

VIEWS AND VIGNETTES

Preamble

The following *Views and Vignettes* briefly explore some of the themes and motifs which run through my works exhibited in *Scenes from Still Life*. The works are diverse, though located liberally within the Still Life genre.

The Floor Work : *Still Life (natura mortua)* consists of one thousand, two hundred and forty-nine stone flowers of various dimensions which have been carved, incised, and engraved from basalt, granite, marble, slate, painted in floral hues, then darkly coated with graphite and wax. They are arranged on the ground an imprecise grid reminiscent of cemeteries and gardens.

The Table Setting : A thirteen piece afternoon tea setting formed from metallic mesh, placed on a damask tablecloth. The combination of the moire caused by overlapping mesh and the shadows cast by the objects creates a complex and illusory web. *The Last Afternoon Tea*, was originally inspired by The Mad Hatter's Tea Party¹ then expanded to include Albert Einstein as one of the guests, owing to his prowess in solving riddles.

The Tablecloths : Damask and linen tablecloths have been permanently inscribed and stained with a record, in pencil and ink, of shadows of the objects which were set on them.

The Memos : The shadows of flowers have been carved from stone. Reminiscent of Victorian mourning jewellery, they can be worn in commemoration of their transient beauty and as memento mori.²

Two and three dimensions : before Still Life, and since

Before the artifice of Still Life painting, there was still life. Objects have been arranged for aesthetic effect for as long as humans have interacted with them — in the first instance with stones, branches, shells, and later with the artefacts that we produced ourselves alone or in combination with objects from the natural world. The systemising, capturing, taming, and framing of this custom of arranging things to satisfy iconography, fashionable taste, or idiosyncratic whim has in no way diminished the persistence of the practice in the world at large, which has endured in parallel with the development, rise, and some would say decline, of the Still Life genre of painting — squillions of items arranged over the millennia for symbolic purpose or aesthetic delectation, or a combination of both. After the development of Still Life painting in the early seventeenth century, when Dutch artists commandeered, glorified, and framed it in a celebration of bourgeois affluence, the genre has had its ups and downs, and is frequently, quite unreasonably, regarded as a minor art form, owing to its domestic scale and focus.

In the twentieth century, the genre found its three dimensional form in delightful constructions in painted wood and sheet metal by Picasso, reliefs and collages by Louise Nevelson, Duchamp's readymades, boxes by Joseph Cornell, wonderfully gloopy ceramic objects by Lucio Fontana, timber constructions by Manolo Valdés, flaccid canvas forms by Claes Oldenburg, uncanny and provocative objects by Louise Bourgeois, parades of pots by Gwen Hanssen Pigott, collations of everyday objects by Tony Cragg, piles of cups and saucers by Robert Therrien, Fiona Hall's forms from shredded banknotes, glass beads, soap, and sardine tins, and arrangements celebrating an abundance of culinary ingredients by Mario Merz, among others. It was revived and celebrated in 1997 with a spectacular collection of three dimensional Still Lives as well as framed images at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in *Objects of Desire : The Modern Still Life*³. The practice of arranging objects for ceremonial display or personal delight, persists both within and without the academically sanctioned Still Life genre.

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A constellation of objects : the unframed Still Life

The constellation of objects forming an unframed Still Life — a Still Life 'in the round' — is a shifty construct, which generally lacks a fixed viewing point, though its systemisation and presentation may recommend one. With individual objects in a particular configuration, however idiosyncratic, mystifying, or synthesised the individual elements may be, their materiality is verifiable. However, while affirming their substantive reality as things in the world rather than 'mere' images of things, the constituent objects are, paradoxically, promiscuous and ambiguous (in time-space). The individual component objects as well as their composition are polyvalent and polymorphic.

