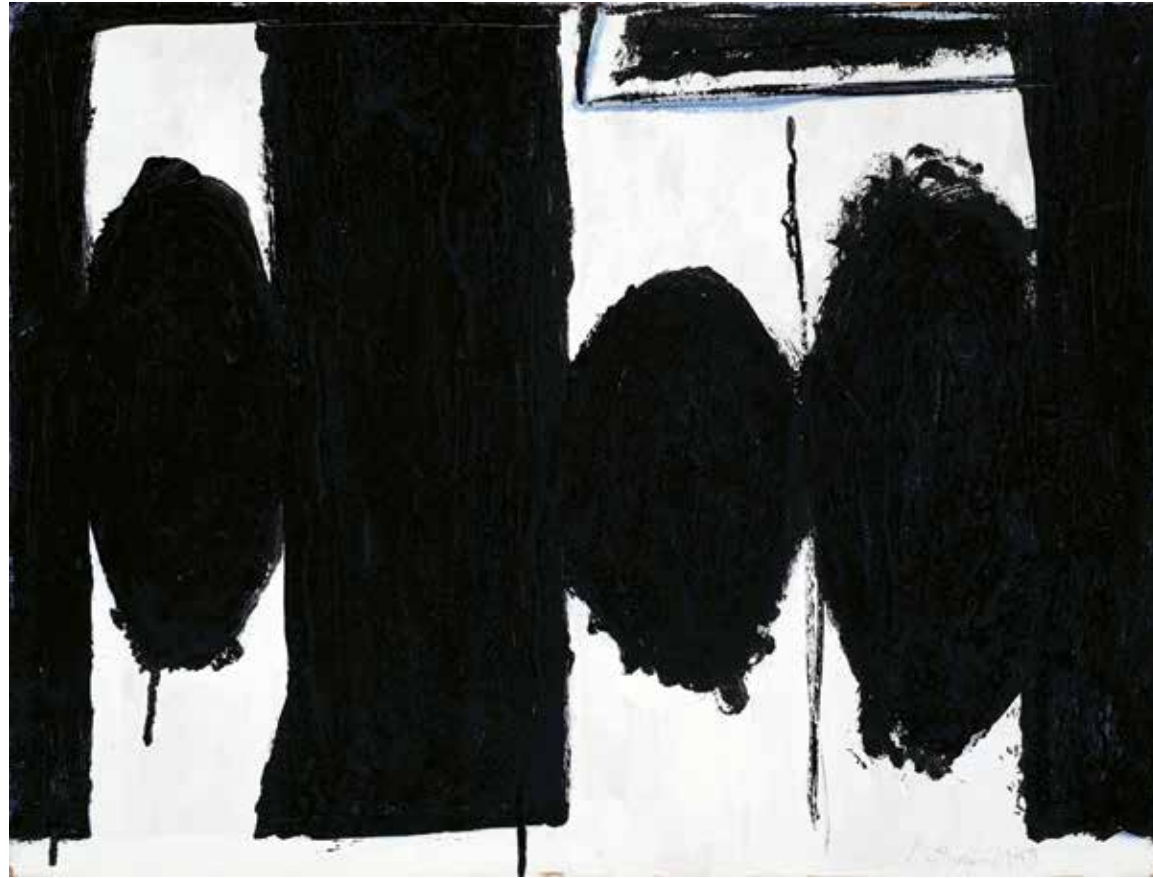
their clothes on their backs.
Mythic and literal.

How to speak about them
and why? How to speak

to them. To keep them
in mind. In our minds.

“Bless you and keep you,”
so the prayer says.

Norma Cole



At Five in the Afternoon

Robert Motherwell, 1949

In Celebration of Line

...but now he was dreaming of the construction of another sort of flora.

Huysmans, 1884

All of these images of plant forms are from one garden that I tend at the *Bonnafont Gallery* in San Francisco. Philippe Bonnafont, a gallerist, and very importantly a gardener, chose to exhibit my photographs of tulips in 1992. He profoundly understood flowers and found them respected and celebrated in my images; to me, this was more important than the views of any photography writer. There is a tyranny of style in the arts that can result in the lifeless, stylized flower photographs of Mapplethorpe. In my flower pantheon are Manet, Redouté, many Japanese folding screen artists, Braun, Blossfeldt, Man Ray, and Steichen's roses above Modotti's. I adore and keep wilting bouquets. I have blushed at an orchid show, as I do at some of these images.

