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Loaded Things: The semiotics of objects in Still Life.

Exploring how still life objects function as ‘visual signs’ within cultural and historical contents.

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List of Contents

List of Figures.....	2
Abstract	3
Introduction:.....	4
Chapter 1: Still Life and Symbolism.	5
Case 1: Artist Studies.	6
Chapter 2: Semiotics and the language of things.	10
The Turn Towards Theory: How Semiotics Reframed Still Life.	11
The Viewers Role as Interpreters	12
The Autonomy of Things: OOO and Vibrant Matter.	13
Chapter 3: Contemporary Reinterpretations, from Vanitas to Consumer Culture.	14
Transition from Morality to Materialism.	15
Reloaded Meanings.....	17
Conclusion	20
Bibliography.....	21
References:	23

List of Figures

Fig 1, Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, 1640

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436636>

Fig 2 Abraham van Beyeren, *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit*, early 1650's

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435663>

Fig 3. Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill*, 1628.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435904>

Fig 4, Clara Peeters, *still life with Cheese, Artichoke, and Cherries*, 1615

<https://collections.lacma.org/node/209186>

Fig 5, Paul Cezanne, *Still Life with Apples* (1895)

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78486>

Fig 6, Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, 1956

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/giorgio-morandi-still-life-natura-morta>

Fig 7, Wayne Theibaud, *Cakes*, 1963

<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/72040-cakes>

Fig 8, Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007

<https://www.muca.eu/en/exhibition/damien-hirst-for-the-love-of-god/>

Fig 9, Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #03, from the series "Ill Form & Void Full"*, 2011

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/laura-letinsky-untitled-number-03-from-the-series-ill-form-and-void-full>

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how still life objects function as semiotic symbols of meaning in both historical and contemporary art. It will examine how the genre of still life uses objects to convey human experiences of life and death, and how such interpretations have changed both theoretically and culturally. This will take place of three chapters. The first chapter looks at the beginnings of still life symbolism and its ethical connections to the Vanitas paintings. The second chapter examines the semiotics and language of things, examining the development and interpretation of meaning. And the third chapter examines modern reinterpretations, showing how the still life has evolved from a moral reflection to a commentary on consumer culture. By examining how artists continuously reimagine still life, this dissertation argues that objects remain powerful constructs of human experience. They convey subtly but strongly about the frailty and beauty of life, merging the gap between life and death, permanence and disintegration.

Introduction:

Still life, as a visual and cultural practice, has long been used as a tool to construct and deconstruct ideas surrounding life, death and material existence. Its unique capacity to transform ordinary objects into vessels of meaning has positioned the genre at the forefront of exploring how humans understand value, temporality, and symbolism. Throughout art history, the still life genre has both mirrored and shaped cultural beliefs, acting as a mechanism for expressing both moral and philosophical narratives through items. The representation of objects in still life can reveal how societies perceive mortality, beauty and consumption, reflecting changing relationships between humans and the material world.

For centuries, objects have been essential to creative practise, yet their meanings have changed dramatically throughout time. Still life became a highly significant genre in the seventeenth century, especially during the Dutch Vanitas era. These pieces mainly included fruits, flowers, skulls and extinguished candles, which functioned as moral warnings of the transience of life and the pointlessness of material possessions. a visual language of morality and mortality was formed by each object carrying a coded message. However, the philosophical and symbolic significance of these items changed along with social and artistic settings.

Art historian Norman Bryson argued that still life “withholds narrative and confronts us instead with the sheer fact of material presence” (Bryson, 1990, p.61). This claim marks a turning point in how still life can be read, not solely as moral instruction, but as an exploration of perception, materiality, and being. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists such as Paul Cezanne and Giorgio Morandi redefined still life by focusing on the quiet vitality of objects, suggesting that meaning exists not only in what the objects symbolises, but in the act of seeing itself. Their work transformed still life from an analogy of death into a meditation on existence.