Irrespective of the care with which the elements may be arranged, or of their locus — institutional or domestic: in museum, gallery, shop, or home — their frame, if you can call it that, is determined more or less capriciously by a subtle movement of the viewer's head or by a partial or complete perambulation around the group: one is before, then beside, then behind it; the cup is in front of the jug, then beside it, then behind it. The viewer is no mere bystander. On tiptoes you can have bird's-eye view of the scene, crouch down and it becomes mountainous. The objects and their arrangements are spatially and temporally nuanced by the viewer.

One way to attain stasis with such a constellation is to photograph, draw, or paint it from a selected viewpoint (although Picasso and Braque managed several simultaneously); another is to look at the shadows cast by the objects. In natural (sun) light these darkened areas move no faster than the turning of the earth, though they may be subdued by a passing cloud; in an environment with artificial light, they are stationary, contributing a modicum of stability to the experience of viewing this thing we call Still Life. In the short term (the time taken to view an object) only the shadow remains constant — more constant in relation to the object than the viewer's shifting view-point which varies as the object, in collaboration with our motility and our curiosity, entices us by its multifaceted accessibility to inspect it from all sides, luring us to an engagement which is prohibited by the frame and static nature of the Still Life image.

Today, we are protected from the reality of objects by the proliferation of their glossy images. (Plato might smile⁴) And it takes an investment in time and a sustained and focussed effort to fully peruse such an arrangement of objects as the unframed Still Life. I wonder whether we are still prepared to engage in this way, as the insatiably consumed and consuming object shimmers in the endlessly variable lights we cast upon it, its shadow often massaged into oblivion. Before our eyes it shifts and slides. The elision of the gap between real and virtually real, between object and shadow, deludes and erodes qualities fundamental to the thingness of things: material stability, tactility, weight.

And we know, in yet another loss of innocence, that the apparent stillness of objects is illusory, that for all their apparent solidity they are a teeming mass of atoms. Even a superficial understanding of physics disrupts our sense of the constancy of matter as it eddies and shimmers, leaving us on shaky ground. So that with the most constant light source and a composed and relatively immobile viewer, the objects in a Still Life are less than constant — are fast in their internal flightiness rather than hard and fast as they appear to eye or hand. Haptic understanding of objects is superceded by scientific information, and by gloss, as the physical object is replaced by the phantom object spun from atoms or pixels, fantastically illumined, photo-shopped, glazed, mediated.

But the shadow! That is a different matter (or lack of it). That clearly defined shape cast by the object, said to be the precursor of the portrait, of painting itself, provides us with a certainty that we can transfix, trace, render, verify.

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Parking in Ashfield is always at a premium. Late one afternoon I commented to my son Robert on the apparent lack of free spaces. 'Read the shadows, Mum. If you can't see past the cars, you can check the road for a gap in the shadows.' Of course, he was right (teenage sons usually are) and we found a park. Since that day, I have learned much from watching shadows and my fascination with them has grown.

At sunset my shadow ripples down wet sand to stretch across rolling banks of shore-break, then, as the sun drops further, my head rolls out of its depth. I zig-zag up the steps of my brother's house, as we compare cameras in the early morning. I darken, like dampness, the desiccated ground. I slant across grave stones, my head in a wreath of flowers.

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Contingencies : shadows and objects

The shadow, as evidence of the object, demonstrates a dependable collaboration between light source, object, and the surface on which it is cast. It is entirely contingent upon: the object that interrupts the flow of photons onto a given surface; a light source which is uni or multidirectional — not omnidirectional as this obliterates the shadow, creating a white-out; a surface or surfaces to receive it. In attesting to the presence of these elements, the shadow is more honest than the photograph, which, for all its evidential aura, is frequently fallacious; it is more constant in its actuality than a painting or a drawing, both of which are subject to the imaginative whims of the artist; it is more authentic than a virtually enhanced digital rendering of an object that might not even exist. Nevertheless the shadow is merely a phantom sign which indicates that some thing has interrupted the flow of light to a surface. And it could be asserted that there is less constancy still in the shadow as the earth turns against the light of the sun, the moon waxes and wanes with the tides, clouds roll or scud over the surface of the earth, the fire flares, then smoulders, the candle flame sputters and dies, even the electric light (our trustworthy serf) fails in a storm, and will coalesce in darkness with the last of the fuel that feeds it. Yet at times shadows can seem more stable and more certain than the objects that cast them.

