

BOOK REVIEW

Kaelin, Matthew M. 2016. *The Sinister Beauty of Carnivorous Plants*. Hardcover: 144 pages, Dimensions: 9.3 × 0.7 × 12.2 inches. Schiffer (May 28, 2016). ISBN-13: 978-0764350986.

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Matthew M. Kaelin is an artist and natural history enthusiast who is deeply influenced by his immediate surrounds, his carefully tended carnivorous plant collection, and the natural habitats of his native Long Island. This work is the synthesis of his art and his environment and is the culmination of many years of perfecting the medium of macro and portrait photography to capture his subject, the carnivorous plants.

At first glance, this might appear to be simply a coffee table art-book. Although by reading further, it will be found to have greater depth than normally seen in such works. In botanical photography books, the photographer rarely ever cultivates their own plants, nor do they often contribute meaningful efforts to conservation. They tend to simply be a collection of pleasant images of a botanical theme. This book on the other hand, has personal involvement, specific information for reference, and there is a darker, more intense artistic vitality than is usually seen in such works.

Conducting this review as one would normally with a scientific or horticultural treatment of carnivorous plants would be an injustice to what is essentially an art-science fusion book and hence the review will focus on the artistic merit of the work. This volume is essentially split into three sections, and this review will deal with each in turn.

First, 84 pages of lavishly produced color plates, portray the most intimate details of these plants. Each work has a title captured in post-modern/conceptual art language, for this language can be powerful and beautiful. Kaelin uses this language in order to clarify the emotion the artworks are meant to convey, and to communicate to the viewer in an elegant and direct manner. Visually, the work is influenced by the dark art of Swiss surrealist artist, H.R. Giger. The author is attempting to create an immersion into this world through compositions which inspire the emotions of intensity, fear, and lascivious seduction, which are perhaps the very reasons that many of us are drawn to the subject of carnivorous plants.

The reader is then seamlessly moved into the realms of cultivating the subjects so painstakingly captured in Kaelin's art. This is not a comprehensive cultivation guide nor is it meant to be, but more an outline of the struggle to achieve perfection in artificial environments. The culmination of this section is a roster of the beautifully cultivated plants that form the basis for the artworks, again captured to perfection in stunning studio images.

The third section is a native habitats chapter and is where the most entertaining and enlightening writing will be found. Kaelin has been influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, and this might very well be apparent in the text. It is a natural-history narrative in the vein of the Romantic period of naturalist writing, but more specific in scope, and being a bit heavier in feel. Overall, the visual and conceptual elements are meant to move the story of the book, and then divert the viewer's attention to information as a vehicle for learning about the subjects themselves. This information covers the plants scientific names, cultivar histories, natural habitats, and very importantly, their conservation status, since so many are in danger of extinction in the wild. This brings greater depth and meaning to the artistic project, and provides the opportunity for exploring education and conservation in the spirit of a natural history collection.

For those looking for another book on cultivation or a general overview of the carnivorous plants, this may not be the first choice for you. These are topics that have been covered extensively and little more can be added that will make a meaningful difference to our store of knowledge. In this book, we have a completely fresh and unique perspective on these amazing plants, and one that is worthy of a place in anyone's carnivorous plant, natural history, or art library.