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GQ Style

Meet Makoto Azuma, the Outrageous Florist to Dries Van Noten—and Man Who Launched a Bonsai Into Space

We sat down with the Japanese florist who freezes flowers (or lights them on fire) to discuss life, death, and, of course, Donald Trump.

BY BROOKE MAZUREK

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Makoto Azuma is standing in his subterranean botanical laboratory in [Aoyama](#) trying to explain how he's able to talk with flowers. "I listen to their voices," Azuma explains. "Like humans, they wake up in the morning, so it's best to handle them then." Among the flowers in front of him: an electric blue delphinium, a blossom that looks like a hot pink pinecone, and a shrimp-colored dahlia that are placed in individual vases, spaced as precisely as handbags in a Prada boutique. Although the flowers aren't much for banter, he says, there is a telepathic meeting of the hearts that transpires when he begins his work with the stems before sunrise. "There is a *feeling* that happens, not particular words," explains the artist, who possesses the kind-hearted demeanor of Bob Ross and the aesthetic edge of Raf Simons. When a florist "has half-heartedly bundled flowers or is thoughtless with them... I feel the flowers' sadness scream."

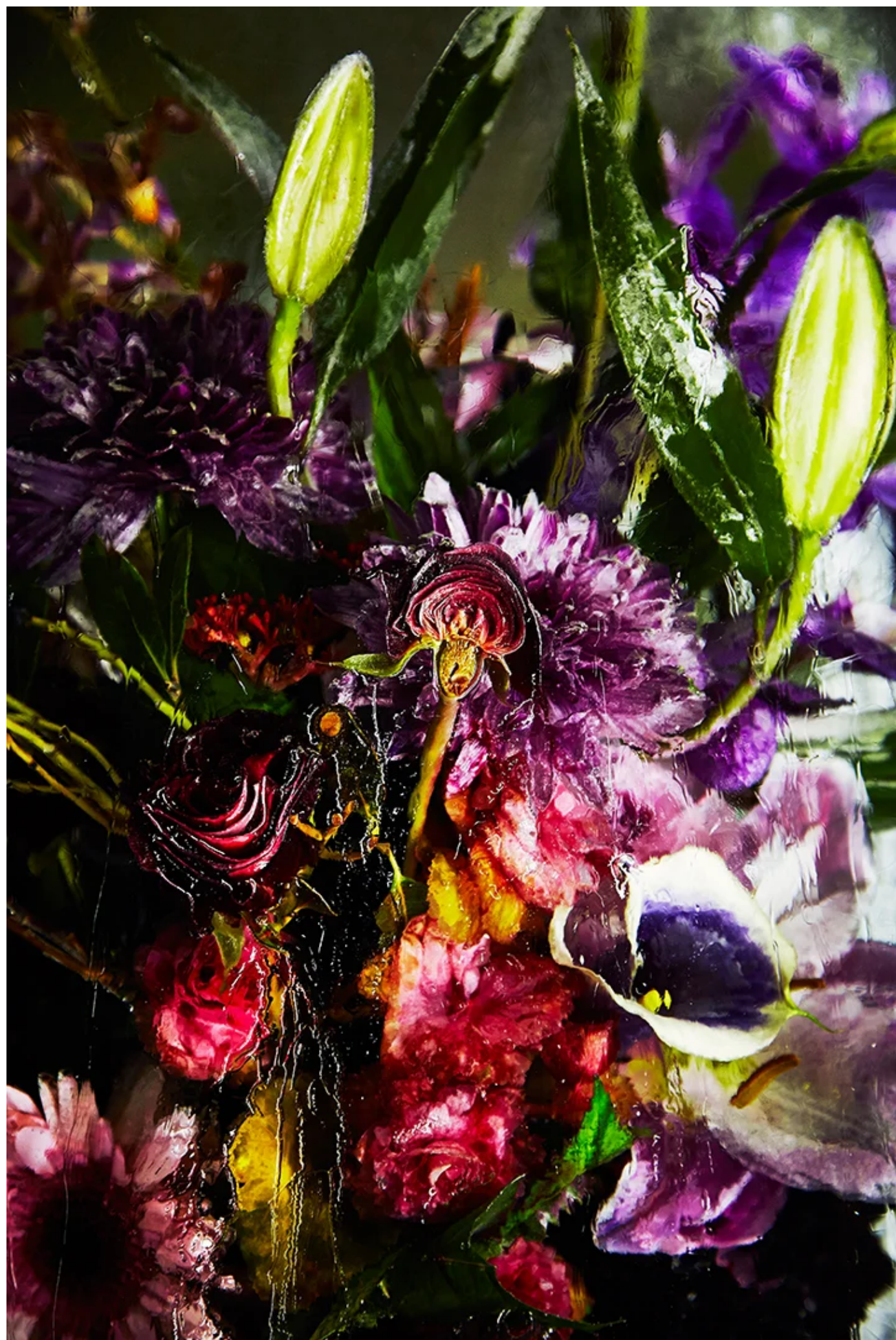
In many ways, he has transcended the role of a traditional florist. Since co-founding floral atelier Jardins des Fleurs in 2002 with photographer Shunsuke Shiinoki, the 40-year-old has constructed conceptually radical botanical sculptures with hundreds of thousands of flowers, which have been set aflame in caves, frozen into massive blocks of ice, and use to line the runways of designers like Dries Van Noten. There are YouTube videos where you can watch Azuma grotesquely stab flowers into glossy hunks of raw marbled meat, or simply stare at a Renoir-style tapestry of blooms as they wilt at high speed. In 2014, Azuma made international headlines when he launched a bonsai into space.



