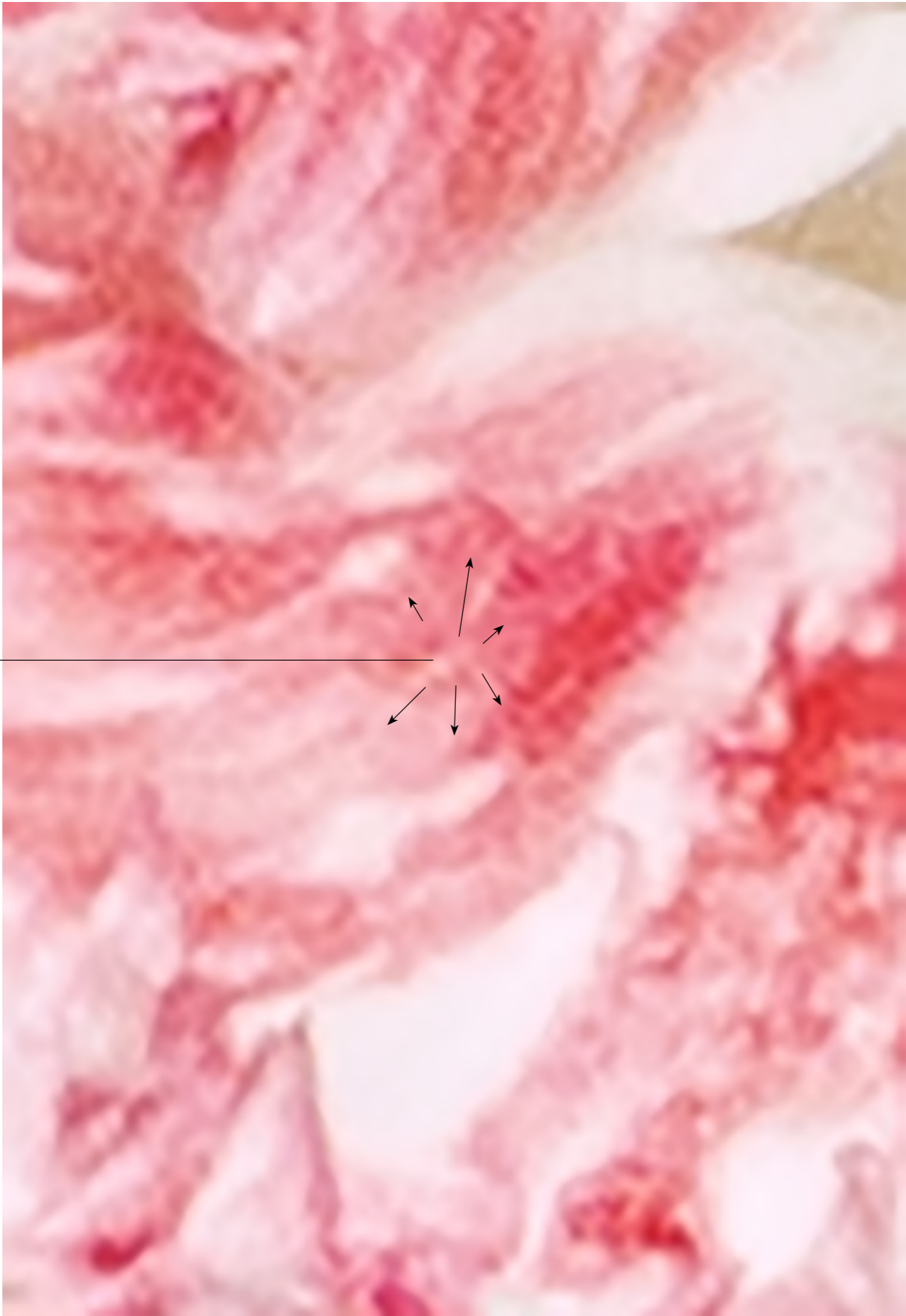




1:6
0 100 200 300 mm



Originally from the arid high lands in Central Asia, the tulip was brought to Persia by the Seljuk Turks. From there to the Ottoman Sultan's gardens all the way to the Habsburg empire in Vienna, the tulip became a status symbol all around the Middle East in the centuries to follow. The discovery that the salty and sandy soil of the Netherlands west coast proved suitable for the flowers to grow coincided with the Dutch Golden Age: Merchant families in Amsterdam and other places became the wealthiest people on the globe in a few decades. However, the still dominant Calvinist culture in 17th century Netherlands promoted soberness. To show your riches, all one could do was to put some tulips in one's window.⁽¹⁾ The Dutch still life paintings from this decade underline this trend: they became a form of documenting and showing what one could afford: the opulent array of flowers suddenly wasn't only there for some days but could be preserved and shown for decades to come. Under this light it's especially noteworthy that, upon closer inspection, we realize that many of the depicted flowers in these still-lives cannot possibly have been blooming at the same time. This points to the fact that painters were not actually using real life props to create new paintings, allowing them to depict the best of what each season had to offer: an even more sophisticated way to show riches for their owner.

The socioeconomic factors at the time made the tulip market expand and grow in no time. The stock exchange of Amsterdam was the world's largest financial market, and the cultivating of tulips was in full swing. Investors started to put money in the tulip business and the prices started to rise. In 1632 and 1633, the tulip harvests were rather poor, which made the value of a single bulb skyrocket even higher. In 1634 the authorities of Amsterdam introduced a system where merchants could buy contracts for the harvest of the following year's bulb. With that, the groundwork was laid for the first speculative investing: People started borrowing money to invest in the next year's harvest and thus, the tulip mania, as it is referred to today, started. It took place from 1634 to 1637 and is generally recognized as the first economic speculative bubble to burst in history. One