

Still Alive: Celia Perrin Sidarous, Peter Morin and the Still Life Genre



by Mark Clintberg

There are: dead things; edible things; floral, feathered and furred things; inanimate things; manufactured and commoditized things. And themes of: wealth and abundance; property; duration and mortality; vanity; temperance; pleasure; hospitality; fetishes; and frivolity. Still life is an ungainly genre. Its subjects are a laundry list, anything that is not animate, anything that does not speak, and things thought to be crafted, discovered, mastered and controlled by human hands. Although it may seem obvious that no human beings are represented in still life, the arrangement and composition of *things* in this genre (not to mention the act of representation itself) show a world in which humans have deeply intervened by moving, crafting and sometimes destroying objects. This genre remains a resonant force influencing art practices today. Celia Perrin Sidarous' photographic series *Les Choses* (2012–) shows judiciously arranged, mass-produced consumables of mysterious provenance. These images are composed in a rhetorically clear fashion, which connects to central tensions in still life Northern European images of the 17th century. Peter Morin's *Team Diversity Bannock and the World's Largest Bannock Attempt* (2005) was a one-day food service performance intended to draw attention to a conflict about resource extraction – and therefore commodity production – on Indigenous territory. The circulation and consumption of commodities, and the rhetorical properties of images, are at the core of these practices, connecting them to the legacy of still life.

Still life is a naturally corrupted genre – a praiseworthy quality – because its exact borders (and the very definitions of animate and inanimate things) are so difficult to control. Perhaps it would be most appropriate to think of still life as a tendency rather than as a genre. It has a tendency to record the stuff of the world, and in recent centuries still life images have often recorded commodities. Today, this predilection to record things, or objects, seems to be at the centre of popular culture. It is evident in an array of social media, like Facebook and Instagram, through which users often post images of commodities, such as so-called unboxing videos, which show newly acquired commodities being gingerly removed from their packaging, and photographs of food taken in restaurants. These actions continue the core pictorial tendencies of still life. The stuff of still life – commodities and their arrangement in space – remains a prominent component of today's daily experience. Images that follow the tendency of still life surround us: in advertisements for luxury goods, in supermarket flyers, in cookbooks, on billboards and in many art practices of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Perhaps, one might counter, such associations are possible simply because still life is a broad category that represents inanimate things, and it is a genre mutable enough to net countless contemporary art practices. In fact, it is still life's mutability that has made it such a durable genre. Yet the genre has been consistently denigrated as the lowest (or nearly the lowest) form of art production.

Many art historians and philosophers have denigrated still life as the last refuge for painters who lacked the skill to succeed in history painting, portraiture or landscape. In his *Discourses on Art* (1769–90), the English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) argued that still life painting was beneath history painting, paintings of biblical narrative and landscape. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) considered still life paintings containing food to be inferior to other forms of painting since they "necessarily excite the appetite [...] which puts an end to any aesthetic contemplation of the object."¹ Charles Sterling points out that the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture's hierarchy of painting's various genres placed "the painting of inanimate objects"² at the bottom (the

Academy was founded in 1648), and art historian Marc Eli Blanchard explains that even as late as the 1970s, some art historical texts argue that artists practised still life only as a "divertissement," an exercise to take their minds away from the preoccupations of real history.³ These are considerable aspersions.

Yet, still life has also been framed as a deeply powerful genre. A 1906 essay by Frederick Wedmore – identified by art historian William H. Gerdts as a turning point – stands out in this respect. Wedmore writes that those who call still life degraded or lowly "forget that in the picture, wise men have the things (their charm at least) and the Art besides the things – a painter's own great way of looking at and rendering them – a humble truth which I commend to the reflection of those who do not quite understand that in Art that which endures and vivifies is the temperament of the artist."⁴

