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#### Recommended Citation

Kalman, Rachel, "The Impossible Tasks" (2019). *Graduate School of Art Theses*. ETD 130. <https://doi.org/10.7936/we0p-a631>.

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*The Impossible Tasks*

by  
Rachel Kalman

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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*Abstract*

In this thesis I unpack the still life genre and its relation to my painting practice, examining the ways in which banal objects project influence and disrupt the notion of a linear, narrative history. Through the contextual lenses of close observation, propagandistic agendas, and the transgressive history of pattern, I explore the inherent contradiction contained within still life painting; working to balance an empathic respect for objects, as such, with my deeply seated desire to metaphorically interpret and empower visual imagery. I am fascinated by the impossible tasks we ask of weak, inanimate, decorative objects and work to generate still lifes of still lifes that subvert their own historical, moralistic authority; confounding the relationship between kitsch and art, banality and power.

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*Introduction*

Still life painting is a balancing act; a constant negotiation between evaluating the unique identity of an object and imbuing it with metaphorical meaning. That dichotomy is ever present and necessary for my work to successfully function. I have found the subtle complexity of still life a valuable way to combat the simplistic imagery and information that mediates our daily lives. In this paper I approach the genre of still life and my own observational practice through a variety of contextual lenses to reflect on how painted imagery projects knowledge and influence. My still lifes of still lifes are images that work to subvert their own historical, moralistic authority and explore the relationship between kitsch and art, banality and power.

## Ethics of Observation

*“If you gave yourself enough time, you would see the pine needles too.” - Catherine Murphy,  
BOMB Magazine*

In a recent interview, artist Louise Despont said that “to be focused and dedicated to doing one simple thing can perhaps be the most transformative[...]that as narrow as it is, it can be infinitely deep.”<sup>1</sup> Observational painting is a sedimentary process. By virtue of repetitive accumulation a painting has the capacity to become more than a singular product made by a singular person. The “completeness” of one of my paintings is entirely dependent on my ability to look at everything that I have the capacity to see. And once a painting is finished my memory of making it is a vague and twisted thing. In this sense observational painting is fundamentally and inextricably about the passage of time, regardless of any formal decisions or conceptual agenda. My process becomes a physical manifestation and metaphorical reflection of time; of the way small things accumulate.

Painter Catherine Murphy is a master of this process and of articulating the magic of it for others. Her intensely detailed and realistic paintings are generated solely through direct observation and can take her several years to complete (fig. 1). Despite the ways in which many art critics and journalists have taken to ask grand, philosophical questions of the small wrinkles of a dress or the tension in a bit of stretched nylon, Murphy maintains that realist painting requires no outside defense or justification for existing, as such, and strives to capture the unique essence of each object. She paints in natural, changeable light so that her subject is not about a single observed moment but hundreds of thousands of moments. To my mind, her work activates the “still” life and is ultimately about the infinitely complex human experience of time, exemplifying the specific type of relationship a person develops with an object he or she observes for an extended period.



Figure 1: Catherine Murphy, *Polka Dotted Dress*, Oil on Canvas, 52" x 52", 2009

There is an ethics to observational painting that has to do with owning without possessing, competing, or invading and instead allows for a meaningful exchange to occur. The relationships I have formed over the years with yards of fabric, kitchen utensils, ceramic keepsakes, and silk flowers are unique and odd and difficult. These bonds are fostered over many weeks, often months, of close looking and cannot be made in any other way. The energy and identity of these objects becomes a part of me, of who I am. I have found in my research that this unique phenomenon is articulated to a certain extent by object theory.

Coined and founded by Graham Harman in 1999 in his doctoral dissertation entitled *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, object-oriented ontology or object theory holds that our relational experience of an object no matter how intently we look, taste, touch, and smell is inherently limited and can never result in complete understanding. Rejecting



anthropocentrism, the philosophy unseats the human being as a privileged “subject” that must inherently preside in an ordered, perceptible world over the inferior “object”.<sup>2</sup>

Since Harman’s publication a number of other speculative realists across many different disciplines have further expanded this line of thinking — notably in ecology where mass amounts of objects and materials (specifically radioactive waste and styrofoam) are literally altering the physical conditions of the world independent of human contact and involvement. We have generated so much permanent waste it now exists in places and spaces outside our perceptual reach. These theories apply quite literally to video game technology as well, where in fictional world-building platforms objects operate as characters in their own right. They relate to each other and must be programmed with their own inner lives in order to function believably within the virtual world.

I am fascinated poetically by this concept. Some critics of this philosophy find the idea of object ontology nihilistic; as if it places us in an unfeeling, speculative world where our perceptual ability cannot be trusted. Others find fault with the fact that most object-oriented theorists do not account for the man-made nature of most inanimate subjects. When the origins of an object are perhaps less mysterious (i.e. a freshly baked chocolate cake), it can be more difficult to imagine that the thing has a secret inner life. While I agree these are elements of the theory Harman and other object theorists tend to avoid, I also feel this is an area of study that demands we suspend our disbelief. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Julian Yates describe their collected essays *Object Oriented Environs* as “ an aleatory recording of things fleeting, perilous, embarrassing, embraced; of enthusiasm and reluctances; of objects and bodies that cross distances for a while to become an ephemeral gathering with a powerful trace.”<sup>3</sup> Their book flap

alone speaks to the infinite number of confounding ways we approach the ontology of the stuff we surround ourselves with. And not all of them are terribly scientific or academic. There are limits to what we are capable of understanding about the being of objects and therefore limits to what we are capable of communicating theoretically. Harman states that the “philosophy must break loose from the textual and linguistic ghetto that it has been constructing for itself, and return to the drama of the things themselves.”<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps for this reason so many creative writers and visual artists are drawn to the inanimate world. Whatever the issues may be between ontological philosophers and theorists, I find the concept of object-hood wonderfully lyrical and ultimately rooted in our remarkable capacity for empathy. If we might manage to connect with a thing that possesses no human traits, no biomechanics, no sensations, what on earth is preventing us from connecting with each other?

