

Photography, Genre and Continuity

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In his somewhat obscure "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston" of 1937, Clement Greenberg does much more than lambaste Weston for his modern-style pictorialism. Remarkably, Greenberg offers here a concise prescription for both painting and photography as modernist art. If painting is to progress it must strive for the absolute, expurgating all figurative content in a move towards self-definition. Photography on the other hand, will arrive at self-definition precisely by embracing representation-it is free to take up the traditional tasks which painting must abandon. Even the most important job of traditional art, the history painting, is now left for photography. Greenberg cites Walker Evans as an exemplary modern art photographer, finishing his review with the moral: "let photography be 'literary'."¹

Whether one agrees with Greenberg's prescriptions or not, it is clear that painting has largely moved away from its traditional functions and that photography increasingly assumed those functions, both in the fine arts and the popular media. Beginning with the Realists, the important work in painting seems to have been accomplished in progressive steps away from the "high" genres. Portraits and landscapes, rather than battle scenes preoccupied the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Cezanne and the cubists advanced their art through the lowest of the genres, the still life.

The system of genres which ordered the representational enterprise of painting previous to the modern era was subject oriented. A picture's worth was firstly tied to its subject matter rather than its mode of execution. At the top of the hierarchy were history painting and mythological scenes, below them were portraits, followed by landscapes and lastly, the still life. The further from a direct depiction of human drama, the lower the rank of the picture.

While photography did assume the task of history painting it did so largely through the photojournalistic model. Of course the pictorial conventions of photojournalism largely derived from the preceding tradition of painted representations, but this was rarely overtly acknowledged. Instead, a purely photojournalistic, which is to say a purely photographic aesthetic, was pursued as an antithesis to the retrograde conventions of "fuzzy" pictorialist art photography. With some exceptions, it was predominantly in the cinema that the painted prehistory of photographic representation was openly explored and exploited before the 1960s. Perhaps it is due to the false start of pictorialism, that it took until the conceptual art movement of the sixties for artists to examine the continuity between the the worlds of the painted pictures of the past, and the photographic pictures of the present.

The recent return of the history painting within contemporary painting has been widely discussed, especially with regards to the *Oktober 18, 1977* suite of paintings by Gerhard Richter of the possibly murdered Baader Meinhoff prisoners in Stammheim prison. Since Rauschenberg, Warhol and the pop artists, through Polke, Richter and Kiefer, to contemporary artists such as Cady Noland, this "new history painting" has almost exclusively relied on the journalistic photograph for its image. It seems that directly painted representations of historic events are either still taboo or simply too difficult to manage. Meanwhile, through the sixties and seventies a profusion of photographic activity emerged from the ground-zero of conceptual art. This work explored photography's potential for art in ever more novel ways. Out of this freedom of approach came some serious new art that employed photography to make representations which did not owe as much to the restrictions of established fine art photography as to the continuous history of representation.

The most accomplished proponents of this art photography include Gilbert & George, Cindy Sherman, Clegg & Guttman and, most relevant to this exhibition, Jeff Wall. These artists with their large coloured pictures, blew away the constraints which held art photography hostage and introduced the photographically produced tableau as a form which could assume its place in the museum in dialogue with the painted tableaux of tradition. One of the chief characteristics of this new art was its reanimation of genre as an inescapable condition of representation.

Jeff Wall's retrieval of the history painting has probably been the most clear and significant recognition of what Thomas Crow has referred to as "the Persistence of Genre."² Wall's influence on younger Vancouver artists may be more pervasive and deeper than at first it might seem. By opening up the notion of a photographic revival of genre, he has given visibility to potential developments which may, or may not, follow his own particular direction but which nonetheless stem from the same theoretical base.

The artists in this exhibition all developed their aesthetic programmes in Vancouver. This city has never had a very impressive tradition of painting, it therefore felt natural for many artists to begin their artistic work in mechanical media like photography or video. Yet, as artists they were tied to the history and traditions of art and so could not step over the velvet rope of autonomy into the culture industry. It is now possible for the work of Wall and his colleagues to be taken for granted as a foundation or context for addressing the important questions of art with the tools of new media. It is from within this art-historical scheme that I see the work of the artists in this exhibition emerging. It is significant-in ways that I hope will become apparent throughout this text-that this work deals with the still life, the lowest of the genres. For as previously mentioned, it was the early moderns' investment of serious content into the still life that signalled the end of the genre system for painting and the beginning of its spiral towards abstraction.