Still life provides the inspired artist a vehicle through which to communicate an aesthetic vision, and the simple properties of the objects themselves, which Wedmore argues is of little consequence in the face of an artist's ability to show them as beautiful and full of "humble truth." The still life painter is able to convince the viewer of the veracity of the image apparently because the image is so simple and uncluttered by human figures, narrative, or history – an assertion worth contesting. Further countering the negative associations listed above, Norman Bryson notes that the vessels represented in still life resonate with the "creaturality" of the viewer because of these objects' resemblance to containers the viewer has encountered and used to prepare and store food.⁵ Elizabeth Honig, among others, has suggested that the objects of still life (such as vessels, weapons, tools, portraits, jewellery and coins) are products of material and visual culture in their own right – not only subjects of still life, objects that have been created, traded, transferred and reused by many actors and agents – and therefore are deeply important because of how they reveal social systems as connected to economies.⁶ She writes: "What seems to have interested Dutch artists about the market was not the visual and alluring qualities of commodities, but the civic space and social environment within which they circulated."⁷ For at least these three reasons, the themes of still life offer a useful and revealing lens with which to understand and analyze a range of contemporary Canadian, Québécois and Indigenous art practices.

Annie Pootoogook's drawings and prints of commodities used in daily life, including *Kijjautik* (*Scissors*), Spring Hurlbut's photographic series *Deuil*, which shows swirling, astral forms made from crematory ashes of human remains. Chih-Chien Wang's recent suite of dozens of photographs of apples, tenderly captured in situations of diffused light. Kim Waldron's *Beautiful Creatures* project, wherein the artist slaughtered animals and served their meat to the public in a meal of largesse. Iain Baxter's molded plastic forms of bottles, jugs and other containers. Because of their subject matter and their handling of commodities, these projects each function in relationship to the legacy of still life. Two countering examples by Celia Perrin Sidarous and Peter Morin, which deal with still life in distinctive ways that extend the arguments of the authors listed above, are worth giving closer attention.

Sidarous' ongoing series of photographs *Les Choses* shows modest, pared-down arrangements of objects. One image shows a room with white walls and a white floor; a circular mirror sits on the floor, face up, next to four bolts of off-white, black, pale blue and hot pink fabric that are bundled together with three strands of plastic. In another photo from the series, set before the camera are: a simple circular mirror, a single issue of the academic journal *The Art Bulletin* and a piece of pink, diaphanous fabric wrapped

around a rectangular form. These are bare images. To some, they might seem to lack drama and narrative; in short, they lack an interesting subject. They are, after all, *just objects*. What importance could they have? Considered within the history of still life, and especially 17th-century Northern European examples, however, these photographs take on complex significance.

In the work of Willem Claesz. Heda, imported luxuries, including textiles, are shown as a testament to Dutch colonial enterprise. An ornamentally patterned rug depicted in one of his paintings acts as a summary – as evidence – of an active commodity network that circulated goods from distant lands to Northern Europe. This narrative of circulation is what Elizabeth Honig highlights. Turning to such Dutch still life examples, Julie Berger Hochstrasser further points out that images of this kind show the goods themselves but reveal nothing of the human cost involved in the creation and sale of commodities. She writes:

→ *Grim social costs, extracted through exploitation both of European poor and of indigenous populations around the globe, are comfortably absent from these lush tables – a disturbing factor that must weigh in against the notion that these pictures are moralizing, for there was much to moralize about that they conveniently ignore.⁸*

Looking at Sidarous' photograph, it is not clear where exactly this fabric and mirror came from, who made them or under what conditions. Despite their very direct presentation in such a clear, uncluttered photograph, the origins or history behind these objects are riddled with a lack of clarity. The “humble truth” of these commodities is obscured rather than revealed by this image. What factory created this vibrant, billowing fabric, and what machine or human hand made it? What payment was given to the labourers who crafted and packaged it? And by what lines of commerce did such a curious, oddly magical-looking object arrive in the artist's studio? This history of the object's fabrication remains out of view, even if the commodity itself is visible in her photographs.