In his book *In Defense of Things*, archeologist Bjornar Olsen defends the status of materiality within the realm of social and cultural studies. Dissatisfied with the ways in which academic criticism and theory approach the material world, Olsen claims that the primary issue within most archaeological interpretation is that people treat objects as metaphorical stand-ins for political, social, and cultural concepts. He states, “A subtext in most contemporary approaches is an implicit conception of culture as somehow ‘prior’ to or detached from matter, with an assumption that cultures, ‘already different,’ approach the material world in unique ways, causing a variety of material expressions and meanings.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the material world exists whether or not people are present to impose their own interpretive strategies and cultural histories onto it. It was there first. The discursive nature of most Cartesian study and theory on

the subject of objects is highly suspicious of the physicality of things and the result is a philosophical worldview full of words like “phenomena” and “experience” and “cognition.” It turns out that accepting that the world was full of things before we made our entrance, self-conscious and screaming, is psychologically uncomfortable. We have a collective tendency to deny the autonomy of anything that does not perceive the world in a way that is familiar to us.

Object theory is, in a sense, a fairly radical concept considering our intellectual traditions, as they relate to materiality, have rendered matter passive, utterly reliant on the thinking subject to provide and imbue meaning. The issue with this philosophy of separateness is twofold; firstly, humans exist fundamentally inside of the world. We are so tangled up in a big ball of existence and experience with everything else, human and object alike, that we ultimately lack the perspective to accurately describe our own relationships, let alone the relationships of non-human matter. Secondly, we are not only thinking subjects but objects ourselves. We often forget that our fleshy bony bodies literally exist in the world as objectifiable material.<sup>6</sup>

Objects occupy a larger and more active existential space than many of us, most of the time, feel comfortable acknowledging. In regards to cognition, human beings order the world primarily through sensory images that are selected and organized in the brain. It is worth mentioning here that the sense of sight is evolutionarily designed to be *helpful*, and not necessarily accurate. Olsen defines *image* as “the way things appear to us in an intimate bodily experience of them and is the product of a corporeal involvement that stems from our relatedness and kinship — from the fact that our body is an image among images.”<sup>7</sup> Considering how enormously difficult it is to define an “image” (as it is an expansive term fundamentally reliant on context, medium, and the psychological state of the viewer), I think Olsen makes sense of the

concept in a beautifully lyrical way. This is also a definition of which I believe most artists who deal with the representation of objects are inherently aware. Rendering an object is ultimately an act of attention and of appreciation. It is an activity which a person would and could not attempt if the ontology of the material world was not considered and acknowledged in some way.

But while these philosophical ideas and theories are all relatively new, the perception and consequential representation of objects has prehistoric roots. At the end of the day, the ontology of things is not so groundbreaking or contemporary a concept. It lives present in the mind of anyone who has ever consciously and closely observed a thing. I would like to look at the genre of still life painting as it was conceived and interpreted in the Netherlands in the early 1600s. Often referred to as the “first modern still lifes” in Western Art, these are a family of paintings I am personally fascinated by and which have influenced much of my work.<sup>8</sup>

The Dutch still lifes of the Golden Age are inextricably and irrefutably tied to a cultural, economic European moment. Society became increasingly urbanized and globalized during this time which sparked a desire to immortalize and revere the diversions and luxuria of everyday life, commerce, and the domestic sphere. In short, people wanted pictures of their stuff. These pictures, however, functioned not only as representations of trade goods and exotic items but as moralistic messaging systems that sought to order a chaotic, expanding world. The thematic tone of these images ironically worked to relieve the underlying guilt and religious pressures surrounding the very human obsession with and reverence for worldly possessions.

In her book, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, Julie Berger Hochstrasser pulls together a number of scholars and arrives at the conclusion that the *vanitas* still life was not only an image of moralistic ideals related to consumption, exotica, and opulence, but one of anxiety.

Referring to the glitzy surface of a Willem Kalf painting (fig. 2) Hochstrasser states, “all is reflection, mimesis; no gold standard of genuine substance truly underlies the dream of impossible wealth.”<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2: Willem Kalf, *Pronk Still Life with Holbein Bowl, Nautilus Cup, Glass Goblet, and Fruit Dish*, Oil on Canvas, 27” x 22”, 1678

The illusionistic promise of fortune and virtue the *vanitas* offered was ultimately an empty one. As Peter Schwenger puts it in his book *The Tears of Things*, “we fill our senses with appearances in order to blunt the always implicit sense that the things of this world are fundamentally distant from us.”<sup>10</sup> Vanitas paintings portray endless, insatiable desire. The opulent, glamorous paintings of artists like Kalf, Claesz, and de Heem are, at the end of the day, objectless portraits of a dream.

This analysis is heavily reliant on an anthropocentric world view given that the still life genre is historically a language of commodity. Whether or not we read expansive wealth or fetishized anxiety into these still lifes, we cannot help but apply cultural conditions and experiences onto the object relations. However, when we interpret images we often fail to consider the things that make up these compositions, as such. In the words of painter Catherine Murphy, “An apple on a table is an apple on a fucking table. That’s its reality.”<sup>11</sup> We are programmed and encouraged most of the time to read these sorts of images as visual code, as moralistic riddles. The disguised symbolism of objects is very much present in my work and important to me (see object key).<sup>12</sup> However, it bears mentioning once again that within the hierarchy of creative contexts that live inside my brain, the observed object is, in and of itself, ruler of the universe.

Hochstrasser states that “we learn that identifying a particular depiction as realistic in style does not begin to account for the panoply of real-life meanings to which it may allude — any more than it dismisses the the possibility of the self-conscious presence of the artist’s hand in such a representation.”<sup>13</sup> While Hochstrasser does not elaborate on this “self-conscious presence” in her book, I believe what she touches upon is what I consider “the gap;” the slippage in communication and material understanding that often exists in the space between art theory/history and art practice. For example, the small object that sits on the tablecloth in Pieter Claesz’s *Herring with Glass of Beer and a Roll* (fig. 3) is, on a crucial level, not a symbol of the ephemerality and fragility of the human spirit, but a physical representation of a cracked walnut shell.



Figure 3: Pieter Claesz, *Herring with Glass of Beer and a Roll*, Oil on Panel, 14” x 19”, 1638

The simplicity is counterintuitive. The viewer of the painting will find it difficult to objectively see the walnut shell without wrapping it up in metaphor and symbolism while the viewer of the physical object, in this case the painter, cannot fail to consider the thing in and of itself. The reality the object experiences remains of value. The object is a necessary source; a psychological independent with which the artist must work and empathically bond in order to pay the necessary degree of attention to paint it. In the words of art critic Adrian Searle, “The fiction of painting, these grand aspirations bound to this poor object, this thing that does not shrink from impossible tasks[...]the fiction of painting knows that it is a fiction so well that its acknowledgment of itself becomes a reflex, about which each work turns.”<sup>14</sup> The impossible tasks are lemons. The wrinkles in a tablecloth. The sharp reflection on the lip of a glass. The impossible tasks are the ordinary things that once translated into paint become something more and something less than they are in life. The wonderful, herculean phenomenon that is metaphor will naturally follow.