Flowers in outer space. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

His work is beautiful and bizarre and emotionally provocative, each project part of a genre he has taken to calling “living art.” Through both simple and violent approaches to flora, Azuma is able to communicate *mono no aware*, a hard-to-translate Japanese concept that makes his brow furrow as he tries to explain its significance. His work, he says, represents an “attraction to things that fade,” but that the emotions tied to evanescence are two-fold: the transiency of precious things gives way to sadness, but there is also beauty in the realization that we were able to witness those things at all.

His subterranean studio space in Ayoya, a chic enclave in Tokyo, has been designed to heighten both his and the flowers’ ability to emote. There are chalkboards covered with diagrams and indecipherable equations. Every wall is concrete; every single surface, stainless steel. “When you think of a flower shop, perhaps you think of a place on a street level selling flowers,” he says. “But this is intentionally underground, this space is all about making the best possible environment for flowers.” Though he likens it to a wine cellar, the setup is more *Jurassic Park*-meets-Willy Wonka. A bunny named U-ko hops around the studio.



Flowers in ice. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

Born the youngest of two children to a chef and homemaker in the countryside of Fukoka, Azuma dreamt of becoming a rock musician when he first moved to Tokyo—only that path didn't quite pan out. "When I struggled to get by, I took a part-time job at a flower market, and that's how it all started." The concept of impermanence still plays a central role in all of his work. Sound, music, and flowers, he says, "are always things that people are really conscious of. They're ephemeral ... and I'm attracted to that." So I asked him about the end of the world.

GQ Style: Your work, through its juxtapositions, often brings to mind the notion of climate change. Is that something you think about? Are you hopeful for the future?

Azuma Makoto: I prefer not to say that directly—rather, I want people to come to their own awareness of flowers and plants. Instead of sending a direct message, I want people to realize it on their own. It's in that place that's hidden. In Japan, the environment is changing, the vegetation and the flowers are changing. Summer flowers bloom in the spring, flowers that should bloom in the winter suddenly bloom in the summer. This is really happening.

How does working and living in Tokyo influence your relationship to flora?

Tokyo is the easiest place to do my work. The reason for that is that the market is very large, the quality of the flowers is very high—for us our work is very visual, yet people here are very picky about flowers. About one-third of my work is in Europe, but the flowers are most beautiful in Tokyo.