It is too tempting to beckon Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) 1857, for a key to my images, poems that actually have nothing whatsoever to do with flowers, though there is a lot about voluptuousness and perfume. While not a single poem is about a flower there is seemingly the musk of an orchid throughout. *Les Fleurs du mal* is an attempt to extract beauty from the malignant, along with Baudelaire's famous ideal of an escape from reality through wine, opium, travel and passion. Perhaps these photographs of mine show the inner light of flowers – not a dark light but a more evocative one, or a sense of the divine, as Stanley Spencer sought and found so perfectly in the quotidian aspects of Cookham. There is apparent beauty, a deeper one and then, perhaps most important, the hidden one. There is nothing new about an access to the divine, to the pure in art. Why is it, then, that curators and gallerists are too often the last to discern either in the work they support?

There have been many approaches to some of the less celebrated aspects of flowers. Despite its name, Jay DeFeo's *The Rose*, 1958-1966 (first called *Deathrose* or, misheard, *Death Throes*) defies the ephemerality of flowers by its sheer weight of 2300 pounds. It thereby becomes iconic and permanent, losing the delicacy, lightness and fragrance of a rose. Perhaps, though, she arrives at its emotional weight. Maybe her

work defines what flowers are about just as well as my images. Flowers need light, making photography – which simply observes the external world that reflects light – a perfectly delicate way to approach them. However difficult to imagine in the weighty presence of *The Rose*, DeFeo was particularly attentive to the lighting of the work in its creation, installing it in a bay window, so that it would be lit only by light reflecting off the adjacent walls.

These images of mine, are they solarized, are they analogue, are they hand drawn, are they ... and does it matter? Do they quote Man Ray more than might a darkroom mistake located in a trash receptacle the next day? I do not believe even slightly in the notion of aesthetic progress. Virtually everything has been represented on film and in pixels, moving or not, faithful or not, honest or not. But reference, “meaning” and interpretation have blinded us from (pure) seeing. They are of no matter; we need only look and see the image before our eyes. There should be no difference between looking at an image of a tulip or a pussy. We need to introduce awkwardness, inappropriateness, into the received contemporary aesthetic opinion. We have lost touch with the authentic, with that awestruck sense we had on first really seeing and falling into a painting, or the overwhelming sensations coming from hearing our first symphony orchestra live or, maybe even more impressive, our first live piano concerto.

My photographs come from a desire to do something visually with the world without pretending to explain it; a desire to touch something new, to create without taking. I want the flowers to speak without intermediaries, without mediation; to let these photographs be given as I received these images as gifts.

Apart from portraits, perhaps a 10 year moratorium on photography would be useful and clarifying – a moratorium in order for us to relocate the senses (and certainly there are more than five). Taking thousands of photos could amount to something beautiful (Winogrand, Araki or an automatic camera attached to the back of a blind dog) but I prefer a more intentional approach – to only create the things we really respond to, that matter to us, forgetting art school or the making of art. To touch the authentic again and to feel and express an otherness in created works.

Against the backdrop of the evolution of media and its powerful gathering of news material and data, all of the world's happenings are trimmed like a lawn by a mower, with fragments of information flying about from place to place through the media as grass flies through the air. These broken pieces of information adhere to our tofu-like brain like spices sprinkled so thickly that they obscure the entire surface. For a moment, this makes us think we're quite knowledgeable, but information tacked on the surface of the brain doesn't amount to much when you add it all together.

Kenya Hara, 2007

Moriyama can continue – he is neither editorializing nor interpreting life. His work is feverishly pursued, not overladen with intention, and so often beautiful.

Maybe there is death in that which is perfectly controlled and composed, leaving no room for the viewer. We all have very personal visual fascinations, and they should be claimed. We are all limited and it is wondrous to be so. But there is an infinite lyricism of line in nature. These images of flowers are a celebration of line and lyricism, elements of living that are as important as reading stories to children at night.