In his book, Schwenger comes to the conclusion that the still life is both an assertion of the prestige of the human subject and an assault on the physicality of the object. He states that this is “an assault that must always fail, filtered as it is by perception and representation.”<sup>15</sup> The silent static of the still life will always and forever press against the impulse to impose narrative structure. I found this to be exceptionally true over the course of producing my fable paintings last year (figs. 4 and 5).



Figure 4: *The Bee and Jupiter*, Oil on Canvas, 28'' x 32'', 2018

I found I had placed too much metaphorical weight on my subjects and the associations themselves were obscure and too personal for the viewer to understand. The paintings ultimately



needed me too much. So instead of sweating to imply a specific metaphorical narrative by pulling and pushing objects into place, I have since worked to embrace the deadness of still life. Still life is unfeeling. There is something tone deaf about the genre, born as it was from a deeply privileged, materialistic class of people. It possesses an understated, nefarious power. I find still life disquieting and more recently have been working to juxtapose divergent pictorial codes in order to produce new visual realities and unexpected associations. Perhaps the object arrangements I paint are not “of” anything at all but instead present a visual representation of “still life” as a concept. They become still lifes of still lifes. There are no right or wrong ways to experience a painting and I am of the belief that the objects can simultaneously exist as both metaphor and themselves without having an existential crisis. I think awareness that the represented object exists on multiple levels of being imbues the image with depth and implication.



Figure 5: *The Fox and the Grapes*, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 22”, 2018

The painter's relationship with an observed object is singular. The viewer of the painting, or the represented object, literally cannot experience that object in reality and so will inevitably impose narrative. It is this viewer, the viewer of the painting, that operates anthropocentrically and, to a degree, must do so in order to connect empathetically. Therein lies "the gap;" the viewer operates as privileged "subject" in order to generate meaning while the painter understands that the image, and any subsequent meaning, would not exist without the existence and independent will of the "object." Three related yet distinct images exist in my still lifes; one in my mind as the painter, one on the canvas itself, and one in eye of the viewer.

As Schwenger puts it, "We recall that Hans Christian Andersen's tin soldier, darned needle, and bottle neck take long, eventful journeys. And even if an object is viewed as motionless, there is a paradoxical connection to the event in that very viewing."<sup>16</sup> Unlike other modes of image capture, an observed painted object is representative on a fundamental level of the painter, looking. We are inherently limited and I believe that still life as a genre operates to expose how much information we are capable of perceiving and, at the same time, how little we know about the things outside of ourselves.

## Still Life as Propaganda

*“A painting is nearly nothing, just a little more than nothing.” - Adrian Searle, *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting**

Beyond the objectification and translation of inanimate stuff, the genre of still life is politically loaded. It operates both historically and contemporarily as a lens through which we examine cultural maxims, narratives, and fallacies. According to scholar Dr. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, despite the prejudice and scorn that has historically fractured the relationship between still life and the art world, “It has become increasingly clear that still lifes constitute a rich source for social and cultural history; quite apart from their artistic value, they tell us a great deal about our present-day situation and how we got here.”<sup>17</sup> This implication, that object imagery has the capacity to alter our own preconceived notions and master narratives is what I have been exploring in my most recent paintings. I have been studying two artists in particular who, in my opinion, make work that turns on the notion of objectified objects and speaks to the power of the genre.

I became aware of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s photography a couple years ago and was specifically drawn to his diorama series. They are some of the stillest still lifes I have ever seen. They present the viewer with objects that are illusionistically true to form and speak to an inner sense of object-hood while being completely and totally dark and dead and other.

Natural history museums are in the business of generating pedagogical images. Dioramas are designed and constructed in such a way so as to capture the viewer’s attention so that he or she might learn something. Institutions intentionally depict the natural world as a wild place, untouched by the contemporary moment, which results in the generation of a picturesque construct. As Stephen Asma puts it in his book *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, “natural history museums are inherently aesthetic representations of science.”<sup>18</sup> They work to promote images that reflect what we want to see, what we expect to see, and what will visually trigger an

emotional response so that we stand in front of these compositions open to instruction and connection. By taking a photograph of the diorama and elevating the way the set piece was designed to be perceived, Hiroshi Sugimoto makes visible the ideal and artificial construction we consume unconsciously. He reframes the picturesque by making photographs that depict not an objective representation of landscape or wildlife, but the expectations we have manufactured for ourselves in attempts to define, organize, and possess the natural world.

As environmentalism and a desire to preserve and protect wildlife developed throughout the 20th century in response to industrial contamination and urban growth, naturalist activities and ecotourism became incredibly popular. Alexander Wilson notes in his book *The Culture of Nature*, “as more and more people have taken to sightseeing over the past forty years, recreation managers have begun to offer their ‘interpretations’ of the world out there in the wilds. This nature interpretation...is a kind of popular education for people visiting parks, museums, roadside historical sites, and other places of leisure.”<sup>19</sup> In efforts to promote education and interest, museums and parks strive to appeal to moralistic, empathic responses in their viewers and visitors.

Of course, the interpretation of nature has become increasingly institutionalized and constructed. Almost every scenic view and ecosystem is now accompanied by a plaque or pamphlet informing and organizing both the view and the viewer’s response to the view — not unlike curatorial notations or wall text in an art gallery. Public parks, natural history museums, and by extension the art world, ultimately project not an objective embrasure of the wild, but an aesthetic performance that will leave the viewer with what the administrators, curators, designers and purveyors of the organization have decided is an effectively meaningful experience.

