

# Stilled Lives

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Personal experience has often been the catalyst for Marsha Kennedy's artistic ideas and practice, which is then further informed by research and social concerns. The presentation of birds, which first appeared in her work in reference to her father shortly after his death, resurfaced again, in the series *Nostos*

*Algos*, followed by a new body of paintings and mixed media works, titled *Stilled Lives*.<sup>i</sup> The catalyst for this work was her son's discovery of a dead bird on a neighbourhood outing, which first inspired the series *Nostos Algos*. With her young son, neighbourhood walks became acts of rediscovery for Kennedy, where "she learned to appreciate the strength and beauty of weeds pushing up through the cracks in the concrete. She became curious about why more value was placed on some plants than others and why it seemed morally acceptable to poison the less desirable plants with chemicals. Finding the bird was her son's first encounter with death. It was also the pivotal event that heightened her awareness of the extent to which urban dwellers are alienated from nature and brought together the ideas examined in *Stilled Lives*."

Referencing traditional *Vanitas* still-life painting<sup>iii</sup>, the *Stilled Lives* series presents images of dead birds arranged on domestic table settings alongside china, cutlery and table linens. Presented as diptychs and triptychs, the works offer layered images, of paintings of birds and their shadows overlaid with etched drawings of weeds on glass. Accompanying the paintings are etched glass labels or panels, engraved with the scientific names of the birds and plants, as well as anthropomorphized songs of the depicted birds. In the depictions of domestic, Victorian table settings and the etched drawings of noxious weeds introduced to Saskatchewan, these works address how the province's natural environments have been physically altered by European settlement through agriculture, industry and the introduction of chemicals. These images acknowledge European domestication of the land and nature, speaking to the impact of settler history on Indigenous peoples, as well as animal and plant species, especially migratory birds. The following is an excerpt from Kennedy's statement on this series, written in 1999 for the exhibition *Stilled Lives* at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, curated by Lee-Ann Martin:

*All the birds I've painted are dead birds that have fallen prey to the dangers imposed by human living such as windowpanes, domestic cats, cars and electric wires. Most of these birds fell victim as they passed through Regina during the spring or fall migration. These stilled and delicate bodies had once flown to far and incredible places.*

*The paintings in this series are symbolic of many current issues that cause me concern and relate to our changing natural environment brought on by the activities of humanity. I envisioned the first European settlers arriving on the vast prairies with attitudes towards nature that were contrary to the beliefs and values of Indigenous peoples. The songs of birds returning in the spring must have been a powerful symbol of hope for the early settlers struggling to survive our harsh prairie winters. The anthropomorphized songs of the birds, engraved on glass panels, give voice to the stilled lives.*

*The table becomes a metaphor for the privatized space of social and cultural rituals, begging an unmediated communion with nature through the stilled bodies of the silent birds. The bodies appear as aesthetic objects, fine and delicate as the china and linen, yet the reality of the dead flesh and the ultimate terror of nature interrupts the safe and sanitized place of the table. China and linen are frequently passed down from generation to generation as gifts of family inheritance which connect us to the past and future generations, and are objects of endearment which may identify a family's cultural and economic status. My subject is meant to stir the viewer from the routine and mundane habits of the table of consumerism to a reawakening of a wider vision.*

*The plants in this series have been identified as noxious weeds under The Noxious Weeds Act of Saskatchewan and, by law, must be controlled on all private and public land. Almost all noxious weeds originated from Europe or Eurasia and thrive in the Americas without their natural inhibitors. The breaking up of natural habitats with the plow allowed these plants to take over and thus began the chemical war between weeds and agricultural producers. Text engraved on the glass of five paintings name habitats where noxious weeds can be found.*

*The museum-like text panels associated with each "setting" reference the authority of western science and recall the period in history when our European ancestors came to explore, name and claim this continent. I began to see a pattern of movement that can be traced by the history of these stilled lives. The early east-west movements of immigrants, cargo, seeds, domestic livestock and fowl is set against the north-south movement of the migratory birds. In the well-known book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson draws an indisputable connection between domestic, industrial and agricultural chemicals and the wide decline of North American songbirds.*

Marsha Kennedy

<sup>i</sup>This series of works toured throughout Saskatchewan and western Canada, being exhibited in two solo exhibitions; *Images From the Edge*, which was presented at the Art Gallery of Swift Current (1997) and The Little Gallery in Prince Albert, SK (1999), and *Stilled Lives*, which was presented at the MacKenzie Art Gallery (1999), Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery (2000), Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba in Brandon, MB (2000) and the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery in Medicine Hat, AB (2001).

<sup>iii</sup>Chris Reid, *Stilled Lives* (Brandon: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2000), exhibition catalogue.

<sup>iv</sup>Primarily known as a popular Dutch art genre of the Baroque period (c.1585-1730), *Vanitas* is closely associated with Memento Mori painting (Latin for 'remember you must die'). Populated by symbolic imagery, *Vanitas* paintings evoke a stark truth that we will die, that everything is impermanent, and therefore we should give thought to our pursuits and daily practices. The still-life, *Vanitas*, tells us of the futility of our earthly pursuits in the face of our mortal existence. Sourced from The Collector, *Vanitas: Dutch Master Paintings Explained*, <https://www.thecollector.com/vanitas-dutch-master-paintings/>, accessed August 24, 2020.