This change has become much more prominent in modern practise. Through photography and moving images, artists have been able to revive still life, reinterpreting its moral and symbolic values within the framework of modern culture. The artists in current day of age can express contemporary concerns about consumption and impermanence while recalling the vanitas tradition by using everyday objects to explore themes of excess, fragility and temporality. They reimagine still life that it becomes a place of conflict between loss and want, richness and decay.

Chapter 1: Still Life and Symbolism.

Still life has always functioned as more than a neutral display of items, it is a genre deeply ingrained with symbolic meaning and cultural value. As Norman Bryson argues “still life withholds narrative and confronts us instead with the sheer fact of material presence” (Bryson, 1990, pg61). This tension between silence and significance allows objects to function as carriers of symbolic meaning rather than just a passive visual detail. From its earliest appearances in Western art, still life has operated as a visual language through which painters have examined issues of mortality, time, morality, riches and human desire. Through the careful selection and arrangement of everyday items, artists have been able to communicate complex ideas without relying on narrative or human beings. This challenges the viewer to look attentively and to analyse, transforming everyday material things into carriers of rich meaning.

The introduction of still life as a recognisable genre, particularly during the Renaissance and the Dutch Golden Age, signalled a dramatic shift in how items were regarded within art. no longer confined to the background of religious or historical themes, objects became the principal subject allowing their symbolic potential to be fully fulfilled. Fruits, flowers, vessels and domestic items were no longer simple representations of workmanship, but signs that represented greater philosophical, theological and social concerns. Still life, became a place where life and death, pleasure and decay, permanence and impermanence coexisted inside a single image because to customs like Vanitas and Memento Mori. this view of objects as active symbolism is further confirmed by Svetlana Alpers, who describes Dutch still life as a method of gazing that emphasises “the descriptive presentation of the world” (Alper's, 1983), which encourages stronger observation whilst depicting still life. In this sense, items can serve as signs with cultural or philosophical significance, rather than just being decorative. To understand how value, time and transience are encoded through material, the viewer must investigate the image slowly, and carefully.

Building on the symbolic underpinnings established in this chapter, the following discussion extends this study through closer investigation of how artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries employed still life objects to communicate certain topics. Artists created artistic commentary on ideologies through objects. These items served as purposeful signs rather than being picked at random. Exotic items were brought into European homes by the expansion of international trade during this time and their depiction in still life served as a warning against material luxury as well as a demonstration of economic power. By studying how artists interrogated these social and moral tensions inside material form, this chapter explores how visual language of objects not only moulded artistic practise, but also influenced broader cultural understandings of value, morality and human existence.

Case 1: Artist Studies.

For instance, Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1684) was a well-known figure in Dutch and Flemish still life paintings from the 17th century. His elaborate compositions captured the pronkstilleven still life genre, a term used for a painting characterized by displays of luxury goods that showcased wealth and status. His works are characterised by careful precision, colouration, and symbolic richness, reflecting both the material wealth and the moral contemplations of his era. De Heems paintings generally contain luxurious displays of fruits, flowers and expensive things, precisely portrayed to showcase texture and detail. This approach aligns with the pronkstilleven style, which emerged in Antwerp during the 1640s, aiming to display wealth and abundance, reflecting the social aspirations of the burgeoning merchant class (Meijer, 2008).



Fig 1, Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, 1640

The piece *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, 1640 follows the Baroque concepts of dramatic lighting and balance in terms of style. The observer is urged to think about each object's symbolic worth in addition to their materiality by the shadow and reflection. The curled lemon peel as well as slice, can be sensed as a common theme in Dutch still life, which emphasises impermanence, despite its appearance, it symbolises bitterness underneath surface beauty and the certainty of decay, whilst the oysters and wine can signify indulgence, symbolising the conflict between pleasure and spiritual discipline that is typical of Dutch Protestant culture and has historically been associated with both celebration and moral caution. The art is profoundly anchored in the tradition of moral commentary found in the Dutch still life paintings. Although Da Heem's dedication to traditional objects and patterns places him within the classic collection of still life, his layering of meaning implies a concern about control and consumption. By executing the still life's expected visual language while

exposing the weakness that underlies its grace and order, his method unintentionally traps tradition. His work subtly questions the very social ideas it appears to support, while upholding the genres aesthetic standards.