Sugimoto has spent the last four decades photographing this sort of naturalistic interpretation in a series of large black and white photographs. The dioramas he shoots most often depict a family group of a specific species, from prehistoric squid to our early human ancestors. As Val Williams puts it in her exhibition catalogue, *New Natural History*, “Before the invention of photography in the mid nineteenth century, the animals which featured in books of natural history[...]were mainly of the domestic, native variety. But as colonization became a major preoccupation for European nations, this imagery changed rapidly.”<sup>20</sup> The dog, cow and horse were replaced inside natural historical spaces by lions, tigers and bears — animals from further afield that triggered the imagination and appealed to the quintessentially American exploratory impulse and sense of adventure. The animals on view became increasingly exotic and unfamiliar to the urban-dwelling person, especially in the United States. In mid 20th century wildlife photographers attempted to generate “animal portraits” by capturing a specific moment in which the animal gestured in a way a human might recognize as an identifiable mood or temperament. The personification of wildlife was of course exacerbated by the release of Disney classics like *Dumbo* and *Bambi* in the early 1940s (fig. 6).<sup>21</sup> Attempting to modernize old, dusty exhibits in the 1980s, natural history museums redesigned their displays to make them more accessible, playful, and attractive to the viewer, who were, more often than not, school children. In short, over the course of the 20th century, natural historical imagery has been manipulated and shaped into a user-friendly cabinet of curiosities. While the intention of wildlife photographers and museum curators has been and continues to inspire a public awareness of environmental issues and endangered wildlife, the result is a visual detachment from the objectively real world.

Posed characteristically behind glass partitions, animals and their habitats become objects of public consumption, and they are easy to digest.



Figure 6: The Walt Disney Company, Still from *Bambi*, 1942

Sugimoto's use of a large format camera, while generating the most technologically transparent image, has a way of elevating the realism of the set piece. He takes enormous care and adjustment to ensure the shallow, artificial nature of the subject is transformed to truly look like deep, living space. The illusion is additionally strengthened by the elevation of the horizon line. While in a museum the ground plain of the diorama is usually low, this landscape envelops us in its imagery in a moment of mutual trespass, implying an extension of space beyond the constraints of the frame. Of course, the irony here is that the more naturalistic and alive the scene appears as a photograph, the more intense the realization that the physical diorama is artificially constructed. Once clued into the fact that this is a photograph of a diorama and not a physical

landscape or even an earthly location, we can unpack the implications of the structure of the composition and the potential issues that arise when human beings visually interpret the natural world as a cultural construct and package the result, in an educational context, as objective truth.

Specifically in the case of *Wapiti* (fig. 7), the American Museum of Natural History has generated a distinct hierarchical structure amongst the animals.



Figure 7: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Wapiti*, Gelatin Silver Print, 13 3/4" x 23 1/8", 1980

They stand frozen in time and space, eternally projecting social relationships dominant and pervasive in our own western human culture — most blatantly patriarchal, stratified social structures. The bull wapiti is the focal point of the composition. His is braced and bellowing and while we cannot hear him, the sound is implied and draws our attention. One of the female wapiti looks back at him, directing our gaze. A distant snowcapped mountain is framed in the negative space created by his impressive antlers. They rise above the distant horizon in a moment of high contrast and project authoritatively into the sky. The bull is offset by a tree in the



foreground and three smaller wapiti who graze and move unhurriedly toward the left edge of the frame. The composition is perfectly, eerily balanced. Photographically framed, the image is pleasing to the eye to a degree that is next to never found in reality. The idealization of these animals is only possible (of course) because they are not real. They are stuffed, mounted, and arranged to stand on artificial shrubbery, grazing on fake foliage, while the sun sets on a painted backdrop that is propped no more than four or five feet behind them. Because the taxidermy is manipulated to project familiar human group behaviors, we subconsciously relate to the wapiti. The living illusion of the animals makes it all the more apparent just how dead they truly are and how intensely constructed the composition actually is. The wapiti's death becomes inseparable from their stillness which is what has allowed for such an illusionistic image, effectively an elaborate still life, to exist.

Sugimoto uses illusionary naturalism in his diorama series as a visual lure. The composite beauty and romantic idealization of the picturesque construct reframed in this way operates as an access portal for more difficult, complex content. His images reveal the ways in which human beings manipulate the natural world to reflect our own cultural sentiments and characteristics. In order that we pay attention and make sense of spaces and species unfamiliar to us, it would appear that we need to see ourselves to some degree reflected or present within the image. These photographs serve to reveal our constructed, visual definition of the natural world, the arrogance with which we reorganize and objectify the unfamiliar, and our own empathic limitations.

In addition to the picturesque construct, the way I paint and the objects I choose to paint demand that I tackle, or attempt to untangle, the uncanny power of mimesis and the concept of kitsch.

Mark Tansey's painting *Still Life* (fig. 8) is perhaps one of the most self-referential examples of still life and its mimetic relationship with the world of kitsch.



Figure 8: Mark Tansey, *Still Life*, Oil on Canvas, 62" x 46", 1982

We are presented with a scene in which a woman throws a bouquet of flowers (recently immortalized in paint) unceremoniously into the trash. An innumerable number of artists over the centuries have painted elements of the material process in their own work — perhaps the most famous of which is Velazquez's *Las Meninas* wherein the artist presents himself behind a canvas the viewer is not permitted to see (fig. 9).



Figure 9: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, Oil on Canvas, 10.4' x 108.6', 1657

In a radical compositional move for the time, the viewer suddenly occupies the sightline of Velázquez and is privy to the environment in which the artist paints and that his royal commissioners, reflected in the far mirror, observe. As Svetlana Alpers notes in her essay *Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of Las Meninas*, “*Las Meninas* is produced not out of a single, classical notion of representation[...]but rather out of specific pictorial traditions of representation. It confounds a stable reading[...]because the painting holds in suspension two contradictory (and to Velázquez’s sense of things, inseparable) modes of picturing the relationship of viewer, and picture, to world.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the painting becomes blatantly self aware of “the gap” and establishes a triangulation of viewership between

the artist, the painting, and the audience. Unlike *Las Meninas*, *Still Life* allows the viewer to observe the painting within the painting. However the meta quality of the image projects a similarly unstable reading. Because the painted woman is frozen in time as she dumps the flowers out and we are privy to see the blurred gesture, the painting within the painting assumes the place of the original observed object and the viewer is struck by a disturbing sensation of uncertainty. There exist in this composition no two identical vases and yet the mimetic doubling of the bouquet is deeply implied not only within the reality of the painting, but within Tansey's own studio as he constructed the composition. The viewer is left unsure as to where the true flowers actually exist if, in fact, they exist at all.

