

Stilleven: Contemporary Still Life **Teachers Guide**

Hallie Ford Museum of Art
September 12 – December 20, 2015

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Stilleven: Contemporary Still Life*; to offer ways to lead their own tours; and to propose ideas to reinforce the gallery experience and broaden curriculum concepts. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of artists who use the theme of still life in their work.
- To examine formal and narrative aspects of traditional and contemporary still life.
- To explore work that may challenge the conventional definition of still life.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss the traditional definition of still life and how it relates to contemporary work.
- Discuss the many reasons artists use still life in their work and their varied approaches.
- Discuss how an individual artist uses the parts and principles of art in his or her work.
- Discuss how the artists use still life to explore formal issues or to create narratives and associations.
- Identify and discuss works that may challenge the conventional definition, but share the same formal and expressive ideas found in traditional still life.

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INTRODUCTION

John Olbrantz, The Maribeth Collins Director and exhibition co-curator

A still life is a work of art that depicts mostly inanimate objects, either natural (food, flowers, plants, rocks, animals) or man-made (cups, saucers, glasses, jewelry, tables). With its origins in antiquity and the late Gothic period, still-life painting emerged as an important theme in Western painting by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. While still life reached its zenith in the hands of the Dutch and Flemish masters of the seventeenth century, it has continued to be an important if under-recognized theme in American and European art for the past three centuries.

Stilleven (the Dutch word for “still life” and pronounced “sti-lay-ven”) celebrates the work of contemporary artists from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia who focus on still-life themes in their artwork. Organized by Director John Olbrantz and Collection Curator Jonathan Bucci, the exhibition is intended to reaffirm and in some cases challenge traditional notions of still life imagery. Indeed, during the last four decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, still life has expanded beyond the simple observation of inanimate objects to embrace a wide variety of intentions and approaches.

Some of the artists included in the exhibition, like Norman Lundin and Eric Elliott, use still-life themes to explore formalist issues of atmosphere and light, while others like Amjad Faur use still life to make social or political statements. David Giese creates wildly fanciful and improbable still-life compositions based on a fictitious private residence that he claims to have discovered in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, while John Feodorov and Karen Hackenberg use still-life themes to address environmental issues such as waste, pollution, and the importance of recycling. Still other artists like Margie Livingston and Ben Frank Moss use the simple concept of arranged objects as a means to explore materials and processes.

For many artists in the exhibition, art-historical references abound. Dutch-born painter Henk Pander references traditional Dutch still life in many of his works, while artists Katherine Ace and Sarah Fagan create still-life paintings that recall the work of such nineteenth-century American *trompe l'oeil* (a French term that means “to trick or fool the eye”) painters John F. Peto and William Harnett. Mixed-media artists Whiting Tennis and Blair Saxon Hill have both been heavily influenced by Cubist collage, while painter and printmaker Sherrie Wolf and photographer and installation artist Wendy Given offer fresh approaches to traditional still-life themes and motifs.

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the images and suggested discussions and activities to introduce students to contemporary still life.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

AT THE MUSEUM

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider beginning with the visual scanning they used in the classroom as well as the suggested discussions (see below). A good way to start is by asking, "What is happening in this picture?" or "what do you see here?" Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "Show us what you have found."
 - Describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, and if applicable, scene, mood and atmosphere.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- Does the artist seem to be more interested in the subject matter or formal issues?
 - How important is the object (or objects) – its realistic depiction, its inherent beauty, etc. – to the artist? Explain.
 - Is the artist sending a message, telling a story or making associations for the viewer or the does the work seem to be more about how the artist uses color, texture, contrast, space, etc.? Or both? Explain
- Does this work fit the traditional definition of still life? If not, does it share some of the same themes or concerns? Explain.

THREE STILL LIFES

Still life is traditionally defined as a work of art depicting inanimate, often commonplace objects that are either natural (fruit, flowers, etc.) or man-made (vases, glasses, books, etc.) in an artificial setting. As a demonstration of artistic skill and symbolic expression, still life has remained a popular art form for centuries. In the exhibition, *Stilleven: Contemporary Still Life*, you will find Northwest artists who choose the still life genre to explore formal issues and/or to create narratives and express ideas. You will also find artists whose work may challenge the genre's conventional definition, but share the same formal and expressive ideas found in traditional still life.