Fig 2, *Abraham van Beyeren, Still Life with Lobster and Fruit*, early 1650's

Again, Dutch painter Abraham van Beyeren is internationally renowned for his rich pronkstilleven, or bold still life paintings, which highlight abundance, luxury, and material excess. These compositions generally incorporate expensive and imported objects such as fine China, exotic fruits and vessels, all placed in dramatic presentations. Because they were expensive and rare, these items had significant cultural value during the Dutch Golden Age, they represented not only individual wealth but also the Dutch trading empires global reach and the higher social standing of those who could purchase these goods. As a result, van Beyeren's still life's act as both a visual celebration of riches and as a representation of the economic power of the Dutch Republic.

In *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* (early 1650s), van Beyeren portrays a carefully arranged table overflowing with luxury food and priceless artefacts. The lobster itself functions as a powerful symbol of luxury and excess because it was once thought to be an expensive treat exclusive to the upper class. The surrounding fruits, many of which would have been imported, strengthen the impression of global trade and imperial expansion. When combined, these items create a picture of plenty that captures the wealth of Dutch trade in the seventeenth century. However, beyond this facade of wealth lurks a more significant symbolic message. Many of the things in the composition subtly undermine the appearance of gluttony. Half-eaten fruit overturned or unstable vessels, add chaos into what initially appears to be a controlled and refined setting. These characteristics speak to the temporary nature of pleasure and the fragility of material excess, the components serve as moral cautions in the

vanitas painting tradition, reminding spectators that material wealth cannot withstand the passage of time and that earthly pleasures are impermanent. The eye is drawn in by the objects' glossy surfaces and alluring textures, but their chaos indicates loss and decay. In this way, the picture acts in tension between yearning and restriction, abundance and decay. Cultural critic Miya Tokumitsu underscores this duality in van Beyeren's work, noting how his paintings simultaneously reflect and mask the reality of consumption and excess. They contend that the richness in these compositions appears to materialise "as if by magic rather than toil," hiding the labour, exploitation, and global systems of trade that made such luxury possible (Tokumitsu, 2021). The image's attraction is strengthened by this delusion of effortless wealth, which hides the financial and personal expenses associated with it.



Fig 3. Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill*, 1628.

Vanitas painting, a genre with strong roots in theological and philosophical reflection of mortality, the passing of time, and the pointlessness of material effort, saw an unparalleled development in the Dutch Republic throughout the seventeenth century. Pieter Claesz is one of the most important and respected artists in this style. His *Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill* (1628), turns commonplace objects into profound reflections of human existence, is a prime example of the quiet intensity and moral resonance that characterised vanitas still life. Claesz expresses a moral world view influenced by Calvinist spirituality (centres on God's absolute sovereignty, emphasizing his irresistible grace in salvation for the chosen ones) (Bouwsmas, 2018) and early modern intellectual ideas through the subdued tonal palette, restrained compositions and well selected materials. A modest yet strongly symbolic arrangement of a skull, inkpot, a quill, a book and a pocket watch is presented within this

painting. In keeping with the biblical warning from Ecclesiastes that “all is vanity and a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14), each item serves as a visual metaphor for the fleeting time of life and the unpredictability of human understanding. Claesz’s painting embodies this truth, using sharp material forms to communicate spiritual truths without narration or figuration. Additional levels of meaning are added by the writing quill and inkpot. They present human intelligence and the quest for knowledge, all of which were highly valued in the educated Protestant culture of the Dutch Republic. However, when similar items are positioned next to a skull, they serve as reminders of the limitations of education. Dutch still life frequently demonstrates how “the world described is always on the verge of disappearing” as noted by Svetlana Alpers (Alpers 1983, p.87). Books and writing tools in Claesz composition hint to the desire of learning, and artistic effort, but their closeness to death symbolises the fragility of intellectual legacy. No matter how carefully information is pursued or documented, death is always inevitable.