It is worth noting here that the concept of spacial illusion as artifice is an ancient one and for many artists in the West, illusionistic rendering has historically been considered a signifier of technical skill. The ability to detect visual deception and not to be fooled by trompe-l'oeil effects has often been ascribed to the higher intellect of the human mind. There is an anecdote that was commonly circulated in the 18th and 19th centuries, in efforts to promote spacial illusionism, that describes a painting contest between the two most famous painters in Ancient Greece, Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The story goes that when Zeuxis displayed his painting of a bunch of grapes a bird flew down from a tree to try and peck them out of the canvas because they were rendered so realistically. Parrhasius acknowledged Zeuxis's skill then asked his rival to do the honors of unveiling his own painting. However, when Zeuxis went to pull back the curtain that obscured Parrhasius's work, he found the curtain itself to be a painted illusion.<sup>23</sup> The moral being that the painter who could trick the human eye was considered far more skilled than the artist who could only fool the simple animal.

However there is an additional reading to Tansey's painting beyond that of mimesis, and it has to do with the superficiality of decorative, commercial imagery. Kitsch, in the derogatory terminological sense, was born in the late 19th century when new Modernism clashed with traditional, established European culture. There developed an odd sort of split between the maker of kitsch and the "fine artist." While many artists today channel the aesthetics of kitsch in a self-reflexive way (i.e. camp), some artists, like Odd Nerdrum, believe that "Kitsch must be separated from art. A kitsch painter works towards different goals than the artist."<sup>24</sup> His intense defense of sensual expression was of course in reaction to and a rejection of the modernist values of constant progress, change, and experimentation.

According to scholar Sindre Mekjan, "'Kitsch' is traditionally used to describe garish, vulgarized objects, or cheap, mass-produced paintings with simple, inane motifs."<sup>25</sup> There is a harshness, a villainy, often associated with kitsch in the art world because it appears so excessively straightforward and saccharine (fig. 10). Kitsch is blunt, direct and lacking in metaphor. As Nerdrum puts it, "we are taught to keep an ironic distance [from art], to see things from a dual perspective and search for double meanings."<sup>26</sup> Kitsch rejects this complexity. It speaks to the individual in anti-intellectual, often romanticized terms. This was something the modernists feared and railed against, arguing it was an aesthetic adopted by totalitarian regimes and authoritarian agendas.<sup>27</sup> Kitsch has long been associated with mass-mentality and group-think because it is so easy to digest. Kitsch became a propagandistic agent; a way of visually promoting specific emotional pitches and cues.



Figure 10: Thomas Kinkadee, *Candlelight Cottage*, 1996

Throughout his career Tansey has appropriated imagery, often cutting and tracing from magazines and film. In *Still Life*, the human subject appears to be a 50s housewife, complete with pumps, apron, and pin curls. In much the same way that the flowers project a fragile ephemerality, so does she. Her visual status as “housewife” actually eclipses her role as author. We must check our assumption that she is actually the painter of the flowers and not simply cleaning up after an artist who has already left the room. The conceptual association between the genre and the culturally constructed feminine, kitsch, domestic space is deeply embedded in Western culture.

Scholar Sianne Ngai studies aesthetics of a type I feel my still life objects share in; affects that project a degree of weakness and ambivalence. She specifically works with what our contemporary capitalist culture has deemed cute, interesting and zany. Aesthetics that can be

described in this way are non-cathartic; they do not inspire strong, grandiose feelings of awe or anger. They are somehow suspended in their purposelessness and in that sense, politically ambiguous. She says that “in comparison to powerful experiences like that of the sublime or disgusting, these aesthetic experiences are profoundly equivocal; indeed, they almost seem to call attention to their relative lack of aesthetic impact or power, to their own aesthetic ineffectuality.”<sup>28</sup>

By placing my “ineffectual” still life objects in the same formal space as images that suggest an entirely more concrete aesthetic, I call an attention to them which they would not generate represented on their own. They demand our intellectual recognition because they are brave enough to occupy a visual field (i.e. historical event photography) that is contextually and historically not for them. This is in spite of the fact that they represent the every day moments of every day life and present a worldly experience that is “based on a combination of ordinary feelings.”<sup>29</sup>

Ordinary feelings are rarely ones of judgement and conviction. Ngai’s aesthetic categories and my still lifes exist in a state of weakness. While decorative, kitschy objects project a degree of powerlessness, they simultaneously possess an enormous capacity for meaning. For example Ngai cites the complex power struggle that accompanies the experience of “cuteness.”<sup>30</sup> On one hand, when you observe something cute and helpless it instills in you a sense of your own power. But on the other hand, that same fragility demands your attention and triggers your biological desire to care and nurture. There exists a dark political underbelly to these sorts of weak, kitsch aesthetics that is exemplified in Tansey’s work and that I hope to elevate in my own paintings.

## Pattern and Transgression

*“A generally beautiful or distasteful object merely calls for ritual repetition or avoidance.” -  
George Kubler, *The Shape of Time**



I majored in creative writing in college and took a poetry course in my senior year. About half way through the semester the professor, reconsidering just how many books he had asked us to buy, took pity and began photocopying some of the assigned poetry. On the back of one assignment were a few lines of a poem that had been printed by mistake. I liked it so much I went online to hunt it down. An *Elegy to a Goldfish* remains my favorite poem and I come back to it periodically.<sup>31</sup> Despite the dark specificity of the work, it embodies the tonal energy I strive to convey in my paintings. It is at once innocent, colorful, humorous, and deeply disturbed.

I can't remember when  
 my brother and I decided to kill you, small  
 fish with no school, bright and happy at the bottom  
 slipping through the gate  
 of your fake castle. I think it was winter. A part of us  
 aware of the death outside, the leaves  
 being burned up and the squirrels starving  
 inside the oaks, the sky  
 knocking its clouds into the ashtray of the city.  
 And it might have been me  
 who picked you up first, who  
 chased you around the clean bowl of your life  
 and brought you up into the suffocating  
 elevator of ours. And I want to say it was my brother  
 who threw you against the wall  
 like a drunk husband, the glow-worm inch of you  
 sliding down the English Garden  
 of wallpaper, and that it was me who raised my leg  
 like a dog, me who brought my bare foot  
 slamming down on your almost nothing ribs  
 and felt you smear like a pimple. Now that's something  
 I get to have forever. That Halloween-candy-  
 sized rage, that cough drop  
 of meanness. And your death, only  
 the beginning, the mushy orange autopsy  
 reminded us of mandarins, Navels, bloods, Persians  
 the sweet Valencia. And when our sister  
 who must have thought of you all day

