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## A CORNUCOPIA OF CONTEMPORARY STILL LIFE

BY Rachel Wolff (http://www.artnews.com/author/rachel\_wolff/) POSTED 02/10/14 5:00 AM

Artists are devising high-tech, high-concept updates to the traditional *nature morte*

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Last fall, the British artist [Mat Collishaw](http://www.matcollishaw.com/) (<http://www.matcollishaw.com/>) showed a series of lushly lit color photographs at Miami's [Bass Museum of Art](http://www.bassmuseum.org/art/mat-collishaw/) (<http://www.bassmuseum.org/art/mat-collishaw/>). One of them featured a cornucopia of contemporary indulgence: grilled cheese sandwiches cut into triangular wedges are piled high on a silver platter, waxy lumps of cheese seeping through their toasted crusts. A gravy boat full of ketchup is at left, two hardboiled eggs rest in a bowl at right, frosting-drenched cinnamon buns are in the shadows behind, and French fries spill out onto the table.

The piece, from 2011, is titled *Garry Miller. Miller* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/06/us/a-record-for-executions.html>) was a convicted rapist and murderer who was executed by lethal injection on December 5, 2000, in Huntsville, Texas. This grease-slicked and deftly illuminated display is a re-creation of his last meal.

Other images in the series, titled “Last Meal on Death Row, Texas,” similarly spotlight turkey sandwiches (*Bernard Amos*), leafy greens and ripe tomatoes (*Chester Wicker*), a T-bone steak and boiled shrimp (*Martin Vega*), Frosted Flakes and a pint of milk (*Jeffrey Barney*), and a Communion wafer and a glass of wine (*Jonathan Nobles*). It's indulgence—literal and spiritual—in the face of death, on the brink of death, and as a stand-in for the dead man himself, each the visual equivalent of a last gasp for air.

Coincidentally, state government officials [ended the “last meals” practice](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2011/09/texas-ends-death-row-inmates-final-meals.html) (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2011/09/texas-ends-death-row-inmates-final-meals.html>) in Texas in 2011, the same year in which Collishaw, who is represented by Blain|Southern in London and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York, completed the series.



Matthew Benedict includes a skull, a traditional symbol of *vanitas*, in his mixed-media *Apocalyptic Still Life*, 2012, which combines seashells with an obsolete calculator and typewriter.

JOERG LOHSE/©MATTHEW BENEDICT/COURTESY ALEXANDER AND BONIN, NEW YORK

The series is a clever take on the morbid, often *vanitas*-laden visual syntax typical of [European still-life painting](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nstl/hd_nstl.htm) ([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nstl/hd\\_nstl.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nstl/hd_nstl.htm)) from the 16th and 17th centuries—a coded vocabulary that rendered fresh flowers, ripe fruit, raw meat, shucked oysters, skulls, feathers, shells, and other exotic curios as emblems of death. And it's a motif that, in the 21st century, has undergone a resurgence: Collishaw is one of a rash of artists using the look and language of the *nature morte* to express anxieties about our modern age, from [Matthew Benedict](http://www.alexanderandbonin.com/artist/matthew-benedict/biography) (<http://www.alexanderandbonin.com/artist/matthew-benedict/biography>)'s *Apocalyptic Still Life* of now-antiquated technology to [Javier Pérez](http://javierperez.es/) (<http://javierperez.es/>)'s smashed Murano-glass chandelier being picked at by crows to [Jessica Jackson Hutchins](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/jackson_hutchins.htm?section_name=shape_of_things) ([http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/jackson\\_hutchins.htm?section\\_name=shape\\_of\\_things](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/jackson_hutchins.htm?section_name=shape_of_things))'s sculptural vignettes in which everyday objects are obstructed by and encased within hulking plaster forms as if they were relics of a modern-day Pompeii. (A large selection of Jackson Hutchins's work plays prominently in “The Genres: Still Life,” on view at the [Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum](http://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibitions/genres-still-life-featuring-jessica-jackson-hutchins) (<http://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibitions/genres-still-life-featuring-jessica-jackson-hutchins>) at Michigan State University through March 16.)