Additionally, the tonal contrast of the light gently falling onto the quill and skull whilst the background fades into darkness serves a symbolic purpose. The surrounding darkness alludes to the unknown beyond life, which is consistent with Christian belief, regarding the uncertainty of existence, while the lit skull becomes a sharp visual reminder of mortality. Because of Claesz’s understanding on tonal variation, the moral message of Vanitas operates subtly but profoundly, encouraging a contemplative, intentional engagement with the fleeting nature of life and the uncertainty of deterioration. As a metaphor for the transient nature of human existence, objects seem to momentarily emerge from shadow before disappearing back into it. This reinforces the idea that all possessions, including riches, wisdom, beauty and even memory will eventually fade.

Chapter 2: Semiotics and the language of things.

Semiotics refers to the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, which provide a critical framework for understanding how visual art communicates beyond the eye. It has its roots in Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theories and was then later developed in

Roland Barthes cultural analysis, how objects can operate as carriers of meaning, and how interpretation is shaped by context, culture and time. Semiotics becomes not just helpful but crucial in the field of still life, a genre that is essentially concerned with the organisation, display and symbolic liveliness of items (Hudek). It enables us to think about how meaning is constructed rather than built-in, and how artworks function as coded systems that the viewer must actively decode. By using these lenses, still life is transformed into a field where tangible objects and interpretive frameworks join to produce complex dynamic meanings.

The Turn Towards Theory: How Semiotics Reframed Still Life.

Strongly influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, the theoretical shift of the late 20th century drew emphasis to how images create meaning. The development of semiotics as a technique for analysing visual culture was greatly influenced by Roland Barthes. Barthes proposes in *Image-Music-Text* (1977) that images function through two levels of meaning being: denotation (the literal object shown) and connotation (cultural or emotional associations). This illustrates how commonplace objects develop meaning when used in still life paintings, the way he emphasises that objects themselves shape perception when he states, “the image no longer illustrates the words: it is the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image” (Barthes 1977, p25). This chapter will primarily focus on Clara Peeters and Paul Cezanne.



Fig 4, Clara Peeters, *still life with Cheese, Artichoke, and Cherries*, 1615

Understanding the semiotics possibilities in the seventeenth century is enhanced by applying this to Clara Peeters work. Cheese, cherries, and a sliced bread serve as both denotative (food items) and connotative (luxury, domestic order) objects in her *Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke and Cherries* (1615). How these elements create a coded language that would have been understandable to modern viewers is made clear by semiotic reading. For example, Dutch still life “constructs knowledge visually” (p75), treating items as carriers of social identity, as noted by Alpers (1983). According to semiotics, the silver cup that Peeters

prominently displays is a sign of riches, but also represents the rising of merchant elite, and class aspiration. Another important element is that the viewer is led to a certain interpretation by Peeters' reflections, which are miniature self-portraits concealed within the metal. These features do more than just decorate the surface, they contribute to the construction of the painting's meaning system by situating the painter's presence within the symbolic space of the piece. This illustrates how semiotics may show how items influence relationships between the artist, the subject, and the audience in addition to what they visually depict. Brusati (1997) claims that Peeters uses accurate portrayal to ground meaning in material presence in a “visual argument for the authority of things” (p138). Her constant use of knives pointing in the direction of the audience serves as both a visual cue and a signifier of involvement and invitation, providing evidence to support this claim. The reason for this could be that the knives direction semiotically suggest entry to the scene, reducing the gap between the viewer and the portrayed domestic world.