The academic journal in this photograph is in a formal relationship with 17th-century Dutch paintings that show letters, books and leaflets covered in text. But further detail can be drawn from this image in connection to still life. Art historian Hanneke Grootenboer investigates the rhetorical properties – the argumentative structure – of Northern European still life images. She studies two rhetorical modes: first, in sumptuous *prunk* (or “luxurious”) still life images full of nautilus cups, jewels and flowers; and second, in humble breakfast pieces, which are still lifes showing modest meals of herring, bread and beer among other dishes. These rhetorical structures are intended to convince the viewer of the veracity of the images in question. Grootenboer argues that *prunk* images, with their abundance of delicious foods and jewelled vessels, convince the viewer through seduction, while breakfast pieces, in their simplicity and clarity, convince the viewer through persuasion.

Sidarous' photograph is convincing in its simplicity – by which I mean, through its clear exposition and lack of embellishment, it is rhetorically clear. Building on Grootenboer's research, it can be said that its simple composition contributes to the argument that “this image shows the truth.” Academic journals like *The Art Bulletin* have an argumentative structure, one that is generally persuasive rather than seductive in nature, drawing on reason and logic rather than ornamental phrasing. This rhetorical structure, it could be added, is further expressed through the journal cover's strict and austere design. The rhetorical message of *The Art Bulletin* is that “this journal is truthful.” The rhetorical properties of the journal, held within its pages

and out of sight but implied by its presence, further echo the direct, expository nature of Sidarous' photograph. In these ways, this artist's project echoes important aspects of 17th-century Dutch still life images: by reflecting on the ambiguous and uncertain network of commodity exchange and production, and, drawing on Grootenboer's ideas, by offering a pictorially based rhetorical structure.

Morin's *Team Diversity Bannock and the World's Largest Bannock Attempt* is an important performative artwork that also connects with key themes of still life. During this one-day project, the artist and volunteers of diverse backgrounds cooked and gave away servings of a massive bannock – a fried quick bread often associated with North American Indigenous communities – to attract media attention to protests against resource extraction from Indigenous territory in northern British Columbia. As the title suggests, Morin promoted the event as a Guinness Book of World Records attempt. A total of 10 massive pieces of five-foot long and two-foot wide bannock were crafted during the project. The artist used the resulting media attention to this spectacle as an opportunity to speak out publicly concerning a political impasse in Telegraph Creek, British Columbia. The conflict was concentrated on the traditional territory of the Indigenous Tahltan Nation, a community in which Morin remains an active member, although he now lives in Brandon, Manitoba. As Morin explains,

The traditional territory of the Tahltan Nation is the largest in BC. Up until this point they've had resource extraction going on in the territory for over 30 years, over 50 years if you include big game hunters coming in for sport. They had a chief who was signing all these exploratory deals with mining companies... so [the elders] decided to occupy [the band office]... I knew that if I made the world's largest bannock I would get some media coverage and I would be able to talk about what the elders were doing.⁹

Morin created this artwork in response to a controversy surrounding the extraction of resources – to be transformed into commodities – from Indigenous territory. Before Morin presented his project, the Tahltan Central Council, which manages the affairs of the First Nation, had been in negotiations with Fortune Minerals to drill at the Mount Klappan coalfields, and NovaGold Resources, which hoped to drill at nearby Galore Creek.¹⁰ Both of these mine sites are on Tahltan Nation land. A group of elders disagreed with Chief P. Jerry Asp's position on negotiations with NovaGold and held a months-long sit-in at the band office in protest. Curator Lisa Myers further describes the details of this conflict in Telegraph Creek. She writes:

demanding a meeting with their chief, the Tahltan Elders demonstrated for over eight months contesting controversial band council decisions made without community consultation or environmental assessments for the development of resource extraction ventures.¹¹

Myers goes on to explain that a central issue at stake for local communities in regards to these plans for resource extraction was the impact such acts would have on the harvesting of traditional foods from the local environment.

