

Review of American Still Lifes

American Still Lifes is a traveling museum exhibition organized and produced by David J. Wagner LLC, which opened March 4th 2014 at the R. W. Norton museum of Shreveport, LA, and which will remain on view there until May 25th. It is noteworthy that this is the first “all still life” exhibition offered by the Norton museum. With an emphasis on representational painting – most often realism – the show offers the viewing public a variety of styles and subject matter sure to engage both veteran museum goer and novice alike. Fourteen well-credentialed contemporary artists have been brought together from across the nation to combine forces for the effect of demonstrating their particular interpretations of a still life; in this case, there are sixty five artworks represented. As with any powerful exhibition, this combined effect has a force of impact beyond the sum of the individual parts. As with any powerful exhibition the viewer moves from artwork to artwork confronting an individual’s visual ideas: evoking smiles, surprises, questions, and a variety of feelings – not to mention the masterful paint manipulation.

The subject matter displayed in American Still Lifes is largely familiar yet varied, as in the familiar being reinterpreted, the familiar enlarged, and in fact, reduced to miniature. Thirteen still lifes no more than a few inches in size accompany the exhibition, offering a contrast of scale, and giving the exhibition a well-rounded proportion. These miniature artists are Wes Siegrist, Rachelle Siegrist, and Janet Laird-Lagassée: Wes’ subjects include a stopped clock in “A Captured Moment in Time”, found objects, and fishing lures: Rachelle’s include rag dolls, flowers, figurines, and candies as in “Mmmm... Chocolate”: Janet’s include fruit, an interior, and a collection of wooden things with “Wood Lasts”. These works are diminutive in scale, but not impact.

In sharp contrast to the miniatures, Camille Engle confronts the viewer with enlarged glass marbles, and a zoomed-in view of a flower “Passion” that is six feet wide, so much so that it loses much of its “floral still life” familiarity. Engle also offers a bowl and fruit, a stack of classic children’s books, and painted embossed numbers presented as trompe l’oeil (to fool the eye).

Watercolorists Lauren McCracken and Soon Warren demonstrate a love affair with intricate subjects such as cut crystal decanters, bowls, silver servers, and reflective surfaces in general. It might be mentioned that one must likely be familiar with watercolor to fully appreciate the problematic, unforgiving nature of rendering such subjects so masterfully in that medium. McCracken’s “Crystal and Silver with Magnolia on Linen” and Warren’s “Pink Peony” are grand examples of this. Warren also shows one oil painting “Peeled Orange” which tells of her interest in luminous light.

Brian O’Neill adds elements of landscape into “The Proposal” with Champaign on a beach, otherwise he offers formal – centered – compositions rendered softly in a natural palette, such as “The Weight of Beauty” wherein a flower upon an ornate scale rests atop a brick that’s seems to have suffered under the weight, for it is fragmented.

Charles Gilbert Kapsner utilizes a narrow vertical format to present the viewer with darker, thought provoking subjects of humanity. His images often include a human skull, and are somber in palette, yet

can be tinged with humor as in “Am I Still on Hold” in which a phone ever-rests beside a skull upon a pedestal.

Daniel Mark Cassity’s work has a puzzle-like quality which invites the viewer to interpret the content of his warm, limited palette paintings. In compliment of Kapsner, who presents darker subjects with humorous undertones, Cassity often presents humorous subjects with darker undertones, as in “Unattainable” wherein enraptured suitors vie for a beauty beyond their reach.

Jane Jones presents flowers, fruit, and sweets with a clarity that is crisp and clean. Most often a singular subject – flower in container - is presented against a variety of backgrounds for the sake of pure visual drama. “Cascade” for instance, offers rhythmic descending flowers which deliver a satisfying feeling.

Sharon Lloyd Hourigan is the only participating artist working in the dry media of charcoal. Her informal compositional approach to subjects such as “General Delivery Girdwood Alaska” are rendered with exactitude, giving the viewer the feeling that they have stumbled upon a personal, intimate setting, and a particular moment in time.

David Gray’s paintings “Deer Skull and Drapery” along with “Egg and Feather (I & II)” bring a classic realism to bear with full force; nuanced and subtle – precisely composed - they will prove extremely satisfying to any experienced eye.

Berry Fritz utilizes traditional compositional forms to present vases, flowers, fruit – and even lingerie as in “The Seduction”. Fritz also demonstrates his sense of humor with “kiss and Make-Up” wherein a Hershey’s Kiss is juxtaposed to a standing tube of lipstick.

Loren DiBenedetto offers magnolia blossoms, bird eggs, acorns, and cherries for consideration as subjects. She brings us up close and personal to such objects as with “Cherries on a Blue Table” utilizing clean color and letting the cherry stems add complexity to the composition. One can sense her love of nature.

Along with centered single objects, or items arranged in a row, triangle and pyramid forms are also common compositional devices found in still lifes; this is a “formal” approach, in that the objects seem to say “here I sit, solely for your consideration - I didn’t get here by accident.” This is countered by a fully random approach to the subject in which the viewer is presented with objects that – whether actually random or not – are intended to convey that sense. As with any art form, these choices combine with subject matter, choice of light and palette, style, and overall decision making to put on view not only the artist’s skill, but also the individual’s personality and humanity. American Still Lifes, the exhibition, demonstrates the continuing vitality and thriving nature of this art form – its evolution, while pulling from its past - and presents proudly those who embrace this time honored genre.

Daniel Mark Cassity