came home to find the bowl  
 empty, looked at us, my brother and me  
 I remember we started to laugh. And then  
 it might have been me  
 though it could have been him, who thought to open  
 the can of tangerines, who pulled  
 one of the orange bodies out of the syrup, and threw it at her  
 this new artificial you, chasing her around the house  
 screaming Eat him! Eat him!  
 but it was me who held her down on her bed  
 and him who forced  
 her mouth open, and it was me who pushed  
 the sticky fruit into her throat  
 like a bloody foot  
 into a sock. You had only been gone for one hour  
 and yet the sky outside  
 turned black and red, the tree in the yard thrashed back  
 and forth until its spinal cord  
 broke, and my little sister, your one love, flashed white  
 and pulsed like neon  
 in a hospital, her eyes  
 rolling back into the aquarium of her head  
 for a moment, and in every country  
 countless deaths, but none as important  
 as yours, tiny Christ, machine of hope, martyr of girls and boys.

The poem itself turns on a mimetic transformation. In the cruel mind of a child, a beloved goldfish is metamorphosed into a slice of tangerine. While the fish itself is dead by the second line and its body consequentially used to disrupt and traumatize a familial relationship, the murderous intention of the speaker precedes all narrative action. What is left of the poem is a dark reflection of fragmented memory and false images. The past has become an unreliable place.

I reread the poem in the throes of painting this semester and was particularly struck by the lines, “And I want to say it was my brother/ who threw you against the wall/ like a drunk

husband, the glow-worm inch of you/ sliding down the English Garden/ of wallpaper.”<sup>32</sup> I have come to feel that the patterned drapery in my paintings is a related extension of Dickman’s wallpaper. While floral wallpaper might emote nostalgia, security, and domesticity, it also operates as the literal plane upon which the trauma occurs (fig. 11). The comfortable imagery becomes grim and mocking in this context. The wallpaper and my patterned subject matter work to construct an artificial, imitative world in which our beliefs and ideologies twist and turn. A simulacrum (the mandarin slice), no matter how skillfully made or aggressively cast is not the real thing (a beloved pet fish) and presents the reader with a dark critique of institutionalized religion and systemic abuse. The world of Dickman’s poetry, much like the world of vanitas painting, is wonderfully abundant and terribly dead.



Figure 11: Oliver Jeffers, *Made America Great Again*, Mixed Media Sketch, 2019

I have always been drawn to repetition. While I have no memory of this, as a child I could apparently sit for hours and hours happily pouring plastic beads or rice from one cup into another. I imagine the predictable sound and tactility was soothing. While repetition can express comfort, predictability, and contemplation, it can also reflect overwhelming, obsessive action and an unstable mentality. Pattern, as both a formal and conceptual construct, is orderly visual evidence of repetition. My paintings are full of objects that exhibit and express pattern. While I am drawn to all types of decorative design, stripes specifically are the most essential to my work because any structural pattern, regardless of visual motif, is based upon a grid; two perpendicular planes of stripes. The optical nature of the stripe has a rich and fascinating historical context that turns on political and social schemas.

In his odd little book *The Devil's Cloth*, historian Michel Pastoureau examines the history of pattern, specifically striped fabrics. He begins with the Carmelite Order who wore striped habits in the 13th century in homage to their mythic founder, the biblical prophet Elijah who wore a singed cloak. The Carmelites fashioned their garments out of alternating bands of white and brown fabric, each representative of cardinal and theological virtues. As far as scholars and historians can gather, no other religious or social order wore striped clothing at that time. And so, as it goes with any group of people who express themselves in a way that deviates from the cultural norm, the Carmelites were mocked, abused, and scapegoated. The cloaks became associated with scandal, treachery, and in 1287 Pope Boniface VIII literally banned the wearing of striped fabrics.<sup>33</sup>

But this attitude towards the stripe was not a singular event and reared its head throughout the following centuries in a plethora of bizarre and tragic ways. In the medieval

Western world, stripes were deemed derogatory and legislation was passed numerous times in efforts to keep the pattern off the streets. Over time, however, the disgraced nature of the stripe became an ideological tool and was relegated to clothe hangmen, sex workers, prisoners, slaves, clowns, heretics, Muslims and Jews. The stripe, because of its visual power, was an effective marker of transgression (fig. 12).



Figure 12: Wilhelm Brasse, *Prisoner Identity Photograph of Czeslawa Kwoka of Poland (14yo)*, 1942

Striped pattern became a symbolic system of cultural sensibilities and prejudice. In his book Pastoureau makes the case that “the stripe appears simultaneously as an iconographic code and as a mode of visual sensitivity.”<sup>34</sup>

The stripe presents a fascinating contradiction. It is a deviant marker that catches our eye in a way monochromatic surface does not (fig. 13). But at the same time it is deceptive, the stuff of optical illusion, confusing and effervescent. As a realist painter and observer, pattern is such rich surface and I sometimes feel that with every mark, every tiny, ornamental unit, I am

committing some small act of transgression. I feel I am conversing with this strange bit of history that stands as a testament to the sociopolitical power of decor.



Figure 13: Vittorio Reggianini, *La Soirée*, Oil on Canvas, 28'' x 38''

## Black Swans

*“We fool ourselves with stories that cater to our Platonic thirst for distinct patterns: the narrative fallacy.” - Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable**

I have been appropriating photographs of “Black Swan Events” in my most recent paintings. Coined by scholar and economist Nassim Taleb, the term “Black Swan” refers to a happening that meets the following criteria: it must come as a huge shock, effect a mass number of people, and be rationalized and inappropriately contextualized after the fact. I have chosen to use historical images because the emotional response triggered by “Black Swans” is usually similar and shared. While I have little interest in painting photographs or paraphernalia directly associated with the 2016 presidential election, it is ever present in my mind and I am interested in the immediate sensation of, in the words of Taleb, “seeing an event happen precisely because it was not supposed to happen.”<sup>35</sup>



Figure 14: *Joachim von Ribbentrop, Adolf Hitler, and Burli*, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 26”, 2018



Where time is impartial and constant, history is the malleable story we each tell ourselves in order to rationalize the world around us. But at the same time, history serves as an enormous resource of economic, social, and political pattern, if we are willing to engage with it. I have found that still life painting operates in the liminal space between material record and metaphor and is a wonderfully confounding, allegorical space in which to examine narrative fallacies. We believe so strongly in containable, understandable master narratives that we remain vulnerable to future inexplicable tragedies and power dynamics — some of which we are living right now.