Fig 5, Paul Cezanne, *Still Life with Apples* (1895)

Similarly, Paul Cezanne's use of objects in *Still Life with Apple* (1895) invites a semiotic reinterpretation based on the instability of perception itself. Cezanne purposefully disrupts convention perspective, allowing the objects to function as signifiers of the process of looking rather than as carriers of set symbolic meanings. He successfully “displaces symbolic content with the epistemology of seeing” as Shiff (p42) observes. From this perspective, the apples represent the subjectivity and uncertainty of vision instead of moral or domestic connections. This illustrates how theory reveals how visual signs function and how meaning is created, contested, and reconstructed rather than merely complicating the artwork for its own sake. The viewer's expectations are thrown off by the tilted plates, fluctuating curves, and misaligned edges, which erode the signifier's stability. Cézanne produces an unstable signifier that leads to several conflicting interpretations rather than a single, unified signified.

The Viewers Role as Interpreters

According to semiotic theory, an artwork meaning is created through interpretation rather than being rooted in the visual. Barthes emphasises how viewers actively create meaning by using the cultural codes at their own disposal, producing interpretations that can go beyond or even conflict with the artist's initial goal. This interpretative role is particularly important because still life relies significantly on symbolic elements, what a viewer recognises or values within the composition depends on the cultural context they bring to the artwork.

Interpretations of a painting can change greatly between cultures and eras because viewers interpret images through their own social and historical circumstances. When seeing Clara Peeters' still lives in the seventeenth century, a Dutch observer would probably concentrate on symbols of riches and national identity because these issues were highly relevant to their society. Whereas a viewer in present day can interpret the same picture from a completely different perspective, possibly observing her delicate use of reflections as an indication of artistic authorship or understanding her objects considering contemporary discussions about visibility and gender. Similarly, Cezanne's apples were initially written off by the nineteenth century critics as awkward or incomplete, but later analysed by modernist concepts, which were seen as intentional visual experiments. These modifications show that while the signifier (the painted item itself) remains constant, the signified (the meaning associated with it) varies as societal norms and value change throughout time. A still life painting becomes a place where meaning is continuously revisited rather than conveying a single, definitive message, making the observer a co-producer of meaning. Finding a single correct interpretation is not the goal of any painting but is about identifying how cultural knowledge and individual experiences influence an artwork's meaning. As a result, still life functions as a flexible semiotic system where meanings, change, overlap and develop rather than stay constant. No painting ever has a single goal; it invites the observer to explore further.

The Autonomy of Things: OOO and Vibrant Matter.

In recent theoretical advances in philosophy and visual culture, the idea that objects only acquire meaning from human viewers has been challenged. Graham Harman and Jane Bennett put forth frameworks that oppose humanistic theories of interpretation, contending that things have kinds of agency and inherent complexity that surpass the symbolic roles that are attributed to them. These concepts, which are fundamental to theories of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Vibrant Matter provide a new perspective on still life by redefining objects as active actors with their own ontological presence rather than passive parts of a semiotic system.

According to Harman's work on OOO, objects exist apart from human perception. He contends in *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2018) that objects "withdraw" from full understanding, holding onto elements of their existence that cannot be represented or utilised (p. 47). Traditional semiotic techniques, which highlight the link between signifier and signified, are significantly countered by this. From an OOO standpoint, that relationship becomes a single aspect of the object's existence rather than its entirety. This implies that

things in still life do more than just serve as symbols; they express themselves as creatures with presence, weight, and texture that influence how they are seen. This can be seen within, Cezanne's work as in art history, his apples are often characterised as dense and self-contained, which is consistent in Harman's theory that objects contain a "excess" that goes beyond their depiction. The apples in Cezanne's paintings seem to have their own world that functions apart from the observers' eyes. Their rounded shapes and varied colours create a physical demand that seems to defy semiotic reduction as they occupy a large portion of the painting area. They are felt as much as they are perceived. Cezanne's approach to form is proof of this freedom. The objects firmness and independence are highlighted by his inability to follow stable perspective, colour and layering. The tension between warm and cool tones creates volume as the apple appear to push forward because of their visual weight, they look animated by their own material logic rather than symbolic meaning. This reinforces the idea that Cezanne's objects have a vibrant personality that determines how the painting functions as an encounter with things rather than signs, instead, than being passive themes placed for the viewers consideration.