Objects without shadows are nouns without adjectives. They are unqualified, unreal. A person without a shadow, too. Peter Pan lost his shadow; perhaps he flew better without it's weight. Peter Schlemihl sold his to the devil masquerading as a stranger, leaving him loaded but alienated from the rest of humanity who carried their shadows with them.

If there is something counterfeit about an object without a shadow, and there is something uncanny about a shadow without its casting object. Shadows without objects are adjectives without nouns — obscure or in limbo

It can be claimed, empirically, that the object is taciturn; that the shadow is silent. But is it? More playful than the object, it whispers stories of time passing. If objects are rendered shifty by our incessant movement, are shadows more constant? The paradox of shadows is that, while more stationary than our changing view of objects, once cast, they glide, slide, slip, and slither across surfaces, they hiccup at ridges, roll over undulations, they climb up walls, they scurry across ceilings, they vanish down slopes.

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In the absence of the object : shadows

'Shadows are an important way to add realism to a scene'⁵

But what of the shadow without the object? Some of the first images created were tracings around shadows or silhouettes. With a silhouette, the angle and deployment of light and subject is selected with great particularity in order to produce the most representative image, with the least distortion. In reality, shadows, whether random and happenstance or contrived, are often more obscure, capricious, duplicitous. Think of the convincing shadows cast by a piece of vellum manipulated by sticks in shadow puppetry, and of way we are tricked into seeing a bird or rabbit created by a pair of hands, or feet⁶.

A shadow abandoned by its casting object might be seen as a desolate thing. Whether it is a portrait silhouette or the shadow of an object or group of objects, as in a Still Life, it speaks of the absence of the caster. It implies expiration. However, as a record of the casting person or thing, it invites remembrance, and, in the absence of objective information and detail, it coerces the imagination into recreational engagement — into play.

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'But the shadows themselves are canvasses in which, leaping in their thousands from my eyes, live vanished beings with their familiar gaze.' Charles Baudelaire⁷

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The table is set : the table setting as Still Life

The arrangement of objects, whether for the contrivance of a Still Life, in a domestic environment, museum, or retail outlet, demonstrates the agency of human will and action. It tells a narrative of ambitions and decisions: of selection, of positioning. Thus, the dining table, set for effect, qualifies, as a Still Life. (We can only marvel at the uncounted Still Lives created for the delectation of generations of diners.) It is a collection of objects arranged 'with intent' : that is, in order to produce a desired effect. The fact that it is subsequently dis-arranged, without any record other than in the memory of the diners, merely enlivens its existence with a remembered or imagined chronicle of human action and interaction.

Museums and antique shops sometimes arrange complete dinner table settings in order to advantage the display of their wares — tables, chairs, chinaware, glassware, flatware, vases, candelabras, etc — in order to evoke a sense of their potential for the viewer or purchaser. These becalmed Still Lives are somewhat reminiscent of the Marie Celeste. How much more enlivened

they might be with some disruption, suggesting human involvement beyond the carefully staged setting.

For the table is a setting for action, for the drama of mealtime in modest or grand scale, for solitary mastication or convivial celebration, tea for two or an uproarious bash.