Eric Elliott
(American, b. 1975)

Morning Light

2009

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University, gift of Josef Vascovitz,
2014.024

In the tradition of earlier still life artists, Eric Elliott has chosen still life as a vehicle for his explorations of formal issues such as shape, color, value, and light. His beautifully rendered works capture the mood and atmosphere of simple everyday objects and spaces.

About the artist: Eric Elliott lives in Seattle, Washington. He has exhibited his work extensively in the Seattle area and received a Neddy Artist Fellowship in 2009. Eric teaches at Gage Academy of Art and has had residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and the Jerusalem Studio School. He earned a BA from University of California, Berkeley, and an MFA from the University of Washington.

Suggested Discussion:

- Briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, scene, mood and atmosphere.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way a work is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?

- How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - Describe the color. Has the artist used it realistically? How does the color contribute to the atmosphere and mood?
 - How has the artist used light? Describe the quality of light – its intensity, whether it is directional or all over, does it create clear or soft outlines, etc. How does the light contribute to the atmosphere and mood?
 - Does this scene appear realistic? Dreamlike? Both? Explain.
- Discuss the following statements by the artist in relationship to *Morning Light*. Do they give you new insight into his work? Explain.
 - “Painting is my primary connection to the world; it is a ritual where I meditate on the space I inhabit and the objects that surround me. The structures of my everyday life become inspiration for exploration. The focus of each painting or drawing varies; some become more about the objects and some become more about the light, atmosphere, abstraction, or color. Working from a still life gives me time to spend with my subject so that I can get to a place where I do not see the objects as things but as shapes that are part of a larger whole.”¹
 - “It’s always a challenge to push the bounds of painting to something that seems new and raw, despite the antiquity of the tradition. Creating space on a surface that’s so flat is a challenge I love, manipulating the perception of depth. A basic fascination with mark-making has always been the basis of my work...I’m interested in marks and forms dissolving into ground. Which starts observationally, but the end product is pretty distant from observational painting. When you paint something observationally you really have to care about it, and I care much less about the subjects I’m painting than I care about the paint. The mark.”²
 - “When I was doing the greys, I really saw the subtle color between grays. I thought there was so much color in them. Each painting, whether it’s dark or light or bright, takes your eyes time to adjust to what you are seeing. Most people won’t sit in front of a painting long enough for their eyes to adjust to the colors in front of them. Each painting, whether it’s dark or light or bright, takes your eyes time to adjust to what you’re seeing”³
 - “[I’m interested in] the grey area where one object ends and another begins...I’m interested in the air in-between objects...”⁴

¹ Written correspondence with exhibition co-curator, John Olbrantz

²Manitach, Amanda, “In the Studio: Pairings with Eric Elliott”, *New American Paintings*, 1/22/2013, <https://newamericanpaintings.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/in-the-studio-pairings-with-eric-elliott/>. Web. 9/23/2015.

³Manitach, “In the Studio: Pairings with Eric Elliott”

⁴ Beal, Suzanne, “Eric Elliott”, *art ltd.*, 9/2009, http://www.artltdmag.com/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1252712826&archive=&start_from=&ucat=18&. Web. 9/23/2015.

- Discuss Elliott’s work within the tradition of earlier still life artists who chose the genre to explore formal issues. What interests do they share? How are their approaches similar? How are they different?

Juan Sánchez Cotán, (1560–1627) <http://www.sdmart.org/art/quince-cabbage-melon-and-cucumber>,

Georges Braque (1882-1963) <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/89>

Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/301.2004/>



Wendy Given
(American, b. 1971)

Of the Garden: Malus domestica

2014

Ed. 3

C-print

Courtesy of the artist, Portland, Oregon

Malus domestica (apple) is one of the fruits depicted in the artist’s series, *Of the Garden*, which is influenced by the notion of the “forbidden fruit” found in creation myths of various cultures. With images such as these, Given uses still life to draw connections between narratives found in both classical mythology and the Book of Genesis. The photographs are also created within the tradition of *vanitas* painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, incorporating somber and symbolic imagery.

About the artist:

Wendy Given lives in Portland, Oregon, and has exhibited her art throughout the country. Her work employs a variety of media, including photography, installation, sculpture, and assemblage. Given earned her BFA from the Atlanta College of Art, and her MFA from Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, California.

Suggested Discussion:

- Briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, scene, mood and atmosphere.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way a work is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?