In his excellent study of the still life *Looking at the Overlooked-Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson characterizes Dutch still life as quintessentially rhopographic in its concern for "low-plane reality":

What makes Dutch still life so unique is the symmetry between this anonymous, self-effacing technique and the particular range of possibilities afforded by rhopographic painting. Rhopography works against the idea of greatness: while human beings may be capable of extraordinary heroism, passions, ambitions, it leaves the exploration of these things to others, and against megalography it asserts another view of human life, one that attends to the ordinary business of everyday living, the life of houses and tables, of individuals on a plane of material existence where the ideas of heroism, passion and ambition have no place. The Dutch painters of still life are true to this rhopographic scale of values in that they make no use of painting as a vehicle for bringing to the world the uniqueness of personal vision. They are not attracted by still life as a mode of self-expression, or by the possibility of raising their art to Olympian heights.³

Much of Bryson's analysis concerns the distance and interplay between the rhopographic and megalographic. This is a dynamic that also figures in the works which constitute this exhibition.

Besides looking back to original models for the still life, it is necessary to examine the context for the still life today. This requires an account of the images of advertising, for if the photojournalist took up the role of history painter, the still life was likewise taken up by the adman, after both genres were abandoned by the painter. The still life entered the lexicon of advertising almost from the beginning. Billboards of hamburger repasts and television close-ups of gleaming appliances are abundant whilst the art galleries tend to shun pictures of fruit bowls. The commodity is alternately fetishized and naturalized in the commercial still life. Consumer products that lack glamour are fancied up through photographic gimmickry or luxuries are integrated into everyday scenes to make them seem like normal necessities.

It would be impossible to make a still life today without it being informed by advertising on some level. This could involve a conscious rejection of commercial art, or any degree of complicity, ironic ambivalence or critical distance. These questions of photography and painting and the genre system, the rhopographic and the megalographic, and the relation of fine art to commercial culture, are all brought to the fore through an examination of the works of Damian Moppett, Howard Ursuliak and Kelly Wood.

Damian Moppett

Damian Moppett trained as a painter and has only recently experimented with three-dimensional and photographic media. His very first photographic works were the series *Untitled* (1995), which are included in this exhibition. These first photographs follow a simple formula, picturing a miniature “lego” architecture through which balloons have been threaded and then inflated. These pictures are dramatic, the macroscopic lens has inflated the scale to the extent that we feel the pressure of the taut balloons. The rich black and white prints promote attention to the surface textures which, along with the suggestive balloon shapes, bring to mind associations to skin, membranes, and bladder-like sacs. The success of this work spurred on further experimentation, eventually causing Moppett to abandon his painting.

Moppett’s next works dealt literally with the distance between painting and photography; they are quotes of pictures by Phillip Guston. The story of how Guston returned to figuration of a cartoonish sort after a career as an abstract expressionist is by now a staple of modern art history. Guston’s later work is largely a drama of figures set before, behind, or on top of a shallow, stage-like horizontal plane. Grotesque and tragicomic, these works are history paintings as nightmare, constructed on the intimate formal scale of the still life. The two photographs, *Ladder* and *Untitled (Roma)* (both 1996), are pastiches of the Guston paintings whose titles they echo. Moppett, like his hero, exploits the surreality produced by the conflation of the two traditional genres of still life and history painting. As previously noted, history painting held the highest position in the hierarchy of genres whilst still life held the lowest; their respective functions could not be more different. Guston refuses his protagonists the lofty stage and proscenium of history and sends them to the puppet-theater. The compression of history painting’s human drama into the closer frame makes the characters larger-but comically, rather than heroically so. This is a device of an existential consciousness, the important dramas are now internal, no longer played out on the political stage, the battlefield or the landscapes of ancient myth.

Moppett’s narratives are not as serious as Guston’s, with their tenor of moral anguish. While Moppett likewise entertains the megalographic within the formal space of the rhopographic, his narratives are not ones into which we can project ourselves. We remain on the outside, looking in on a miniature slapstick world. We are offered no moral or existential catharsis. Instead we are to be amused as we peer in like nickelodeon customers, for only a brief respite from our world. Moppett’s *tableaux* are a refusal of seriousness that may be read as cynical subversion rather than serious tragicomedy. Yet, the artist’s goal is clearly a strange beauty. His aesthetic hopes to find this beauty in a fictional, psychotic realm and thus his art is more about a unique, personal expression than the humble depiction of low-plane reality that characterized Dutch still life.

