

Vanitas, Still-life in Contemporary Icelandic Art
Curator: Hafþór Yngvason

The Latin word *vanitas* means vanity, something that is empty, vain or valueless. In art history, *vanitas* is used for the artistic genre of still-life paintings that are symbolic of the futility of earthly life. It is a sub-category of a larger class of artworks referred to as *memento mori* (literally, “remember that you must die”) and is mostly used for Dutch paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Here we use the term for contemporary paintings and sculptures that count as still-life, although many of them were not originally presented as such. They all function on different levels but by bringing them together under the heading of *vanitas*, the intent is to highlight certain aspects of the artists’ approaches to materials and construction but also to bring attention to the reminder of transience and renewal that is found in most or all of the works. They may or may not include traditional symbols—such as bubbles, butterflies, smoke, skulls, and hourglasses—but, like traditional *vanitas*, these contemporary works of art focus our attention on the finality of our mundane existence. They all address some aspects of our ordinary ways of life, if not directly in their subject matter then in their use of materials. From the plastic containers used by Haraldur Jónsson and Rósa Gísladóttir and the household trash in Áslaug Thorlacius’ installation, to the food stuff used by Dieter Roth and Ólöf Nordal, the materials themselves are nothing if not ordinary. These and other works in the exhibition are well described with a phrase that the art critic Christiane Meyer-Stoll coined in an article about the artist Ólafur Gíslason, where she described his work *Vernissage* as a “*memento mori* of the everyday”. To use an ancient art historical distinction, the form of representation in all of the works in the exhibition counts as ‘rhopography’ (a word used for still-life in ancient Greece) rather than ‘megalography’:

Megalography is the depiction of those things in the world which are great—the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crisis of history. Rhopography (from rhopos, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks.¹

A central piece in the exhibition is a small book by Dieter Roth. Inserted into this otherwise unassuming book is a small plastic bag with a piece of rotting cheese. To call this a still-life is unconventional but not unprecedented. As the art critic John Paoletti has pointed out, Dieter Roth’s rotting food pieces

are hardly “still” in the English and German sense of the word (*Stilleben*), or even, using the French or Italian term for the genre, “dead” (*nature morte*, *natura morta*). Roth brought “dead nature” perversely back to life by inflicting a tradition represented by, for example, Caravaggio’s *Basket of Fruit* (ca. 1596), in which the artfully arranged fruit is beginning to spoil and the grape leaves to wilt. A classic *vanitas*, the painting reminds us that time and its consequences cannot be slowed.²

The theme of *vanitas* takes various forms in the exhibition. Kjarval’s painting of moulding Icelandic flatbread becomes particularly poignant next to Dieter Roth’s rotting cheese. In a sculpture by Ragnhildur Stefánsdóttir, we have another classic still-life, but a different approach. Here we see the organs of the human body arranged like so many fruits in a bowl. This fragile anatomy is exposed and unprotected, as if to remind the viewer of human fragility. The axe in a still-life by Magnús Tómasson is another strong symbol of *vanitas*. Next to the axe, a single boot and a hat indicate the void left by a departed individual. The

holes in Haraldur Jónsson's containers also may be taken as emblems of vainness and in Bragi Ásgeirsson's assemblage, we find striking images of mortality in a head of a doll and other found objects that have cast upon the shore.

The reminder of our finality can also be found in an installation by Ólafur Gíslason. Entitled *Vernissage*, it consists of regular, white-lacquered exhibition pedestals with casual arrangements of wine glasses that were left on top of them at a private opening. With leftover wine, cigarette butts and used chewing gum in some of the glasses, the party is clearly over. The scene is reminiscent of the ancient Roman rhopographic mosaic *The Unswept Room* (*asarotos oikos*), in which remnants of food are seen scattered over the floor after a banquet. The audience is left to enjoy the spoils.

Spessi explores a similar theme in a series of photographs of the remnants of cafeteria meals. All that is left on the trays is the detritus that is headed for the garbage dump. Used paper napkins and toothpicks, broken corn chips, orange peel and empty soda bottles remind the viewer that everything comes to an end. Nothing lasts. But the message here and in all of the works in the exhibition is neither cynical nor pessimistic. The works may direct our thoughts to our way of life and focus our attention on misplaced values and the vanity of material riches, but their overwhelming mood is not disillusionment or repentance. They don't insist on the *futility* of earthly pursuits but on the hope and necessity of care.

This message is clear, for instance, from a sculpture entitled *Corpus dulcis* by Ólöf Nordal. The sculpture consists of cast chocolate fragments of man's anatomy that have been placed in a bowl for guests to enjoy. First shown during Easter (1998), the sculpture offered a Eucharist, of a kind, in the material of Easter eggs. If the *vanitas* theme of mortality is alluded to here, so is the message of resurrection.

The necessity of care is also the subject of a two-piece sculpture by Rósa Gísladóttir. The title, *Verðandi ... Skuld* refers to the names of two norns in Norse mythology. *Verðandi* (literally, "to become") stands for the present and *Skuld* ("debt") for the future. We are reminded that we owe the future, for better or for worse. This is a classic warning of a *memento mori*. Considering the materials of the two pieces and the enormous amounts of plastic containers used in daily life, the debt that we are referred to is environmental in nature. But the title refers us also to the life giving activity of the norns, who live by the tree of life, Askur Yggdrasils, and water it daily. Considering the shapes of the two sculptures—a bottle and a bowl—we are reminded of the simple fundamentals of life and of our responsibility to nurture it for the future.

The complexities of these fundamental truths are brought to attention again in Áslaug Thorlacius' installation. Here we see used containers and packaging materials, carefully sorted and neatly bundled (following Chinese principles of recycling), juxtaposed to watercolours of the comforting disarray of domestic life. In this portrayal of opposites, the stress is not on the eternal conflict between the unfettered and the confined but on the common element of intimacy and care.

And finally, in Spessi's new series of photographs, made specifically for the exhibition, shows household appliances against a white background. This is a standard fare of still-life. There is nothing remarkable about these pots and pans, spoons and ladles, other than that they are dented. These are the weapons of the household revolution. They have toppled a government and now they stand firm as a reminder to any new regime not to lose sight of the unassuming material base of life.

¹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990; bls. 61.

² John Paoletti, "Opus of Excess", *Art in America*, no. 8 (September 2004), pp. 104-110.