
THE SERENITY OF THE ABSENCE OF PEOPLE

ZEUXIS: AN ASSOCIATION OF STILL LIFE PAINTERS TABLETOP ARENAS

On view at the Colby College Museum of Art in
Waterville, Maine
From March 28 to June 13, 2004

Reviewed by Laurie Meunier Graves

At first glance, still life painting seems to be modest to a fault. There are no grand themes, no wild imaginings, no stunning vistas. Instead, the focus is usually on inanimate objects, grouped together and often from everyday life. But first glances can be deceiving. Still lifes, in their own quiet manner, present familiar things in an ordered way that is far from natural. This juxtaposition of forced order with mundane items brings a focus and attention to objects that we normally wouldn't notice. In addition, the forced order reminds us of the role of the artist, the creator, often hidden in showier works of art. Not only do we have the eye of the artist but also the arranging hand.

At Colby College in Waterville, Maine, there is a first-rate exhibition called *Tabletop Arenas* that features still life paintings, and it's a beautiful example of how even within the tight parameters of this genre, there still can be a great variety of style, technique, and subject. *Tabletop Arenas*, a traveling exhibition comprising over thirty artists, was put together by Zeuxis, an association of still life painters based in New York. Best of all, *Tabletop* helps us see how a focus on order and inanimate objects can produce an almost Zenlike serenity and how the absence of humans only heightens the effect. Although the art is vivid and engaging, it is also soothing, a perfect example of how order, in the right proportion, is necessary. (The same, of course, is true of disorder.) To continue with the Zen association—this time with the notion of paradox—even the still lifes that seem disordered are ordered.

Langdon Quin's *Still Life with Kitchen Glove* is one of my favorite paintings in this show, and it illustrates the quirky possibilities of this genre while at the same time maintaining the aforementioned serenity. A bright aqua and yellow glove hangs from a rack. It is surrounded by cleanup items—paper towels, bottles of soap or cleaner, and a pink towel. We use these items every day, over and over, with scarcely a thought. But the glove, as bright as a beacon, draws us in to take a closer look, to reconsider them. Yes, they are humble, but they have their place and, in an odd way, their own kind of beauty.

On the other hand, Carmela Kolman's *Orange Alert #2* gets to the essence of still life. The painting could not be more simple—oranges in a blue and white bowl. But what oranges! They seem to glow from within and are so completely orange that the viewer's mouth nearly puckers in anticipation of eating the sweet fruit.

Lucy Barber's *Raven* takes a completely different approach. It is a still life that not only has an archetypal look but also features an animate object—a raven, of course, perched on the edge of what looks like a yellow table. This still life's order seems to come primarily from the imagination. Holding a paintbrush in its beak, the raven appears to be contemplating a small ball nestled against a white shell. Is the raven getting ready to paint or is it bringing the brush to the artist? We will never know.

Phyllis Floyd's *Blue* is another painting that tweaks the rules while at the same time staying within the boundaries of still life. As its title suggests, this is a painting that is lit from behind with something that is blue. (A cloth? Cardboard? Paper?) A gleaming silver pitcher, adding its own metallic glow, sits next to a brown paper bag with handles. A piece of white paper leans against the pitcher, and another piece of white paper is tucked inside the pitcher. This painting, like the other paintings in this exhibit, seems to be devoid of people. But what's that caught in the reflection of the pitcher? Could it be a person? Could it be the artist? Maybe so, but the figure is small enough and abstract enough so that it doesn't interfere with the still life and instead feels like a sly little joke.

After I was done looking at the wonderful textures and colors of the pictures in this terrific exhibition, I sat down on a bench in one of the rooms just to be with the paintings. The museum was quiet. There were few patrons, and the guard, reading a book, was in the next room. From where I was sitting, I could see the raven, the pitcher, and the oranges. Other still lifes, with other objects—cabbages, bottles, roses, and watermelon—caught my attention. The longer I sat, surrounded by the serene still lifes, the more I realized what a gift their serenity was. It was almost as though they were secular icons, a cool touch in this overheated world of politics, wars, and terrorism. Art, of course, is not obliged to be tranquil or beautiful or ugly or anything else. However, to refuse the gift of serenity is a foolhardy notion at best, and I stayed on that bench for a long time, reluctant to leave the quiet particularity, the "whatness" of the still lifes.