In his most recent works Moppett turns directly to the representation of the *informe*. All untitled, but collectively referred to by the artist as “Office Blobs” these pictures are carefully composed “accidents”: nonspecific materials, perhaps plaster, insulating foam and adhesive rubber, and banal objects like cigarettes, thumbtacks and pencils, are gathered together in *tableaux* with pointless narratives. These things are all new and clean, they are devoid of the pathos of the organic. The colours and their combinations are suggestive of states of nausea but are once removed from the body and its functions. These pictures embrace a seasick cynicism reminiscent of Magritte’s *vache* period, but as bloodless cartoons outside of history. Need we no longer decipher an absurd or nauseous picture as an index of historic circumstance or have such pictures become permanent, mannerist tropes? Such a conclusion might only be symptomatic of a view that has mistaken the present order for an eternal nature. Moppett’s colours and technique appear to be derived from the commercial image. His choice of the still life, the throne room of the commodity, especially leads us to interpret his pictures as reflecting the conditions of late capitalism.

Howard Ursuliak

Unlike Moppett and Wood who both construct their fictions in the studio, Howard Ursuliak prefers to work in the everyday world. His “discovered” still lifes utilize the model of the photograph as indexical document. It is possible to view his photographs as a kind of anthropology concerned with a marginal economy and lifestyle. Pictures such as *Untitled (boxed snacks)* (1994), that are part of a series which examines corner grocery stores, would seem to reinforce such a reading. Yet his allusions to the history of proto-photographic painting, manifest through studied composition and attention to light and colour, inform us that he intends his pictures as art rather than journalism or social science.

Ursuliak presents a realist vision focused on a melancholic apprehension of the economy. He searches for his pictures in

the sort of small family-run shops that line East Hastings street and Kingsway in Vancouver. This sector of the economy is usually associated with recent immigrants and includes laundromats, corner-stores, pawnshops, and strange little businesses that seem not to do any business, often for generations. The particular nature of these kinds of spaces is well known to most city dwellers but is rarely recognized or considered. In *Untitled (laundry counter)* (1994) it appears that the least amount of energy or expense has been invested in the decor, while decades of human activity has left its traces, wearing smooth all the available corners. These places feel exhausted, like old, underpaid workers—they are the opposite of the hysterical cheer and optimism that one finds in the new “superstores” and the suburban malls. Often decades-old commodities can be found on dusty shelves or pathetically few products will be displayed, conjuring images of scarcity in the Eastern Bloc or other “backward” economies. These pictures evidence the desperation of the need to identify, to participate in the economy, if only in the most half-hearted manner.

Sometimes these stores feel more like museum displays or film sets than part of the reality of the present. Certainly this is what draws Ursuliak to this subject. However, there is too much poverty of spirit here for these pictures to be merely nostalgic or sentimental. The ascetic quality of both the space depicted and especially the vision of the artist, ward off false emotions. In their depictions of the forlorn commodity, these pictures reveal the empty promise of the new commodity, and so ultimately perform a critical function. By redeeming the discarded, Ursuliak’s photos threaten to upset the hierarchy.

Before Modernism, subjects were as important, or more important, than the vision of the artist. This prejudice has certainly not vanished altogether. Indeed, our museums are filled with works by modern artists which deal with rejected or devalued things and realities. It is as though a war is being waged by art against a hierarchical ideology. Norman Bryson traces this artistic concern for the lowest reality and its concurrent critical devaluation back to the Greeks. He cites Pliny’s critique of the painter Piraeicus:

In mastery of his art but few take rank above him, yet by his choice of a path he perhaps marred his own success, for he followed a humble line, winning however the highest glory that it had to bring. He painted barber’s shops, cobbler’s stalls, asses, eatables (obsonia) and similar subjects, earning for himself the name of rhyparographos.⁴

Bryson explains that rhyparographer means “painter of rhyparos, literally of waste or filth; the association is with things that are physically or morally unclean.”⁵ – so the tag is ultimately an insult. Clearly, Pliny’s distaste reflects an ideology that is still with us. Enough so to continue to prompt artists to take on the role of rhyparographer as anti-hero, i.e., Mike Kelley’s self-portrayal as janitor.⁶ Ursuliak does not quite fit the definition of rhyparographer; he is much closer to the rhyparographic proper. Nonetheless, his pictures force a questioning of values, perhaps in a less reactionary way than most contemporary rhyparography.

Our world is constantly defined for us by people and institutions with agendas which are not necessarily in our interest. For modernity this has most often meant a value system based on production. To step outside of this is to enter a realm that is characterized by its loneliness, its distance from the *agora*. This loneliness is Ursuliak’s subject. The objects and spaces depicted are the necessary agents of its representation.

Kelly Wood

Kelly Wood has been making photo art for nearly a decade. The works in this exhibition are recent products of a project begun in 1994. Wood began her still life project with negative images of pastries and cakes where the “negativity” was intended as a punning emblem of refusal, directed at consumerism and perhaps to classist notions of art. They might be understood as poison treats for any bourgeois collector or Pollyanna artlover who might be lured into her trap. Wood’s latest pieces are both negative and positive prints of sugar and sweets. Her photographs bring us closest to the formal criteria, although not the conceptual criteria, of the Dutch still life model. Pronk still life paintings functioned as allegories of empire and indexes of consumption with the paintings themselves rivalling their subject as economic objects. The objecthood of Wood’s pictures is reinforced by the vivid colours of the large mattes and sleek metal frames.