Breakfasts, lunches, tea parties, dinners, suppers

A table setting is a location, one might say a theatrical set, awaiting developments — waiting for something specific to the setting to occur. The drama is played out, with the host or hostess playing the role of dramatist and director: determining the formal or more casual nature of the meal; the menu, including the number of courses; the selection and positioning of guests, if there are to be more than those who usually gather around the table; and contriving the setting of the table before the event. The acts, entr'actes and asides of the meal may take the form of: thanksgiving and toasts (words : solo or in unison); passing and receiving /giving and taking (movement and murmuring); sharing and hoarding; mastication and ingestion; the clink of glass touching glass, the chatter of cutlery on ceramic; a burp; intimate conversation; crossfire; laughter. Crumbs are dropped; a petal falls; a wine-glass leaves its ring on the damask; soup splashes, pasta flicks in a whiplash of bol sauce, raspberry coulis is shed between plate and mouth. There is an aroma of garlic, tomato and basil, perhaps seafood or lamb, followed by the sweetness of caramel, fresh strawberries, coffee, peppermint creams, perfume, illicit cigarette breath. All this — the creation and then the clearing of the mess takes place on the tablecloth, and in the process the cloth is imbued with a narrative, inscribed in stain and shadow.

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Past imperfect : spills, stains, scorch-marks, shadows

I sit at the dining table under six down-lights, freewheeling . . . endlessly, mindlessly twirling my wineglass . . . twirling . . . twirling . . . the swirling rubies of the dregs and the six shadows are hypnotic . . . twirling . . . twirling . . . twirling . . . the glass fuses with its shadows . . . I half close my eyes . . . only the shadows remain . . . shadows of my glass . . . others . . . the narcissus . . . multiplied sixfold . . . a palimpsest of shadow over shadow . . . the objects are vague . . . obscure . . . invisible . . . I pick up a pencil and begin to draw . . .

Cloth is an exceptional witness. Spills, stains, scorch-marks, cuts, and tears provide forensic evidence of past presences and events, not just on the surface but impregnated into the fibres, lodged in the interstices of warp and weft.

The shadow, which appears as a dark area on the surface of cloth is not a stain, it is a phantom — transient, ephemeral; but with the advantage of the absorbency of the fibre or the accepting 'tooth' of the weave the shadow (or its negative) can be captured and rendered with ink, pencil, paint, or dye. Thus the shadow is transformed from a apparition into a more or less permanent image. While not in the same league as the Turin Shroud, or the Veronica, the table-cloth, by virtue of its

absorbency, accepts and bears witness to events which have taken place upon its surface. (The marks on the Shroud and the Veronica were not shadows, of course, and are probably not considered to be stains — the word lacks salutary affirmation. One might presume they were more like scorch-marks generated by the Radiant Corpus, such as might be left from a cigarette ember.)

The tablecloth — that genteel article, which most of us use only occasionally in these accelerated days of fast and faster food — provides evidence of convivial or solitary acts and scenes performed at the meal table, whether a festive repast, a simple family gathering, a romantic meal-for-two, or an austere and solitary near-fast. Spills and stains, or the lack of them, are articulate. They may furnish mere hints or solid clues about the drama at the set table — an exposé of pasts, perfect or imperfect. Accompanied by shadows, they become eloquent.

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Memory, its shadows, stain the warp and weft of our being; stain the thread (like ikat) before the cloth is woven; stain the cord before the cut is made, the knot is tied.

Shadows darken and merge with evening; dissipate when the light would conjure for the yearning eye or soul some sharp, delineated evidence of what was. With their disappearance, the memory of objects, of their use, gains weight, can be touched, felt, palpated, their heft ascertained, they can be smelled, heard. Listen to the clink of glass, feel the edge of the knife, who is it chews so loudly, (or are they gnashing their teeth?) The wail will follow by and by, in the small hours, when all is threatened by the dawn. Listen for it.

The mood is fragile, easily fractured by the optimism of early birds, shattered by the blaze which simultaneously heightens and obliterates both memories and shadows.

Memories fuse into shadows. Breathe on them and they begin to smoulder, with the apt tinder of words may ignite, flare, leaving scorch-marks behind our eyes, ash and the smell of smoke — aromatic or acrid.