Dennis Letbetter



Black Flower video <https://vimeo.com/137040194>

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DENNIS LETBETTER

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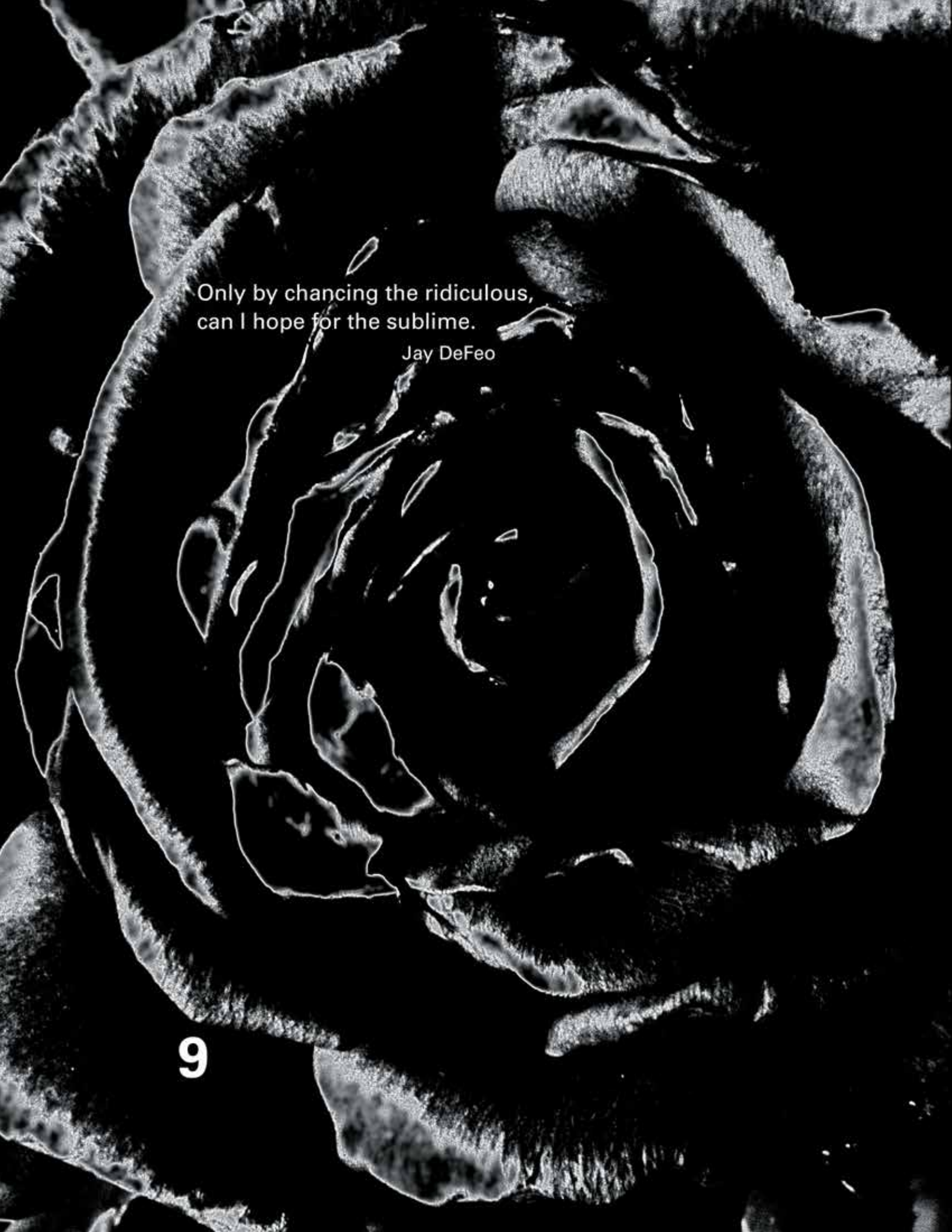
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Only by chancing the ridiculous,
can I hope for the sublime.

Jay DeFeo