This focus is extended to the autonomy of non-human creatures in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) which suggest that matter is lively, capable of exerting power and engaging in systems of interaction. She says objects "act as forces with trajectories, prosperities, or tendencies" if we work with this viewpoint, still life is a negotiation between non-humans and human agencies, objects are co-creators of the artworks visual and intellectual results rather than just being chosen for their symbolic possibilities. This interaction between material vitality and human aim can be shown in Clara Peeters's still lives. Her mirrored surfaces, knives, and metal goblets are frequently interpreted through semiotics as symbols of household identity, trade, and riches. However, these items can also be seen as materially contributing to the painting's meaning using Bennett's framework. For example, the shine of cutlery is not only a representation of luxury but also results from the way metal behaves physically when exposed to light. The microscopic self-portraits, distortions, and glimmers that show up as reflections on the glossy surfaces are not only works of art; rather, they are the outcome of interactions between materials and their surroundings. This brightness is ingrained in the thing before it is perceived; it comes before signification.

Harman and Bennett work together to promote a shift away from the notion that still life is merely a coded arrangement that needs to be decoded. They suggest that via their existence and resistance to complete understanding, objects themselves take part in the process of creating meaning. This change broadens the scope of still-life interpretation from a simply semiotic exercise to one that is more materially engaged, where the autonomy of objects is crucial to the artwork's communication.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Reinterpretations, from Vanitas to Consumer Culture.

The symbolic function of still life has never remained stable. The meaning of the objects that painters choose to depict changes along with cultural objectives. Modern and contemporary artists adapt these once fixed symbols into reflections of material culture, technological development, and the stresses of daily life, whereas vanitas in the seventeenth century focused primarily on morality, mortality, and the effects of earthly pleasure. The still life genres ongoing emphasis on temporality and the close interaction between people and their surroundings is what maintains coherent throughout these changes. However, there has been a significant shift in the expression of temporality. The transition from symbolic moral aim to studies of perception, consumer culture, and the silent agency of objects was shown by artists like Giorgio Morandi and Wayne Thiebaud. Their work serves as the basis for modern artists like Laura Letinsky, Sharon Core and Damien Hearse to reimagine still life for a world characterised by constant global capitalisation, and environmental anxiety.

Transition from Morality to Materialism.

One of the biggest changes in the still-life genre is the transition from moral caution to material obsession. Items like skulls, extinguished candles, and rotten fruit represented mortality and the necessity of spiritual reflection in seventeenth-century vanitas (Alpers, 1983). These symbols lost their religious significance as Western civilisation became more industrialised and temporal. Instead, they started to express worries about consumerism, abundance and the unpredictability of contemporary living. The still life started to focus more on the oppressive demands of this world and less on the afterlife.



Fig 6, Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, 1956

Giorgio Morandi offers a crucial place to start when tracking the change of still life. Working in mid twentieth century Italy, Morandi occupies the line between historical and modern still life, his simple bottles, jars and crates are placed in gentle tonal harmonies in his painting

Natura Morta, 1956. The warm neutrals, dusty whites and muted palette simplify the world to necessities and eliminates the glamour of both Dutch pronkstijl and post war commercial society. Morandi rejects abundance altogether, he emphasises the quiet presence of common place items rather than those of luxury. These items encourage reflection rather than serving as symbols for religious teachings. As Rossi (2018) argues, Morandi replaces moral allegory with “attentive looking” shifting the still life from an instructional genre to a perceptual one. This implies that Morandi’s art invites viewers to focus on subtle changes in tone, space and light, rather than symbolic interpretation. He transforms the still life into a study of perception by eliminating moral clues, making the viewers awareness crucial. This change places his paintings less as narrative instruction and more as a silent investigation how meaning might arise by focusing on the piece.