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Mesh : pixels and shadows

Where's the matter? When is the shadow? Why is a raven like a writing desk?⁸

The Last Afternoon Tea represents an event horizon at which both subjects and objects are absolutely pixilated, time is warped, space wefted, matter degenerates and dissolves into a web of shadows, and the decorous institution of afternoon tea is nonsensically disrupted as the world disintegrates into a mesh of holes, a fabric of deceit. The scientific paradigm is exposed as yet another subterfuge; and the nubile paragon of 'the object' is transfigured, it materialises, crumples, battered and worn, audaciously daring to sag and wrinkle, as pixels distort. Alice, as always, is consumed by curiosity, but just for now, Albert E. has only one answer to the riddle, and it may not be the right one.

How to grasp pixels? How to mould the digitally wasted image? How to recall and reanimate the debilitated object, purged of all imperfections, eccentricities, foibles? And how to do all this while acknowledging the legitimacy and authoritative presence of the digitised, pixilated world? Annealed and malleable metal mesh, like clay under the hand (but with gloves to protect against sharp ends of wire) invites a collaborative enterprise, asks to be bent and buckled and folded and pleated and squeezed and stretched and crushed into shapes — the shapes of objects, of objects on a table setting — objects so often rendered bland and lifeless in their virtual re-representation. And metal mesh — its warp and weft creating rows and rows of squares (or pixels) — weaves a world in emulation of the virtual with its mathematical precision, its logical configuration as an archetypical grid, its ordered representation of the binary, digitised world. So uncanny in its seamlessness, and, when malleable, almost as compliant as the swirl function in Photoshop, it is easily sabotaged.

Today, objects are regularly ‘cooled’ as they are rendered virtual through digitisation; and when the digital is materialised by way of the controlled mathematical precision of CAD/CAM, this neutrality is exacerbated. Provoked by the fragmented, yet paradoxically apparently smooth and seamless serenity of the digital world, mesh invites the repossession of form and matter as an agency for a poetic material manifestation of digitised objects, where the warp and weft delineate potentially addressable points — an heterodoxically ironic departure from binary order, approached through a hands-on rendering, replete with expressive foibles and ‘faults’, of a series of generations of objects which evolve from the nearly-nubile paragon to something more experienced and idiosyncratic.

While permitting these tactical manoeuvres, mesh evokes aspects of the domestic world — the domain of the Still Life. In its usual role in this country, as insect screen, it simultaneously lets ‘nature’ in and keeps ‘nature’ out — allowing the passage of ‘fresh’ air while denying access to flies, mosquitos, moths, and other undesirables.

Mesh is both there and not there. The warp and weft of the wire is not only palpable, it also evokes digitised wire frame design drawings of potential objects, as well as those renderings of visually alluring but bafflingly inconceivable astronomical space-time dimensions.

To add to the complexity, there are the magical effects of moire created when one layer of mesh crosses another, or intersects with its shadow — an effect which changes with even a slight movement of the viewer’s head as reality swims in an illusion of shadows and digits — leaving both view and viewer utterly pixilated.

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*Oh, the knowledge of impermanence
That haunts our days
Is their very fragrance*

Rainer Maria Rilke⁹

Flowers and stone

Flowers my mother lovingly embroidered on linen tablecloths for her glory box — poppies, daisies, cornflowers; flowers arranged in vases; flowers drawn and flowers painted; flowers in gardens, in my garden — roses and dandelions; flowers in graveyards — real ones in wreaths, vibrant then wilting, plastic ones held in jars full of pebbles, gaudily tacky, then fading, disturbingly pallid; flowers of colourfully glazed ceramic; flowers made of metal, flowers of stone. Embroidering, arranging, drawing and painting flowers is women's work. So is carving them from stone.

Women and the portrayal of flowers — what a fecund collaboration! Flower painting is an art form which has been practised with patient dedication, with passion and flamboyance by so many fine artists : by seventeenth century Dutch artists Marian Van Oosterwijk and Rachael Ruysch, by Georgia O'Keefe in the USA; developed with schematic clarity in paintings and linocuts by Margaret Preston; depicted with accurate specificity in botanical studies by Ellis Rowan and Celia Rosser, and captured by Olive Cotton in her hauntingly beautiful photographs.