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“The issues of death and time and consumption are key to the genre,” says Paul Martineau, associate curator of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. “And they’re all issues that remain central to us today, maybe even more so because of the frenetic activity of modern life”—and the issues of waste, haste, war, and globalization embedded therein.

Michael Petry (<http://www.michaelpetry.net/>), a London-based artist and curator and the author of the recent *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvent the Still-Life Tradition* ([http://www.thamesandbudson.com/Nature\\_Morte/9780500239063](http://www.thamesandbudson.com/Nature_Morte/9780500239063)) (Thames & Hudson), suggests that this could be a distinctly post-September 11 condition: “Nonstop war within the last ten years and the ongoing threat of terrorism has brought the notion that death actually walks with us.”

The fragility of life is a potent subcategory within this wider trend. It’s an idea that traditional still-life painters expressed centuries ago through blossoms on the verge of maturity and the onset of decay—and one that contemporary artists are eager to heighten and extend. The Finnish artist Saara Ekström (<http://www.saaraekstrom.com/>), who exhibits at Gallery Kalhama & Piippo in Helsinki, has long worked within the still-life genre. Her 2011 “Limbus (<http://www.saaraekstrom.com/exhibitions/limbus/index.html>)” series, for instance, includes black-and-white photographs of flowers scattered on the ground among human hair, leaves, and twigs. The images were captured in a style akin to crime-scene photography, calling attention to the way the flowers are cut down in their prime and somberly broadening their associations with mortality.

Ekström also uses time-lapse photography to riff on the still life’s age-old connection with death and decay. In *Clouded Yellow Bud* ([http://www.saaraekstrom.com/exhibitions/nothing\\_elegant/nothing\\_elegant6.html](http://www.saaraekstrom.com/exhibitions/nothing_elegant/nothing_elegant6.html)) (2008), she fixed her camera on an overflowing cup of tea as mold gradually formed on its surface and saucer; in *Domestic Nature Morte* ([http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/domestic-nature-morte\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/domestic-nature-morte_en/)) (2004), viewers watch as plump ripe tomatoes shrivel and die.

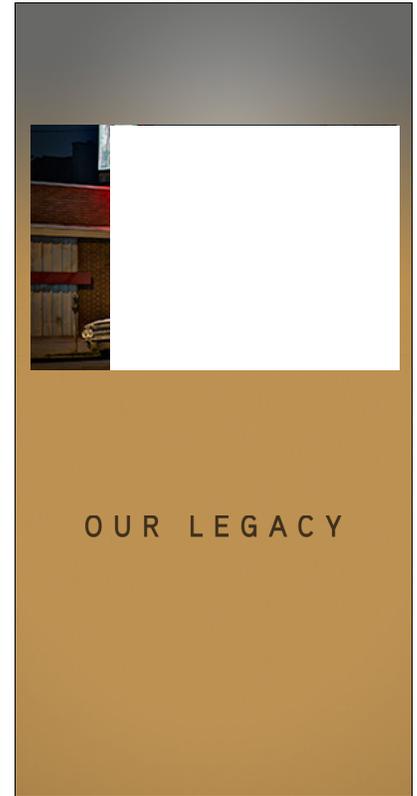
The Israeli photographer and video artist Ori Gersht (<http://crggallery.com/artists/ori-gersht/>) is also well known for his singular take on our inherent fragility and the historical still life more generally. His work (shown in the aptly titled “History Repeating,” Gersht’s 2012 survey (<http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/ori-gersht>) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) includes the “Blow Up



Ori Gersht emphasizes the destruction at the heart of the still life genre in exploding still lifes such as *Time After Time: Untitled 8*, 2007.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CRG GALLERY, NEW YORK

(<http://www.mummerschnelle.com/pages/oriselector.htm>)” series: large-scale prints of floral arrangements—reminiscent of works by the 19th-century still-life painter Henri Fantin-Latour (<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/ignace-henri-theodore-fantin-latour>)—captured midexplosion, with angular shards of stems and petals dotting the pictorial space (an effect achieved by freezing the arrangement in liquid nitrogen predetonation). Video works such as Big Bang (<http://vimeo.com/23638593>) (2006) document the explosion itself in slow motion and remarkable high definition, propelling organic shards throughout the largely black frame. They tumble and dissipate like orbital debris.




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TOP POSTS



Gersht tackled a different still-life motif in *Pomegranate* (<http://vimeo.com/23639516>) (2006), which mimics Juan Sánchez Cotán's composition for *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* (<http://www.sdmart.org/art/quince-cabbage-melon-and-cucumber>) (ca. 1602), albeit with different fruit. In this video work—also filmed at an exceedingly high frame rate to render the action in slow motion—a bullet zips toward a dangling pomegranate, slicing the fruit in half. It eerily mirrors human flesh as its seeds and bloodred juice slowly spill out.

“In many of my works, there is an act of destruction, which for me is kind of challenging the very notion of the still life because traditionally there is an eternal preservation,” says Gersht, who is represented by [CRG](http://crggalleries.com/) (<http://crggalleries.com/>) in New York. “At the same time, in the still photographs I’m freezing a moment and preserving it as eternal.” A moment that refers to the flower’s short, precarious life cycle; a moment that is suggestive of mortality and the passage of time.

“It’s a process where the act of destruction is becoming, in the work, the moment of creation,” Gersht continues. “I think that has a relationship to the ethos of still life and preserving the ephemeral.”

Gersht has also been interested in exploring how technology impacts the way we visualize the world—how it’s “constantly shifting our perception of reality” and how it can allow us to experience that which was previously imperceptible to the human eye (a bullet midflight, for example, or a floral arrangement midexplosion), or, as he terms it, “the hyperreal.”

In a more literal approach, British artists [Rob and Nick Carter](http://www.robandnick.com/new/) (<http://www.robandnick.com/new/>) collaborated with Moving Picture Company—the visual-effects studio behind such films as *Life of Pi*—to render Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder’s *Vase with Flowers in a Window* (<http://www.mauritshuis.nl/index.aspx?FilterId=988&ChapterId=2346&ContentId=17511>) (ca. 1618) as an entirely digital image that gradually shifts over a three-hour time span as the sun sets and the flower’s petals wilt. Titled *Transforming Still Life Painting* (2012), [the piece](http://www.moving-picture.com/work/transforming-still-life-painting) (<http://www.moving-picture.com/work/transforming-still-life-painting>) was shown in conjunction with the exhibition “Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painting from the Mauritshuis,” [recently on view](http://www.frick.org/exhibitions/past/2013/mauritshuis) (<http://www.frick.org/exhibitions/past/2013/mauritshuis>) at the Frick Collection in New York.

Slowness is a critical element of the Carters’ recent work. In *Transforming Vanitas Painting* (<http://www.robandnick.com/new/RN915-transforming-vanitas-painting>) (2012–13), computer animation makes the dead frog in Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger’s *Dead Frog with Flies* ([http://www.fondationcustodia.fr/universintime/22\\_boschaert\\_182.cfm](http://www.fondationcustodia.fr/ununiversintime/22_boschaert_182.cfm)) (ca. 1630) slowly rot and disintegrate during the three-hour duration of the piece. The impetus for the work stemmed from the assertion that museumgoers spend an average of only six seconds looking at a work of art.

These pieces utilize technology as a means of slowing viewers down, says [Kate Bryan](http://www.faslondon.com/fine_art_society_contemporary/about_us.html) ([http://www.faslondon.com/fine\\_art\\_society\\_contemporary/about\\_us.html](http://www.faslondon.com/fine_art_society_contemporary/about_us.html)), head of contemporary art at the Fine Art Society in London, which hosted [a survey](http://www.faslondon.com/fine_art_society_contemporary/exhibitions/archive/2013/transforming.html) ([http://www.faslondon.com/fine\\_art\\_society\\_contemporary/exhibitions/archive/2013/transforming.html](http://www.faslondon.com/fine_art_society_contemporary/exhibitions/archive/2013/transforming.html)) of the Carters’ work last year. The Carters, Bryan adds, are trying to “turn our attention back and get us to look again”—not just at their work but at what surrounds us as well.

For the Hudson Valley–based photographer [Sharon Core](http://www.yanceyrichardson.com/artists/sharon-core/) (<http://www.yanceyrichardson.com/artists/sharon-core/>), who exhibits with Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York, the element of slowness is inherent in the lengthy and organic process that lies behind her still-life-centric work. Like many of her colleagues who are directly engaging the genre, Core looks to historical still-life painting to drive her contemporary compositions, citing works by artists ranging from 16th-century masters such as Bosschaert and Jan Brueghel the Elder to later practitioners such as Fantin-Latour and Raphaëlle Peale. [The ongoing series](http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_yanceyrichardson_com/Core_Flowers_Oct_2011.pdf) ([http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www\\_yanceyrichardson\\_com/Core\\_Flowers\\_Oct\\_2011.pdf](http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_yanceyrichardson_com/Core_Flowers_Oct_2011.pdf)) titled “1606–1907” comprises Core’s efforts to re-create—and reinvigorate—their work through photography.




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For her series “1606–1907,” Sharon Core grows heirloom flowers and photographs them in careful arrangements, re-creating still-life paintings from a variety of eras. *1606*, 2011, calls to mind Dutch masters.

©SHARON CORE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND YANCEY RICHARDSON, NEW YORK

Core takes on the arduous task of sourcing heirloom seeds and bulbs to cultivate the original species of fruits, vegetables, and flowers that appear in the earlier artists’ work and growing them herself. Unlike painting, “photography is seen as a quick medium,” Core says. “But if I am trying to imitate something from the past, that means I have to create the past in the present.” And that takes time.

“I like that kind of subversion,” Core adds. “The original works were often painstakingly painted. I’m mirroring that in a way through my activities.” The Carters, too, for that matter: their digital renderings were more than three years in the making.

“I’m always impressed by the fact that still life has been used throughout history as both a conventional and an experimental mode of visual inquiry,” says Martineau, who curated a [historical survey](#)

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([http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/focus\\_still\\_life/](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/focus_still_life/)) of still-life photography at the Getty in 2010. “It also seems to be something photographers retreat to when there’s a lot of change in the artistic environment.”

For instance, he adds, “I think the death of chemical photography has caused artists to retreat to something that they know, almost like standing on solid ground. It allows you to be more creative and experimental. And I think that’s part of the reason why still life in the past few years has become a more popular genre.”

There’s also a certain element of humility that permeates contemporary still-life photography, particularly in our postrecession age. The Dutch photographer [Krista van der Niet](#) (<http://www.kristavanderniet.nl/>)—whose work was included in a [touring survey](#) (<http://www.mamm-mdf.ru/en/exhibitions/contemporary-dutch-photography/>) of contemporary Dutch still-life photography co-organized by the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow and the Moscow House of Photography—acknowledges this element of her work and that of her colleagues as well.

“People want to work in the studio, to reevaluate the simple things around us and to reappraise these things,” says van der Niet, who shows with Liefhertje en De Grote Witte Reus in the Hague. Much of van der Niet’s work is predicated on visual mash-ups of natural and man-made objects. In [Fruit](#) (<http://www.kristavanderniet.nl/portfolio/work/#18>) (2009), a semitransparent arrangement of store-bought produce is encased in a nude stocking. The resulting filmlike surface is suggestive of decay or even—from an American standpoint—the pesticides that coat many of our mass-farmed fruits and vegetables.

Indeed, today’s food culture—its production, its branding, and its scarceness in certain communities throughout the world—is often inseparable from its handling in contemporary art. In [Kerstmis](#) (<http://www.kristavanderniet.nl/portfolio/work/#15>) (2011), van der Niet placed the head and torso of a dead rabbit strung up by its hind legs on a cluster of red Christmas tree ornaments; in [an untitled work](#) (<http://www.kristavanderniet.nl/portfolio/work/#13>) from 2012, she left a cantaloupe wedge partially covered in cling wrap; and in [a painterly and near-monochromatic arrangement](#) (<http://www.kristavanderniet.nl/portfolio/work/#19>) (also untitled), she positioned eggplants and avocados around a small mound of blackberries resting in the plastic container in which they came.

Equally nuanced are [Christopher Williams](http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/christopher-williams/biography/) (<http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/christopher-williams/biography/>)’s photographs of plump red apples and perfectly bisected chocolate-covered wafers, all styled and photographed by commercial professionals—crisp would-be branded images minus the brand and a shrewd commentary on the ways in which foodstuff is pictured, packaged, and sold. Williams exhibits with David Zwirner Gallery in New York and London and [Galerie Gisela Capitain](http://www.galeriecapitain.de/) (<http://www.galeriecapitain.de/>) in Cologne. [A midcareer retrospective](http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/christopher-williams-production-line-happiness) (<http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/christopher-williams-production-line-happiness>) of his work is on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through May 18; it will travel to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in August.

The Chicago-based photographer [Laura Letinsky](http://lauraletinsky.com/) (<http://lauraletinsky.com/>), who, like Core, is represented by contemporary-photography dealer Yancey Richardson, was attracted to working with still life because she saw it “as a way of engaging with my culture, my society.” But rather than thinking of the historical still life, which she calls a kind of “cornucopia or delighting of the senses,” Letinsky wanted to explore “the more meager path, an inclination to be happy with what you have. It all made me want to look at the still life in the moment after things are consumed—thinking about this ‘post’ moment, about hunger, about desire and want and need.”

In Letinsky’s still-life work (which was rounded up in [a solo exhibition](http://www.denverartmuseum.org/exhibitions/laura-letinsky) (<http://www.denverartmuseum.org/exhibitions/laura-letinsky>) at the Denver Art Museum last year), a lone plastic cup is perched on a white-linen-covered table with a spoon resting on its lip and streaky remnants of chocolate pudding coating its sides. In a 2008 series called “The Dog and the Wolf,” Letinsky pictured orange peels, oyster shells, butchered fish, shriveled flowers, half-eaten birthday cakes, and deflated balloons as they might have been left after a party. Like her Flemish predecessors, Letinsky is hinting at impermanence, the passing of time, and, inevitably, the end of everything. But she is also beckoning us to enjoy life—she is beckoning us to dig in.



Emma Bennett, *A Weightless Quiet*, 2013. Bennett isolates details from 17th-century Dutch and Italian still lifes, suspending them against a black background.

COURTESY CHARLIE SMITH LONDON

In addition to the many photographers and video artists engaging with the genre, it should be noted that still life remains a potent tool for painters as well. Painters have been keen to use the genre to comment on life and art, past and present, abundance and waste. Spanish artist [Jorge Diezma](http://www.jorgediezma.com/) (<http://www.jorgediezma.com/>), for one, who exhibits with [Galería Alegría](http://www.galeriaalegria.es/eng/artistas.php) (<http://www.galeriaalegria.es/eng/artistas.php>) in Barcelona and Madrid, coats outsize canvases with almost-photorealist renderings of animal carcasses and exotic heirlooms, taking viewers inside his intricate spreads of decadence and death. And [Emma Bennett](http://www.emmabennett.info/) (<http://www.emmabennett.info/>), a London-based painter who is represented by Charlie Smith, crops and paints portions of Dutch masterworks amid an all-black void. The resulting images seem suspended in midair, untethered to any sort of domain and reminding the viewer that our worldly possessions are just as impermanent as we are—that all this will eventually fade.

Rachel Wolff is an art writer, editor, and film producer based in Brooklyn.

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