Bannock, popularly considered a traditional food of First Nations peoples, was used in this artwork as a spark for a media event. In the publication *Bannockology*, compiled and edited by the artist after this banquet, bannock is described as “the ubiquitous bread that is a part of every First Nations social event, private or public.”¹² Beyond this broad appeal of bannock, Morin's public food service event appeals to the very “creaturality” that Bryson iden-



Celia Perrin Sidarous, *The Art Bulletin I*, 2012,
ink jet print on matte paper, 61 x 73.5 cm.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PARISIAN LAUNDRY, MONTREAL



Peter Morin, still from *Team Diversity, World's Largest Bannock Attempt*, 2005, performance.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

tifies. The bounty, the largesse of this offering of food is a very seductive lure for participants, who may simply be drawn to the project because they are hungry or because it appeals to their sense of taste. Or they may be pulled in by the theatrical event heralded by the work's title: the world's largest bannock. Or they may be drawn in by its politics. Bannock, which is generally made domestically and from scratch, may be described as the extreme opposite of one archetypal food commodity: the sliced white bread, such as Wonderbread, available in supermarket chains. All this to say that bannock may seem to be an entirely un-commoditized foodstuff. But Morin used bannock as a point of leverage for a discussion about the creation and circulation of commodities – in this case, gold, silver and copper, but also food – which are major subjects of still life imagery. Morin's piece is a strong example of performative still life: a still life environment that is entered into and experienced by visitors through gustation. Drawing on Honig's perspective, which is that Northern European still life images focus on economic and social settings for commodities, it becomes clear that Morin's project is compelling because of how it draws out social relations connected to an economic situation, which is linked to the extraction of resources from Indigenous territories. For Morin, the display of commodities is no simple diversion from important events, but rather the lynchpin for revealing the contours of political events. Countering Schopenhauer's worries about still life, in *Team Diversity*, bannock's ability to "excite the appetite" is what makes it such a valuable rallying point for a political discussion.

Both of these art projects by Sidarous and Morin are connected to the legacy of still life and demonstrate the ongoing importance of this genre. Many artists are attempting to work through the complex circulation of commodities as well as the rhetorical properties of images. This may be connected to the Marxian puzzle of the commodity. Marx writes: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."¹³ Although the histories of the

commodities profiled in these practices remain obscured, these projects make it clear that to this day, the slippery, difficult-to-define, ambiguous category of the commodity continues to haunt the still life genre.

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Endnotes

- 1 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969); Vol. 1, 208.
- 2 Charles Sterling, Still life painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century (Harper & Row, 1981), 63.
- 3 Marc Eli Blanchard, "On Still Life," Yale French Studies 61 (1981): 276. He cites two volumes on the subject of *nature morte*: *Le Grand Siècle de la nature morte en France* (1974) and *La vie silencieuse en France* (1976) which primarily tell the story of painters' lives rather than that of the paintings themselves, and veer away from any analysis of the artworks.
- 4 William H. Gerdts, 25. See Frederick Wedmore, *Whistler and Others*, 216.
- 5 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13–14.
- 6 Elizabeth Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998)
- 7 Elizabeth Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life," in *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*. (No. 34, Autumn 1998), 172
- 8 Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 240.
- 9 From a phone interview conducted between the author and Morin, October 2012.
- 10 Tyler Allan McCreary, "Struggles of the Tahltan Nation," *Canadian Dimension*. November 1, 2005. <http://canadiandimension.com/articles/1889/>. Site accessed March 27, 2013. Monte Paulsen, "A Gentle Revolution," *The Walrus*. December/January 2006. Site accessed March 27, 2013. This political conflict continued well beyond the date of Morin's event. In September 2005, the RCMP arrested several protesters blocking Fortune Minerals from entering the coalfield site. Paulsen reveals that Galore Creek holds an "estimated 13 million ounces of gold, 156 million ounces of silver, and 12 billion pounds of copper."
- 11 Lisa Myers, "Serving it Up: Recipes, Art, and Indigenous Perspectives," *Senses & Society: Sensory Aesthetics*, Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, eds. Vol. 7, Issue 2 (July 2012): 185.
- 12 Peter Morin, *Bannockology* (2009), listed on the Open Space "Publications" page. <http://www.openspace.ca/web/publications.php>. Site accessed January 25, 2013.
- 13 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. (London: Penguin Books, 1990): 163.