The rise of the Fascist Party in Nazi Germany was a sociopolitical Black Swan event which I felt was particularly appropriate in relation to our current political climate (fig. 14). It was also an unnerving composition to paint and I was anxious about the way in which it might be received by the viewer. I chose to lean into that discomfort and see if I could make an affecting image. I knew I wanted to use a photograph in my still life that was taken from within the event, before the reality of the situation was realized by the world.

I was also drawn to this particular photograph because I had never seen it before. The freshness of the image made the event feel closer and more potent. Contrary to observed, painted imagery, reality is inherently assumed in a photograph. As Barthes says in *Camera Lucida*, “In Photography, the presence of a thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing.”<sup>36</sup>



Figure 15: *Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg and Archduke Franz Ferdinand*, Oil on Canvas, 26” x 30”, 2019

The photograph presents us with a living illusion; a frozen moment in time that we trust implicitly. In that sense, despite the painted photograph’s initial desire to distinguish itself from the context in which I have placed it, the framing of the event becomes synonymous with still life. The photographic figures, reflective of monstrous horror, are rendered inanimate. In one of my favorite no-nonsense definitions of the genre, the Tate describes “still life” as anything that does not move or is dead.<sup>37</sup>

I chose to compliment *Joachim von Ribbentrop, Adolf Hitler, and Burlin* with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo (fig. 15). Most of

us learn about this event briefly in a high school history class but as I did further research I became fixated on the Duchess, Sophie. While noble, she was not of dynastic rank and was consequentially considered unfit to marry into the Imperial House of Habsburg. She and Franz Ferdinand were so in love, however, that they entered into a morganatic marriage, a royal union between people of unequal social rank. In order to be with him she forfeited her children's succession rights and was personally excluded from her husband's title and privileges. She was rarely allowed to publicly sit or stand next to him which made it all the more tragic that she was in the car on the day he was targeted.<sup>38</sup>

Reading about her life and its climactic end altered the way she looked out at me through the photograph. The Duchess's all-seeing eye became both an optical and conceptual anchor point for me and it is formally one of the darkest values in the composition. I worked in this painting to further the physical integration of photographic image and observed still life. By framing of the Duchess's eye with the cherry blossom stems I worked to direct the viewer's gaze up to meet hers. This was a primary, guiding decision in the arrangement of this painting. I wanted the objects to develop a more direct relationship with the photograph, purposefully obscuring and revealing moments I found most intriguing.

## Object + Character Key

*“Still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs.” -  
Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked**

While I am now going to “explain” the objects and figures in my paintings, I am not operating under the expectation or assumption that the viewer also interprets them in this way. These compositions are carefully constructed and speak to the visual vanitas-eque language we have collectively lost. For example a painted, floating soap bubble no longer has poetic, ephemeral meaning as it did in the mid 17th century. The puzzling out of an encoded painting is such a pleasurable, fascinating project that people used to share in. I have effectively appropriated and imagined a visual code for myself that allows the viewer to read whatever they would like into the object relationships. That being said, I do not wish to undermine the individual reality of each object with connotation and association. They are on an integral level, simply themselves. I realize these two readings of the object (as metaphor and as, such) are contradictory. Welcome to my world.



*Joachim von Ribbentrop* — Ribbentrop was Hitler’s foreign minister from 1933 to 1945. He was educated throughout Europe as a child and worked as a businessman until 1920 when he married into money and a title. Ever the salesman, he ingratiated himself with Hitler from inside the National Socialist Party. Despite the fact he had no experience in politics and most Nazi officials found him distasteful and superficial, he quickly adapted to his new position. He fed Hitler’s distrust for professional diplomats, radicalizing his every word. Ribbentrop was a political chameleon, infamous for expressing contradictory and inconsistent opinions. Because his party line was generally dictated by whomever he was dealing with, he was an excellent deal-maker

and negotiated a large number treaties that led to the outbreak of World War II, most notably the Soviet-German non-aggression pact of 1939. Ultimately however, Ribbentrop's Soviet sympathies strained his relationship with the Nazi party and when Germany declared war on the Soviet Union he fell out of Hitler's favor. Between 1942 and 1945 Ribbentrop's foreign office oversaw the deportation of countless European Jews to death camps. At the Nuremberg Trials Ribbentrop was found guilty on all four counts of conspiracy, wars of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. He was hanged on October 16, 1946.<sup>39</sup>

Since the 2016 presidential election, Trump has often been compared to Hitler's dictatorial aspect. However, I find Joachim von Ribbentrop the more Trumpian of the two. His background, motives, and actions ring with a horrifying immediacy.



*Adolf Hitler* — I found Hitler's posture in this photograph particularly striking. Hitler was hyper-aware of his public image throughout his life and worked to ensure all image-based media served his political agenda. But here he does not project the dynamic, self-aggrandizing image he sought to circulate. This photo was taken in what looks to be a sunlit garden or field, devoid of imperial architecture. Perhaps he had taken Burli out for a walk as the dog leash would suggest.

Ribbentrop is standing while Hitler sits, elbows on knees. He looks straight out of the frame at the viewer as if the photographer caught him off guard in a rare, candid moment. I cannot imagine Hitler would have wanted this photo made public. He looks far too human.



*Burli* — Burli was a Scottish Terrier gifted to Hitler by Nazi Party Chancellor Martin Bormann. Hitler's inner circle ironically referred to the dog as "The Greater German Imperial Hound" because of his small size and distinctly non-German breeding.<sup>40</sup> Burli is rarely mentioned in historical literature and was almost never photographed because he did not project the strong, nationalistic aura characteristic of Hitler's beloved German Shepherd, Blondi. Burli was most likely shot alongside Hitler's other dogs on April 29th, 1945. The dogs were killed by their handler to keep them from being taken by the invading Russian soldiers after Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide. Burli was a mysterious innocent in the eye of the storm and his presence serves to complicate and reveal the hypocritical nature of Hitler's character and regime.