- How do the formal elements and their arrangement contribute to atmosphere and mood? Are some more obvious than others?
- How has the artist used light? Describe the quality of light – its intensity, contrast, whether it is directional or all over, does it create clear or soft outlines, etc. How does the light contribute to the atmosphere and mood?
- Does this scene appear realistic? Dreamlike? Both? Explain.
- Discuss the subject matter and how it can be understood symbolically (the biblical apple; the transient nature of life).
- Given's image both attracts and repels and is steeped in the rich, dark and symbolic history of *vanitas* paintings from Flanders and the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term originally comes from the opening lines of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." *Vanitas* paintings remind the viewer of the transient state of life and the worthlessness of worldly pleasures and goods. Traditionally, they often included luxury items, abundant fruit and flowers (often out of season or exotic) and food and wine, as well as evidence of decay or interrupted human presence. *Vanitas* paintings reflected a religious age when almost everyone believed that life on earth was merely a preparation for an afterlife. Wine, bread, and grapes were among the religious symbols used.
 - Discuss how *Of the Garden: Malus domestica* reflects the ideas found in *Vanitas* paintings, especially in its use of contrast and the juxtaposition of opposites:
 - **visually** (the pristine, plush velvet vs. the decaying apple; the unmarked areas of the apple vs. the rotting areas, etc.)
 - **symbolically** (the indulgence and pleasure of eating the biblical "forbidden fruit" vs. consequences of eating the fruit; luxury vs. decay; presence vs. absence, etc.)
- Discuss Given's work within the tradition of earlier still life artists who used the genre to explore the concept of *vanitas*. What interests do they share? How are their approaches similar? How are they different?

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610)

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/c/caravagg/02/14basket.html>

Pieter Claesz (1597/98-1660)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Still_Life_with_Turkey_Pie_1627_Pieter_Claesz.jpg

Hans Bollongier (c. 1600-after 1645)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Gillisz._Bollongier#/media/File:Hans_Bollongier_-_Stilleven_met_bloemen.jpg



Margie Livingston
(American, b. 1953)

Block of Blocks with White Pour, Large
2014

Acrylic paint on powder-coated steel stand
Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle,
Washington

Some of the work included in *Stilleven: Contemporary Still Life* may challenge the genre's conventional definition, but share the same formal and expressive ideas found in traditional still life.

Margie Livingston pours, drapes, stacks, and cuts acrylic paint to create her mysterious forms. Each layer is made of about two gallons of acrylic paint, poured into a sheet and then stacked and rolled into a log that is then cut with a bandsaw into two 2x4s. Some are cut further into sections.

At first glance, *Block of Blocks with White Pour, Large* may seem like it doesn't belong in an exhibition of still life, and in fact was not conceived as a still life by the artist. For exhibition curator Jonathan Bucci, however, it embodies certain still-life traits: it is a conscious arrangement of individual objects—in this case small blocks of layered paint—and is suggestive of the *trompe l'oeil* technique that fools the eye into seeing paint as a real object. A stack could be perceived as a book, or perhaps a vessel or a box, and the way they are combined and spaced brings to mind the compositions of still life artist Giorgio Morandi
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/301.2004/>.

About the artist:

Margie Livingston lives in Seattle, Washington. She earned her MFA from the University of Washington and has been the recipient of many awards, including a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Germany, the Betty Bowen Annual Memorial Award, and the Neddy Artist Fellowship, among others.

Suggested Discussion

- Briefly describe what you see here. What is the subject matter of the work?
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?
 - How does your eye move around the composition – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - Look at the work from another viewpoint. Does this change how your eye moves around the composition?
- How does having the work displayed with other still life art influence your interpretation of the work or how you experience it? What associations, if any, do you make?