single speckled tulip bulb (In the 1630s, the speckled tulip bulb was the most attractive, and as we know today carried a virus that caused the specks) would be sold for the price of a large merchant's house or over a year's worth of salary of a skilled craftsman. But, at some point, people started losing their trust in the market: Questions of how these enormous sums were justified arose and people started selling. Within a short amount of time, the price of the bulbs crashed. Several people committed suicide because they could not pay back the money they had used to speculate. ⁽²⁾ Many bubbles have burst since then, and yet, capitalism and speculation are as strong as ever: Today, three hundred million tulip bulbs are exported annually from the Netherlands. ⁽³⁾

The process of creating the series of images for May You Bloom Eternally follows a strict set of rules: First, the total available amount of different colored tulip bulbs are bought at an average-sized shopping center. Then, they are photographed in a singular image stylistically inscribed in the tradition of still-life painting from the Netherlands of the 17th century. The image is taken at the full resolution of a state-of-the-art digital camera. This image is then used to digitally cut out images in the size of 100 x 150 pixels, the ratio of 2:3 being most commonly used in photography. The newly created cut-out-images are then blown up to 110x165 cm, the standard size of full-size roll-paper for inkjet printers. To re-create the necessary resolution for fine art printing of 300 dpi, Photoshop uses interpolation, a method where the surrounding pixels are measured to recreate new pixels that fill the gaps. Whilst there are different forms of interpolation with different strengths and weaknesses, when choosing the automatic setting, Photoshop will create what it considers best suited for each part of the image. With this method, each cut out image originally measuring 100 x 150 pixels is enlarged to measure 12992 x 19488 pixels at 300 dpi. Photoshop therefore created 253'173'096 (two hundred fifty-three million one hundred seventy-three thousand ninety-six) new pixels. Or, in more common terms, the original image measuring 0.85 x 1.27 cm is now 110 x 165 cm, Photoshop therefore having created an additional area of 18148.9205 cm² or 1.8 m² of image surface.