Her “eye candy” blurs the line between picture and referent; the viewer is taunted by her sickly-sweet colours and slick surfaces.

Libidinal metaphors abound either visually, as in the testiculate orbs of *Two Jawbreakers* (1996) or sometimes textually, as with *Brown Sugar* (1996). In this way many types of desire are conflated; taste is equated with sexual “tastes” and aesthetic “taste.” The notion of art as a matter of delectation or subjective consumerism is parodied.

The formal aspects of modernist paintings are often mimicked by the geometry of Wood’s compositions. This is part of a tactic which treats the modernist form as though it were an empty shell, thus denying that it was any more than a bluff, and refilling it with a new and usually subversive content. In this respect, Wood comes close to the simulationism of artists like Sherrie Levine or James Welling whose eighties works delivered a belated, oedipal critique of the pretensions of abstract modernism. *Candy Floss* (1996) pictures two tufts of pink and blue spun sugar candy. The formal reference to the simple compositions of Mark Rothko’s paintings is clear but the intended effect could not be more different. While Rothko’s works are a testament to his religious belief in the redemptive power of the act of painting, Wood’s photos are an expression of a sarcastic wit which expects very little from art but derives a wicked pleasure from expressing this diminished expectation.

Brown Sugar and *Sugar Cubes* (both 1996) present the pure, refined substance as narcotic. The brown sugar in negative appears a psychedelic blue, like a pile of cocaine under blacklight in a discotheque. The equation—art as narcotic or drug—goes back at least to Marcel Duchamp’s *Pharmacie* of 1914. Perhaps art is just a bad habit, a bourgeois addiction. *Selection* (1996) would seem to reinforce this reading. It offers us three different choices of pastry—one more decorative than another; one squat, the other taller; one with crushed nuts—so many choices, so many empty calories.

Norman Bryson has discussed the still life in terms of gender ideology; rhopography was traditionally defined as dealing with feminine interests and feminine space. The preoccupation with the domestic realm in the still life was seen as the opposite of the masculine, megalographic tendency towards abstraction. It is interesting that Wood, as the only woman in the exhibition, should be fascinated with sweets—her concerns, however, hardly keep to the realm of rhopography proper. Her works are probably the most megalographic of the lot, provoking a most abstract discourse on questions of modernity, autonomy, and ideology. It is certain that she also sees her work as addressing gender issues but as with the other theoretical concerns that inform the work, these are caught in a cyclical logic that prevents their full disclosure. Wood’s pictures imply that this is the price paid for autonomy—that any work which tries to find a way out risks becoming something other than art.

All of the artists in this exhibition entertain or invoke the still life in different ways. For argument’s sake, it could be asserted that there are no true still life pictures in this exhibition. However, this would infer that there is a singular, static, paradigmatic still life, rather than a changing abstract ideal which serves as a catalyst for artistic efforts. In bringing such weighty concepts to the consideration of these works my intention was not to overburden them. I hope instead that these ideas will form a context for an informed appreciation. I do not wish to see the pictures smothered under a strata of theory, the primacy of the visual work as a legitimate and unique form of knowledge is something that must never be depreciated.

These pictures present us with something relatively new: the still life as a photographic *tableau*. At the same time, certain intrinsic qualities force a recognition of historical continuities previously obscured by the myths of discontinuity. The exhibition title was intended to reflect the historical nature of art. The word “bonus” is, of course, old Latin for “good.

Its current meaning is derived from its slang usage on the eighteenth century stock exchange to denote something extra given, a gift. Today the term has an empty ring, it reminds us of the false promises of so many consumer products. The pictures in *bonus* all share a certain resistance to affirmative culture. This trait identifies these works as more modernist than “post.” Rather than a retreat into the politics of tribalism or surrender to “entertainment,” the most common pitfalls for contemporary art, these works represent an engagement with the problems and experiences of modernity. This is still requisite for any work which claims a progressive disposition—lest it fall into the fluorescent abyss of postmodern consumerism.

Notes

1. Greenberg, Clement, "The Camera's Glass Eye-Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston," *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, edited by John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, London, 1986.
2. See: Crow, Thomas, "The Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art," *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996.
3. Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Harvard University Press, London, 1990.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Mike Kelley posed literally as a janitor for the cover photograph of his 1993 Whitney Museum retrospective catalogue *Catholic Tastes*.