A portrait of the florist. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

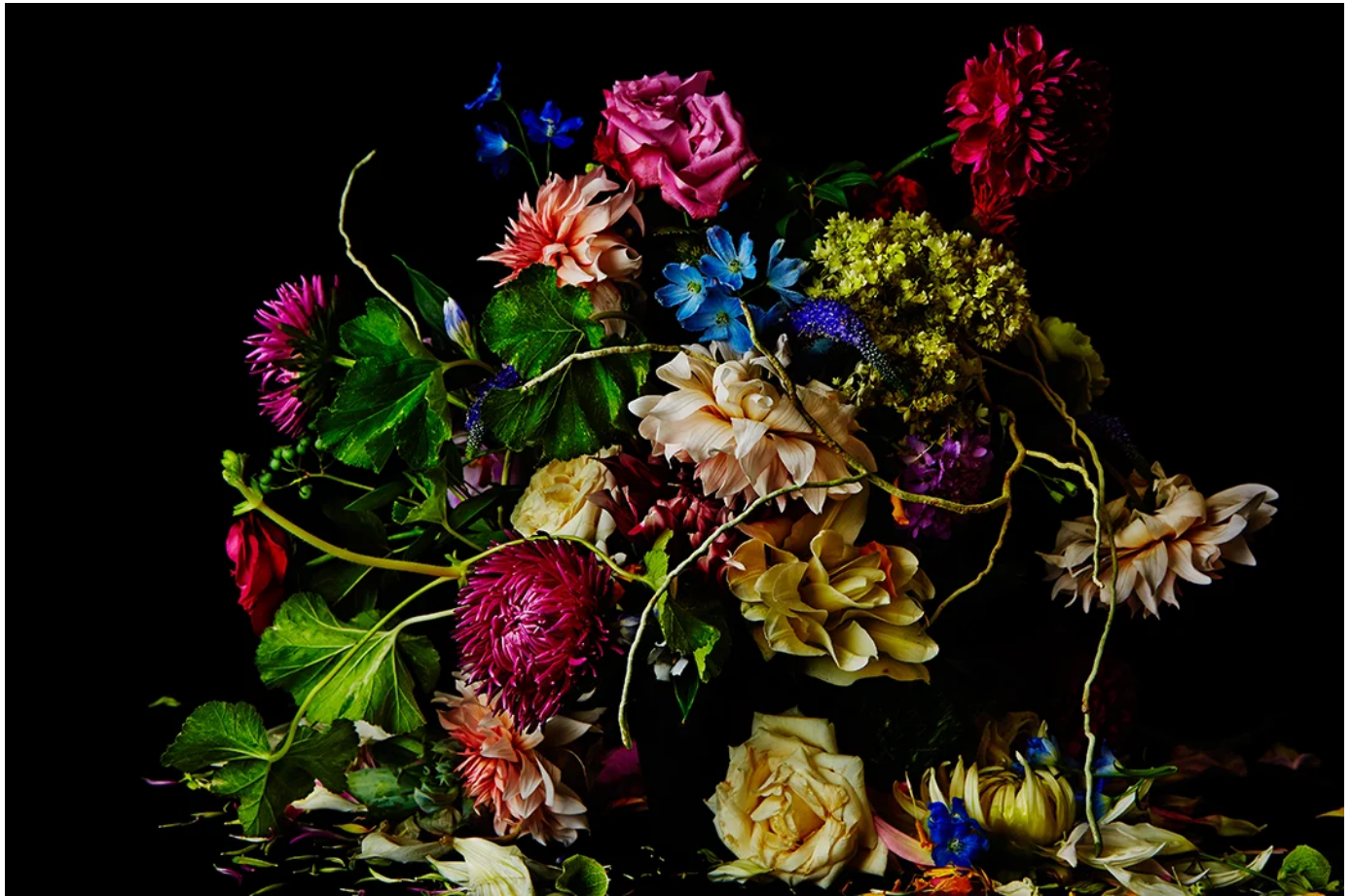
How did you come up with the idea to send a floral arrangement and bonsai into outer space?

I wanted to take flowers and plants into an impossible environment where they could never exist. And seeing this very striking visual visualization—this juxtaposition—really makes you think. This incredible project was all done in this cheap-looking space, and it has the massive effect of people getting more interested in and more deeply aware of flowers. For me, this is a very important project. People who were never interested in flowers before will now see this and become interested.

Is there a flower that fascinates you the most?

Recently I've been really into sprouting bulbs (球根芽). [They have] such a grotesque shape beyond words, and yet they bloom so beautifully. That incongruity produces gorgeous flowers.

The thing with flowers is that they are always changing every day. A day for a flower is ten years for a human. It's a way to look at life. No matter how much I look at a flower, I never get tired of it.



From his book, *Encyclopedia of Flowers* Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

Is there a flower that you think is overrated?

Roses, and the like. But the thing with roses is that because of human intervention, genetic modification, they become exactly what humans want them to be. But I don't really like that so much—it's not so interesting to me. Flowers reflect the places they are from. They have connections to places for example, having different colors depending on where they grow. There is absolutely meaning in the fact that a flower from a certain place smells a certain way. Of course, it's important to have familiarity, and it's important as a product for sale, but I don't think it's good to do too much of that.



A bonsai tree in a sandstone landscape. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

What flower you would recommend a guy give a loved one as a gift?

Well, generally you would say a rose, right? That's the standard answer. But for me, I think that maybe a seasonal flower would be good. Summer flowers in the summer, winter flowers in the winter. I think it would be a good idea to change the flower you give based on that situation.

Of course, people are happy to receive flowers, but the flower fades away. Seasonal flowers are at its freshest right at that moment—the scent reminds you of the season, and reminds you of how happy you felt to receive it. It becomes a memory. It comes from the season, and then reminds you of that season. Seasonal flowers generally have a scent, and that scent carries memory. That kind of story is very deep. I named my daughter Sumire [which means "violet"]. She was born in February. In the season of violets, I gave her that name. That holds deep meaning for me. So roses are one thing, but seasonal flowers are best.



Flowers on fire. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

In September, you created ice blocks filled with elaborate flowers for the Dries Van Noten Spring-Summer '17 show. How did the two of you meet?

I have a lot of opportunities to work in Paris, and he loves flowers. He has a very large garden, and a great interest in flowers. He found me, and said he would like to work with me. Now he's a friend. I really respect his creativity, and we have a great relationship. He's just like me in the sense that flowers are not just beautiful to him—he looks at the whole picture, as they wilt, as they bloom. He sees the beauty in all of it.

Do you have any advice for those who don't have a green thumb?

Flowers are living things. So you have to treat them properly. Open your heart to them. In Japan, in *ikebana* [the Japanese art of flower arranging, or the “way of flowers”] they say you listen to the voice of the flower, so to speak. It's important to live as such. The point is not to see flowers as objects, but as living things. Listen to the plant's voice. Be conscious of it.



Frozen flowers at the Dries Van Noten Spring-Summer '17 show. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

Should they start talking to their flowers?

There was actually research on that subject in the 1970s. And in fact, they found it to have an effect, especially researching how the plants develop their roots. I'm not a scientist, but as someone who always works with flowers, I believe that to be true. I think it has an effect. I've seen that flowers I've worked with more intimately have stayed fresh longer.



More flowers on ice. Courtesy of Azuma Makoto

If you were to send President Trump a flower, which would it be?

Tulips would be good. A red tulip. In the language of flowers, it represents compassion. I'd send him about a thousand red tulips. He needs compassion. He really ought to give flowers a try. I think his attitude toward a lot of things would probably change. Of course, I understand "money is money" and all that, but when working with flowers, it enriches your heart, it enriches a person. I think it would be very valuable for him to think about living things. He's already 70, though. Maybe it'll be the end for him soon.