Whatever else they may symbolise, in the Still Life, flowers, along with fruit and vegetables, traditionally have attested to both the bounty of nature and to mortality. The skull and the candle also appeared as memento mori. However, the flower, both notionally and beautifully, eminently satisfies the role as we witness it wilt, fade, and fall in a fast-forward demonstration of our human destiny. Flesh falls from cheeks as petals fall from flowers, leaving the comparative constancy of bone in a reprieve from the tumult of fleshly joy and anguish. However, the flower, as a holder of seeds and a harbinger of fruit, also symbolises regenerative optimism.

So many flowers! How could one not be bewitched by their beauty, not be fascinated by the richness of their symbolism? There are flowers 'of nature' picked, pinched, purchased, arranged, smelled, admired; planted, watched sprout, bud, burst, bloom, wilt, fade and fall; flowers rejoiced in, and sometimes wept over; flowers pressed, photographed, drawn, painted, modelled, carved, and written of; flowers 'of artifice', observed in shops, markets, on restaurant tables, on hats, on graves; and flowers 'of culture', wrought in metal, modelled in ceramic or carved in stone in churches and cemeteries, embroidered into tapestries, woven into carpets, painted onto vessels and tiles, tessellated into walls and onto floors, and digitised. Flowers, produced and reproduced in so many ways, in order to thwart their transience. And stone, which is slow to work and slow in its decay into finer particles, is ideally suited to the preservation of the provisional, the ephemeral, the illusory. The French word for floral funerary ornaments — *Immortelles* — is telling. The stone flower, durably set in time, perpetuates the idea of the flower and its (and our) inevitable fate.

In the Parisian cemeteries of Montparnasse and Perre Lachaise the ground groans with the weight of stone. The graves in the old Jewish cemetery in Prague crowd into the earth, layer upon layer upon layer. The little graveyards in our country towns touch the earth more lightly. But always there are flowers — fresh flowers piled on the mounded earth of new graves, dead flowers, flowers wreathed in anniversary commemoration, plastic flowers, flowers of ceramic, metal, stone. A vivid memory of sheets of scarlet tulips in the cemetery in Helsinki, of tiny violets springing up among the densely packed graves in Prague, and of a solitary faded plastic rose, blown against a barbwire fence after a storm.

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(memo)

The white camellia has dropped . . . now the cherry blossom has fallen, the wattle birds feed their young on the tiny fruit . . . the narcissus has wilted, faded, turned vague and translucent, but its shadow is sharply defined on the table beneath the vase . . . the dandelion is an aeolian clock . . . the rose petals have fallen . . . the worms writhe at their feast . . . roots stir . . . buds will swell . . . a shadow is carved from stone.

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Margaret West 2008

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¹from Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

²Memento mori : (L. 'Remember you must die') a reminder of death, often included in sixteenth and seventeenth century Still Lifes in the form of a skull, candle, or flowers.

³A fascinating overview of the modern still life is provided by the book which catalogues this exhibition Objects of Desire : the Modern Still Life by Margit Rowell, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1997.

⁴In his famous allegory, Plato likens untutored people to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects out of their sight. Dialogues of Plato, the Jowett Translations, edited by Justin D. Kaplan, Washington Square Press 1951.

⁵David Blyth Advanced Graphic programming Techniques using OpenGL, Silicon Graphics, 1999.

⁶As in the case of 'The Original, The New, The Marvellous Foot Silhouettist Chassino - Sole Inventor and Creator of the World'. Jonathan Allen, Sleight of Light, Cabinet, quarterly of Art and Culture, Issue 24, 2006-2007

⁷from Obsession, Les Fleurs du Mal (1861) (Baudelaire The Complete Verse tr Francis Scarfe, Anvil Press Poetry, 1986)

⁸This last question is The Hatter's riddle put to Alice at the Mad Tea Party, in Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. Although no answer was proffered by Carroll or his preposterous characters, it seems probable that Albert E. would have come up with one.

⁹from Sonnets to Orpheus, Part Two, XXVII, translated by Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy