

THE SECRET WORLD

Within every flower is an astonishing universe, a ghostly, hidden structure. Artist Macoto Murayama has taken it upon himself to reveal it, finds Mimi Murota, in scientific but ethereal detail

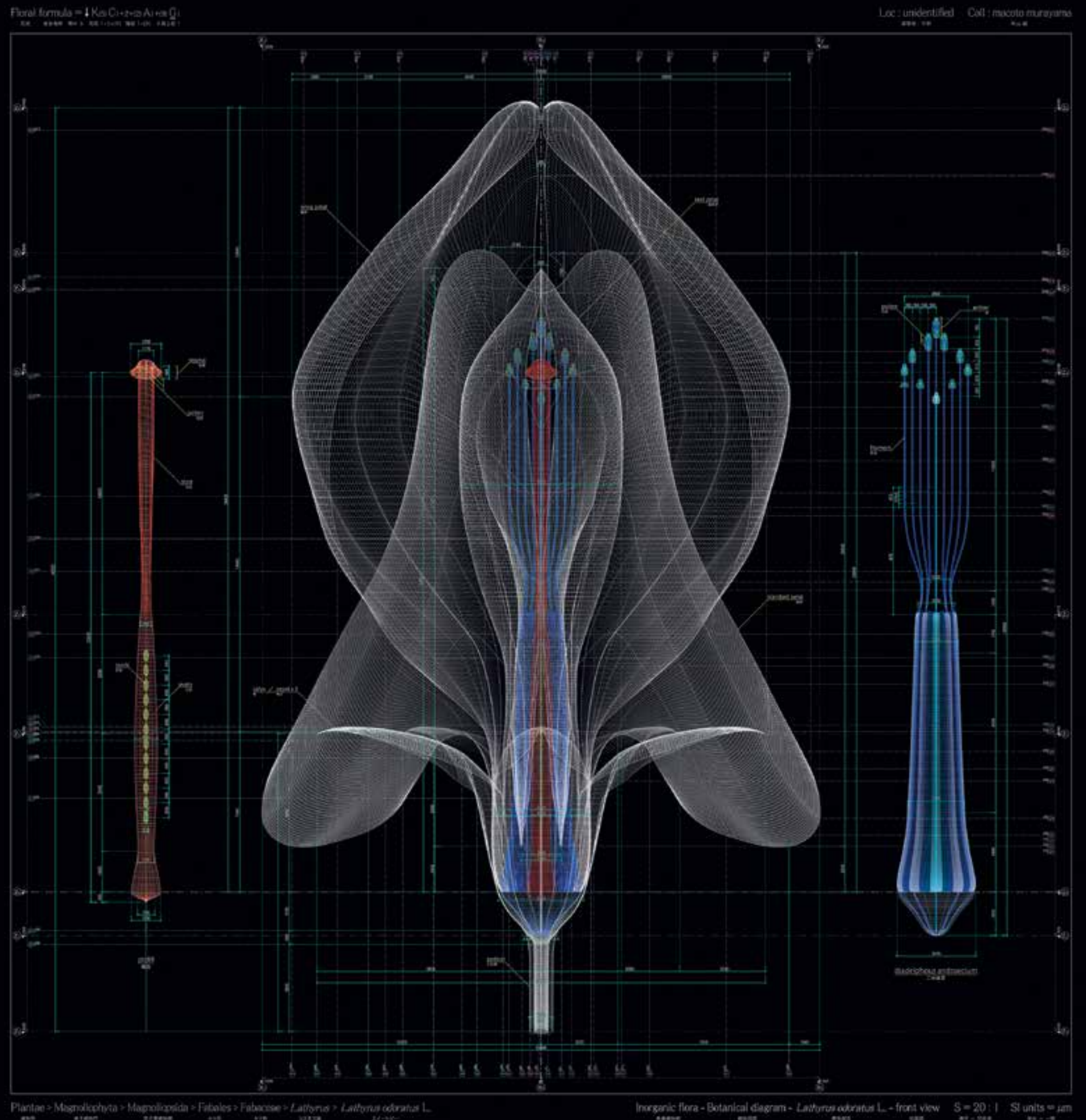
At first glance, the works of new-media artist Macoto Murayama look like unknown creatures. Only after a few seconds does it dawn on the viewer that what we're seeing are flowers. Using the delicate lines and elegant curves of 3D wireframe computer graphics, Murayama delivers a transparent view of the plants' interiors, which gives them a unique and instantly engaging power. Yet in them, there is none of the warmth and intimacy that blossoms usually communicate. Instead, with their unearthly beauty, cool stare, and digital texture reminiscent of blueprints or engineering drawings, they make us feel we're looking at something unapproachable, blooming in the soil of an unknowable planet. So extraordinary are these artworks that they've been acclaimed from New York to London and Asia for their unmatched style and presence.

Murayama's is a unique approach. The 30-year-old Japanese artist first heads to the countryside in search of the specimens, from sweet peas to Japanese narcissus and exquisite Asiatic dayflowers, that will serve as his models. In his studio, he then dissects each flower, removing its petals, anther, stigma, and ovaries with a utility knife and razor blade, and peering at each fragment through a microscope or magnifying glass, analyzing its structure and photographing and sketching it from every angle. "Anyone who saw me looking into a microscope with a pair of tweezers in my hand would think I was a botanist," he laughs.

This is the analog part of his process; next, Murayama moves to the digital phase, using computer graphics to model each part of the flower, then painstakingly reconstructing the full blossom by layering one transparent rendering over another. "I'm not trying to express beauty," he says, "so much as the flower's true form. In search of the flower's theoretical ideal shape, I take an endless number of journeys between the analog and digital worlds."

Murayama's fascination with inner structure goes back to his youth. "As a kid, I loved making scale models, looking at the illustrated instructions and imagining the shape of the building." In 2003, he began a course in spatial design at Miyagi University, Japan, intending to study architecture, but his plans for the future underwent a major change of direction when he encountered computer graphics (CG) technology there.

"I loved the way you could create works with an absolute freedom of conception. Instead of architecture, I became absorbed in the world of CG and, for my graduation, I created my first 'inorganic flora.' As I worked, I referred to botanical art from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and to 'technical art' that depicted the internal structures of cars and other manufactured goods. And what I'm doing now was probably a perfectly natural destination for me, given my fondness for blueprints. I moved in this direction because I was drawn to the power of a diagram to convey information visually in an instant, but I think I also glimpsed an area of commonality between botanical art, which has its mechanical side, and technical art, which seems in some ways to be examining the internal organs of living things. It occurred to me that I could express something interesting by



Previous page: the eerie transformation of *Lathyrus odoratus* L. – in other words, a humble wild sweet pea. This page: the shaggy, sunflower-like head of

a Transvaal daisy, or *gerbera* (top); an exuberant, cocktail-glass side view of a Satsuki azalea, native to the mountains of Japan (below). Opposite: a Perspex-clear

close-up of the stamens, topped by two-lobed, pollen-producing anthers, of the blossom of a Yoshino cherry, one of the loveliest flowering ornamental trees

fusing the two.” That concept unfurled into a new interpretation of the inner architecture of plants, and his first group of works, entitled *Botech Art*, was the symbiosis of botanical art and technology.

After graduation, Murayama moved to the Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences (IAMAS) in Gifu, Japan, where he produced his second series, *Botanical Diagrams*. Even more technically rarefied, these are almost dissection charts or engineering drawings, displaying the names of plant parts, dimensions, and angles.

“The two series may look alike, but they’re very different,” says Murayama. “If *Botech Art* contains a lot of my artistic sensibility, my *Botanical Diagrams* reflect the results of my dissection of flowers based on my view of a flower with all the feeling eliminated.”

What is it about flowers that attracts Murayama? He wanted to know the answer to this himself, so in a move that reveals an interesting side of his personality, he got a job with a florist. He still works there (these days mostly helping with the website) in search of the relationship between flowers and human beings.

“In the store, I discovered all over again that flowers are not ‘pretty’ for me because of such surface qualities as their colors or fragrances; what I want to express in my works is the mystery I feel in their structures. I look at flowers differently from most people, and one proof of that,” he laughs, “is that nobody liked the bouquets I arranged! But every time I dissect a flower, without fail, my heart pounds with the discovery and amazement of it. I’d like to dissect every bloom in the world and make it into a work of art, because flowers, for me, are the driving force for artistic creativity.” Touchingly, he adds, “They’re my indispensable partners.”

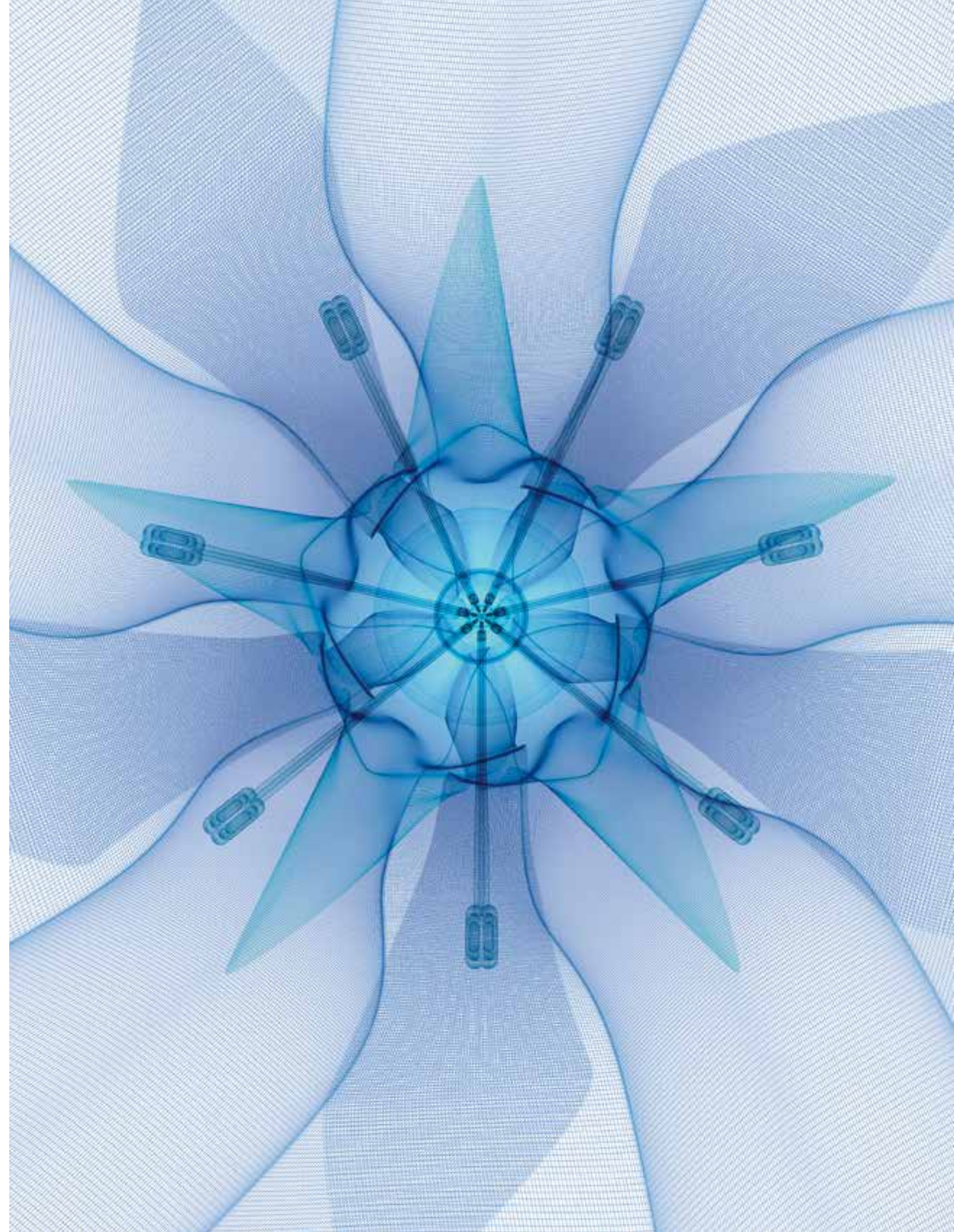
And he wants to portray these creative partners in a way that makes us sit up and, as he does, see them anew. “If I’m working on a lily, I’ll design it with a color that would never exist in a real lily. I want to convey to people a new aspect of the plant by arousing in them a sense that they’re looking at a flower that’s unknown.”

Such drive means he’s revving at full throttle. His third series, *Botech Compositions*, portrayed continuous patterns, and he’s currently animating his work. In the future, a digital encyclopedia will enable the viewer to see a plant from 360 degrees and combine scientific accuracy with the botanical art of past centuries.

Murayama’s blossoms possess a spectral beauty, partly because the gaze he trains on them maintains a dispassionate coolness. “I’m the silent type,” he shrugs, “who finds it hard to express my feelings.” But listening to him, one can’t really believe Murayama struggles to express emotions. What he does is filled with a passion and romanticism that revivifies his subjects, breathing a new and otherworldly life into them. He can’t help, it seems, but go on creating alien images that haunt and fascinate. ♦

Translated by Jay Rubin

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