This process and the resulting image obviously bear the question of what we are looking at. In times of everything AI, this almost ancient method of upscaling images might seem unnecessary to be examined. It is however used daily and without any form of critical investigation that AI has been subject to since its birth. Somehow in pop culture, to this day, photography is charged with the credibility to depict the so-called real world. Whilst in the academic field, the fact that a photograph holds very little - if any - truth or reality is a long-known discussion, from Susan Sontag (saying this) to Roland Barthes (saying the opposite). Yet, it is somehow not yet instilled in the discourse of day-to-day image consumption in social media, news and all other forms. Let's focus on social media for a second: Whilst it is common knowledge that a seemingly simple image of someone having a good time at the beach is often preceded by hard work and tons of not-so perfectly looking photographs, we somehow still are seduced by the feelings of simplistic joy these images spark in us. There is something about this two dimensional reality that holds no discrepancies, that is fascinating to us. The phenomenon is visible in all medias: the feeling we have after a movie is often that of happiness after having dealt with a maybe heart-breaking but after all solvable problem. In this flat world, no dilemma exists. It is almost as if the third dimension that is lost is also the container of unsolvable quandary. And whilst we know all this - it being almost too simple to talk about, a truism - we constantly buy into this feeling of simple happiness again and again. Furthermore, lens-based imagery goes from depicting something that has happened (it must always be in the past, otherwise it could not exist in an image) to something that we aspire to. It surpasses us, the viewer, at some point. We want the stile, the pose, the character of the heroine or the person laying at the beach and thus strive to become what the image seems to be. The images content is being changed from past to present to future: first, the moment is lived and the image is taken (past), then it is looked at (present) and then, finally, it is charged with the idea of an ideal that the viewer can aspire to.

Tulips have become a different facet of the same problem: When I buy a bouquet of tulips today, I don't buy the so-called natural flower I believe it to be. Rather, I buy a simile of a flower, a deep fake, a place holder, an idea. Tulips can be bought in all shapes and forms and at any time today. Long gone are the times when they were subject to a certain season. Manufacturers proudly advertise the possibility to grow all-year round and ship worldwide: «these amazing flowers are available year-round - thanks to amazing innovation and technology - as well as global resourcing. Tulips are available 24/7 and 365 days a year- at Sun Valley Flower Farms in Arcata California» ⁽⁴⁾ This flower has become a perfect example of an ongoing mechanism of capitalism: Something highly valued becomes - by globalization, breeding and optimizing workflows - something available at all times. Whilst it still might be expensive at first, the mythical (and arguably non or only partly existent) trickle-down effect makes the product become available to almost anyone in the global west.

Under this light, the title of the work seems to be a curse disguised as a wish. May you bloom eternally becomes the spell of Goethe's Zauberlehrling when he desperately realizes «Die ich rief, die Geister / Werd ich nun nicht los» ⁽⁵⁾ What we once wished to be true - for things to always be at their best, not blossoming but blooming, not temporarily but eternally, is the same thing that destroys the planet we live on today. Yet, the works cannot be seen as propaganda for a different present: The images that criticize these exact mechanisms are only possible because of tools born from them: From the tulips and the store they were bought from to the camera and lens that took the images, from the program that enlarged them to the printer that put the ink on paper. All these things were - partly or not - created and developed in a capitalist system, with a financial interest in mind. The work even takes part in the creation of the ever-new: creating new, not yet seen colors, which was once done by breeding tulips, is done by interpolation and printing, with the Inkjet printer being able to depict colors beyond that of any other medium. ⁽⁶⁾ The images question the very ideas and tools that created them, by pushing them to and over their relative limits, revealing the imperfections behind their facade of eternal growth and strive to perfection. The images become interesting exactly because they cannot be enlarged without faults, just as tulips are still interesting because they are flawed (remember the specks?) and because they only bloom for so long.

1 <https://medium.com/illumination/the-teachings-of-the-tulip-aea27f50e440>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 <https://ubloom.com/blog/2019/05/11/episode-6-tulips-year-round-spring/>

5 <https://kalliope.org/da/text/goethe2000010804>

6 <https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/michelle-kuo-talks-with-wolfgang-tillmans-31942>