*Lemons, Oranges, and Limes* — Citrus fruit is common subject matter in vanitas paintings. Lemons in particular were often represented half peeled and symbolized the passage of time. They were expensive, luxury items in the 16th and 17th centuries and operated in paintings as declarations of status and technical skill. I do not think it is a stretch to say in the 21st century that painted fruit is a cliché. But because I honestly attempt to capture the objects in a sincere way I find them to be self-reflexive and aware of their own banality.



*Blue Bottle* — I liked how the shape of the bottle formally reflected the strange, bodily, pantalooned gesture of Ribbentrop.



*Orchid* — Orchids have various symbolic associations but the most common fall somewhere between love and beauty. I was more interested in the deceptive nature of the plant itself. Orchids are mimetic creatures that lure pollinators with an impressive display of color and fragrance. However, most orchids do not produce nectar, depriving the insect of any mutual exchange. Some orchid species almost kill their pollinators in the reproductive process. Because their petals are so slippery the insect will fall deep into the flower's bucket and must squeeze through a tiny opening at the base in order to escape. It is only in that precarious position that the pollen scrapes against the insect's back and is successfully deposited.<sup>41</sup>



*Swan* — A metaphorical nod to the phenomenon of Black Swan Events. I had debated spray painting the object black but decided to keep it white. Where the black swan is representative of a highly improbable event, the white swan stands for everything else. And it is the everything



else that lulls us into a false sense of security and leaves us vulnerable to the manifestation of the black swan. I also belatedly realized that my swan might actually be a goose. Whoops.



*Pink Fabric* — I was drawn to this fabric because of its sickly sweet hue. The saturation almost assaults the eye. There is something unnatural and attention seeking about this color that is at odds with the cute, childlike connotation often associated with pinkness. In a peer critique a friend mentioned that it is also the exact hue beloved by North Korean leadership. It is worn by the “Pink Lady”, North Korea’s most infamous television broadcaster who wears a traditional pink Hanbok dress while dramatically and fervently supporting Kim Jong-un.<sup>42</sup> Bubblegum pink pom-poms, flowers, and fans are also used in synchronized North Korean marches and performances to celebrate and promote the regime.



*Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este* — On June 28th, 1914 a Serbian-funded terrorist group called the Black Hand targeted the Archduke’s motorcade in efforts to regain Austria-Hungary’s southern provinces for Yugoslavia. A bomb was initially thrown but missed Ferdinand’s convoy. It was only hours later, when the car took a wrong turn that Gavrilo Princip, one of the assassins, spotted the Archduke. Princip reportedly fired two shots into the open car.

The second bullet hit the Archduke in the neck, severing his jugular vein. He was rushed back to the safety of the town hall but died shortly after.

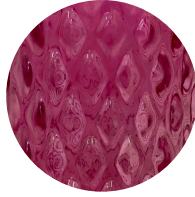
The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo is one of the most infamous Black Swan Events of the 20th century. Heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Ferdinand's death induced Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia. Germany, Russia, France and Britain were pulled into the political maneuvering in the following weeks, ultimately triggering World War I.<sup>43</sup>



*Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg* — Sophie Chotek, the Archduke's beloved wife and mother to three small children, was also assassinated by Princip on June 28th, 1914. She was arguably the first of the approximately 19 million people who would die in World War I. She was shot in the abdomen and bled out before the motorcade reached the town hall.<sup>44</sup>



*Flower Chicken* — I found this thing in a dark, dusty corner of a Goodwill. The still life gods shone down on me that day. It is so unapologetically bizarre, useless and quintessentially “decor” that I think its majesty speaks for itself.



*Pink Vase* — I relate to these two paintings as a pair and thought this vase complimented its blue counterpart. It also presented an overwhelming, repetitive challenge that put my observational approach and commitment to the test.



*Cherry Blossoms* — The national flower of Japan, the cherry blossom is one of the few botanical species that retains strong symbolic association today. Because they bloom en masse with such vibrancy but only flower for a couple of weeks, their loss each year is powerful and affecting. For this reason they are associated with mortality; specifically a graceful, willing acceptance in the face of death. In World War II, kamikaze pilots adopted the flower as their symbol which twisted the meaning into a macabre, dark thing. The cherry blossom became the face of violent self-sacrifice and their transient nature, an “appalling beauty”.<sup>45</sup>



*Orange Flowers* — This is a generic orange stem I found at the craft store. I chose it primarily for formal, coloristic reasons but about half way through the painting felt the flowers were emblematic of the two bullets that the Black Hand assassin shot into the Archduke’s car. There

was a third small orange bud on that stem that I decided to edit out. It felt important there only be two.

*Conclusion*

In my recent Black Swan paintings, there are three major contexts with which I engage: the ethics of observation, the propagandistic agenda of still life painting, and the political power of pattern. Through these lenses and the wonderful irreconcilability of object-hood and metaphor, I work to generate images that disrupt the notion of a containable, narrative history. By intentionally hallowing out object meaning from my still lives, I hope to subvert the way we habitually receive images. We are taught to think and behave as if the past progresses in a linear fashion; punctuated by brief, intense spurts of activity and separated by vast stretches of emptiness. But, of course, history is composed of micro moments, minor marks, each nearly an exact replica of the one that came before. We have collectively internalized a naive projection of the future in which big, bad things occur spontaneously. If we could manage to acknowledge that horror does not occur overnight, but sneaks up on us slowly and steadily, we might collectively be capable of breaking the vicious cycle of our own narrative creation.

## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Cohen and Yates. *Object Oriented Environs*, 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 67.
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- <sup>8</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 75.
- <sup>9</sup> Julie Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, (New Haven [Conn.] ; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 257.
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Prose and Murphy, "Catherine Murphy by Francine Prose."
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- <sup>15</sup> Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 99.
- <sup>16</sup> Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 100.
- <sup>17</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History*, 12.
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- <sup>21</sup> Williams and Hobson, *New Natural History*, 21.
- <sup>22</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, Or, the Viewing of Las Meninas." (*Representations*, no. 1 [1983]: 31-42. doi:10.2307/3043758.), 290.

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- <sup>25</sup> Nerdrum, *On Kitsch*, 14.
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## Gallery



Plate 1: *Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg and Archduke Franz Ferdinand*, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 26", 2019



Plate 2: *Joachim von Ribbentrop, Adolf Hitler, and Burli*, Oil on Canvas, 26" x 30", 2018



Plate 3: *The Fox and the Grapes*, Oil on Canvas, 22" x 30", 2018



Plate 4: *The Bee and Jupiter*, Oil on Canvas, 32" x 28", 2018

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