

***The Agency of Things: Still Life at Gallery North***  
**by Jennifer Samet**

The still life is an occasion for examining relationships – of discrete objects to one another, of objects to their setting, of the artist and the viewer to those elements. Although the very nature of still life painting is the depiction of inanimate objects, we are also seeing the shifting of meaning, the malleable qualities of the objects – their movement. The variation in the depiction of hand-held objects is a reminder that meaning, and vision, is not fixed.

In his famous essay “The Apples of Cezanne” (1968), Meyer Schapiro challenges the assumption that still life painting is merely a “simplified motif” and therefore an opportunity to concentrate on problems of form. Instead, Schapiro explores all of the various meanings that still life painting – and even an apple – can contain. Schapiro writes, “Still life engages the painter (and also the observer who can surmount the habit of casual perception) in a steady looking that discloses new and elusive aspects of the stable object. At first commonplace in appearance, it may become in the course of that contemplation a mystery, a source of metaphysical wonder.”

Indeed, in still life painting, it is often not the objective characteristics of the source material that we notice, but rather, how the artist transposes it. The same object, depicted by a different hand, and in a different setting, can conjure wildly diverse sentiments. This mutability – the shifting of meaning, depending on how an object is represented, or its context - almost makes us consider whether an inanimate object has its own agency. Robert Jessel, in “Sunflowers,” imbues his motif with a radiating energy that pushes across the surface – the radical folding perspective of the table, echoed by folded bills, an overflowing basket, and an extreme cropping, as if things can not be contained.

In Amy Weiskopf’s painting, it is the correspondence of textural and tactile sensation, between the round of mozzarella, and the yellow plums, which becomes the subject of the painting. She conjures the feeling of what it is like to touch or press a moist ball of cheese, as opposed to holding a fruit in our palm and bringing it to our lips. In Christian White’s “Still Life with Leek and Papaya,” the saturated, painterly strokes become signifiers for the tactility of each individual fruit and vegetable, as well as the surfaces of cutting board, table, and cloths.

Other still lifes create symbolic harmonies between the object and its setting. In Don Perlis’s “Desk with Typewriter,” a table covered with a grid-patterned cloth is positioned in front of the urban grid: an apartment building seen through the window. The typewriter on the table further emphasizes the idea of a mechanical order. Paul Resika does the same kind of echoing, with the elements of nature, by reducing the forms of the moon, sail, buoy, and horizon into geometries, lines, and arabesques.

In Joseph Podlesnik's photograph, deliberate disharmonies, between the fecund and the barren, are established through image overlay. A bowl overflowing with apples and a decorative ceramic compote dish fade into a street outdoors, which, with its ordered row of palm trees, looks like desolate urbanity. A couple of figures, and a car or truck on the road are also ghostly presences in the print.

Still life painting is devotional in nature. To represent inanimate objects suggests, inherently, an artist's identification with them, and the specificity of their arrangement and juxtapositions. Jackie Lima takes on devotional objects as subject matter in "Five Headed Ganesh." She emphasizes, through their organization across an oblong space, a rhythmic pulsation and loose symmetry, that itself feels related to devotional practice and ceremony. Susan Walp has said, "I can't start a painting unless I have that huge feeling of inspiration from the motif. It is very specific; I feel it in my body." Robert De Niro, Sr., was a painter who returned, over and over, to the same objects and images as source material. Although his touch had a rapidness and brevity, his motifs were approached with sustained attention – they represented something integral in himself.

Still life paintings compel us to consider our own relationship to the objects depicted – the associations we bring to the painting. The themes of "memento mori" and "vanitas" — reminders of mortality and the transience of earthly goods — have been long been at the heart of still life painting, particularly Dutch 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century painting.

Although there are no skulls represented in this group of paintings, other objects associated with "vanitas" are present – flowers, money (in paintings by Robert Jessel and Robert Kogge; the piggy bank in Bruce Lieberman's painting) and books (in Perlis's painting and Oscar Santiago's "Patriots." Robert Franca's painting juxtaposes one whole banana, with the opened peel of another. Fred Badalamenti's watercolor evokes mortality in both the subject (antique tableware) and its overall palette of white and greenish-gray. The round object at the right is not a skull, but it suggests one. This is true, also, of the reflective doorknob in a painting by Stephen Brown, where a quotidian object is made central – a carrier of meaning and a surface for reflecting the artist – both literally and figuratively.

Angela Stratton's painting "Two of Diamonds" also feels like a harbinger. The empty glass bottle, the shirt, dangling from a hook into a stylized triangular formation, and the playing cards, fluttering out to the table, suggest a person has recently abandoned the scene. Lieberman's painting, in contrast, has an almost raucous domesticity; it is lived in. Blueberries, eggs – cooked and whole, a piggy bank, a coffee cup, and a crumpled napkin are scattered about this space of the dining table.

The act of painting a still life today may be its own "memento mori" – triggering us to ask how arranging or painting a still life, and how objects like antique china, lace, and stoneware are relevant to contemporary culture. The steady looking, to which

Meyer Schapiro referred, is ever more endangered in a culture of distraction. And yet is in these small spaces of unmoving, steady looking, that static meaning is unhinged, that objects become part of a shifting whole.