ART-MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Have students create a still life picture using a variety of simple still life shapes (bottle, apple, pear, bowl, cup, etc.), relative in size and each cut from a different color paper. With white paper as a background, ask them to arrange the “objects” to create a balanced, visually interesting composition. Ask them to think about:
 - Creating balance through shape, size, and color placement.
 - How they will use “space” (the white background).
 - Ways of creating 3-dimensional perspective (overlapping, close vs. far away, the qualities of warm and cool colors, etc.).
- Create a still life arrangement (a vase of flowers on a colorful tablecloth, a variety of objects found in the classroom, objects students have brought from home, etc.).
 - Have students depict the setting or settings, using a variety of media (paint, pencils, craypas, crayons, collage) and from different angles over several days. Ask them to share their work with the class, explaining their process and why they made the choices they did.
- Blind contour drawing is an excellent exercise to help train students to draw what they really see rather than what they think something should look like. Ask students to:
 - Draw an object, looking at the object the whole time. Do not look at the hand as it is drawing. At first drawings may look strange, but with practice students will be better able to faithfully record an image.
 - Choose a starting point on the object where the eye can begin to slowly move around the contour (edge) of the object. As the eye moves, the drawing hand also moves. Always look at the object and not the drawing hand. Do not lift the pencil from the paper.
- Interactive online still life activities:
 - <https://www.nga.gov/kids/zone/stilllife.htm>
 - <http://in-still-life.com/index.php>

LANGUAGE ARTS CONNECTIONS

Ekphrastic Writing Exercise

In simple terms, Ekphrasis (Greek for “description”) is a rhetorical device relating one medium of art to another medium; most commonly referring to a work of prose or poetry that vividly describes a work of art. A well-known example of Ekphrasis from antiquity, attributed to Philostratus the Elder (born c. 190 CE), is a series of *Eikones (Imagines)* which describes 65 paintings, ostensibly in the collection of a wealthy Neopolitan. Two of the works included are still life paintings, one described below:

It is a good thing to gather figs and also not to pass over in silence the figs in this picture. Purple figs dripping with juice are heaped on vine-leaves; and they are depicted with breaks in the skin, some just cracking open to disgorge their honey, some split apart, they are so ripe. Near them lies a branch, not bare, by Zeus, or empty of fruit, but under the shade of its leaves are figs, some still green and “untimely,” some with wrinkled skin and over-ripe, and some about to turn, disclosing the shining juice, while on the tip of the branch a sparrow buries its bill in what seems the very sweetest of the figs. All the ground is strewn with chestnuts, some of which are rubbed free of the burr, others lie quite shut up, and others show the burr breaking at the lines of division. See, too, the pears on pears, apples on apples, both heaps of them and piles of ten, all fragrant and golden. You will say that their redness has not been put on from outside, but has bloomed from within. Here are gifts of the cherry tree, here is fruit in clusters heaped in a basket, and the basket is woven, not from alien twigs, but from branches of the plant itself. And if you look at the vine-sprays woven together and at the clusters hanging from them and how the grapes stand out one by one, you will certainly hymn Dionysus and speak of the vine as “Queenly giver of grapes.” You would say that even the grapes in the painting are good to eat and full of winey juice. And the most charming point of all this is: on a leafy branch is yellow honey already within the comb and ripe to stream forth if the comb is pressed; and on another leaf is cheese new curdled and quivering; and there are bowls of milk not merely white but gleaming, for the cream floating upon it makes it seem to gleam.⁵

⁵ http://www.loebclassics.com/view/philostratus_elder-imagines_book_i_31_xenia/1931/pb_LCL256.125.xml?result=4&rskey=6OD2ZF

Ekphrastic writing enables students to explore art in a deeper way and to respond both emotionally and intellectually to a work. Read all or part of Philostratus's description of the still life. Discuss how his use of language and the details he chooses to share create a vivid picture in the reader's mind. Note how he addresses aesthetics (color, shape, texture, etc.), mood and atmosphere, as well as association and metaphor, and how he engages the reader's senses.

- Have students write their own ekphrastic poem or short descriptive prose inspired by a work in the exhibition. Using a variety of interesting and original language they will create the most vivid pictures in the reader's mind. A good way to start is to choose one or two of the prompts below:
 - Without thinking write down the first five or six words that come to mind.
 - Imagine yourself entering the artwork. Describe the following:
 - what your senses experience: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste
 - the mood/atmosphere
 - your emotions and what in the work contributes to those feelings
 - Describe the colors, shapes, texture, the use of light, space, how the artist has created balance and harmony.
 - Look for and describe the little details as well as the most important ones. Why are they there? What could they mean?
 - What questions would you ask the artist?

For younger audiences:

I see _____ it /they look(s) like _____

I hear _____ it/they sound(s) like _____

I smell _____ it/they smell(s) like _____

I touch _____ it/they feel(s) like _____

I taste _____ it/they taste(s) like _____





Morning Light (detail)



Morning Light (detail)









Block of Blocks with White Pour, Large (detail)



Block of Blocks with White Pour, Large (detail)