Wayne Thiebaud, like Morandi, also welcomed the development of consumerist pleasure. In the painting *Cake* (1963), rows of vibrantly frosted cakes are arranged as though in a shopfront. Although Thiebaud’s image is clearly contemporary, the composition is reminiscent of the organised arrangement of Dutch dinner pieces. The appeal of post war American abundance mass produced food, vibrant colours and the expanding culture of indulgence is reflected in this piece, the way that he utilises food to examine want and the allure of consumer goods, whereas historical still life use it to depict themes of decay. The layout of dessert is transformed into an exhibit by his thick brushstrokes alongside his pastel colour theme, which intensifies the sweetness.



Fig 7, Wayne Thiebaud, *Cakes*, 1963

The postwar recovery in the United States, which was characterised by growing consumerism, suburbanisation, and the celebration of abundance as a sign of national triumph, is reflected in Thiebaud's *Cakes* (1963). Thiebaud's art "captures the optimism and excess of American consumption" while quietly recognising its superficiality, according to Livingston (1994). In this instance, Livingston probably alludes to the painting's representation of the era's excitement for material possessions and the prospect of wealth while also alluding to its hollow nature. The conflict between optimism and superficiality in 1960s American culture is captured by the solitary, thoughtfully placed cakes, which allude to both the appeal of consumption and the repetitive, occasionally empty character of mass-produced pleasures. Together, Morandi and Thiebaud show how religious morality gave way to focus on the psychological and cultural effects on material life in modern still life. Their creations serve as models for modern artists who continue this shift by making direct criticisms of waste and capitalism.

Reloaded Meanings

As modern artists reinterpret the still life tradition, they use well known themes but refocus them on issues that feel more relevant to the twenty-first century. Contemporary still life frequently shows how mortality is intertwined with large scale processes such as international trade, and the constant circulation of images, rather than utilising items to convey moral warnings about death. Due to the circumstances influencing daily life have altered, the symbolic vocabulary of still life becomes unstable. Death is no longer contemplated through

moral instruction or theological allegory, but rather through excess waste, reproduction and how modern society is changing overwhelmingly fast.

For the Love of God by Damien Hirst (2007) is one of the best illustrations of how Vanitas symbolism has been transformed for a society that values extravagance and spectacle. The memento mori tradition is directly referenced by the diamond-encrusted skull, yet its significance changes according to the new environment it enters. The piece reveals how modern capitalism glamourises death and presents it as a luxury, rather than serving as a spiritual warning. The skull is transformed into a product by using valuable materials to polish, refine, and create fake immortality. Caldwell (2012) argues that the piece "collapses critique and participation," which means that it both exposes and represents the ideals of the system it seems to be criticising. It turns mortality into something glamorous and powerful from a financial standpoint, mocking excess while actively engaging in it.



Fig 8, Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007

In this way, Hirst substitutes a commentary on the economics of contemporary life for the moral lesson of historical Vanitas, that death is no longer the equaliser, rather it is now a component of optimistic culture that values riches. The diamonds are essential to this change, as they hold histories of extraction, labour and international trade, hidden processes that provide the appearance of effortless beauty but also representing value and durability. Hirst's skull draws attention to the disconnection between what we consume and the labour or destruction that enables it. This detachment echoes a wider cultural condition that objects lose their symbolic weight because they circulate too quickly, replaced by trends, branding, and constant. In a society where materialism functions as its own ideology, Hirst utilises the visual language of Vanitas. Rather than inspiring the audience to consider spiritual salvation, the piece reveals how society excessively conceals vulnerability, he reflects the contradiction that mortality becomes something to avoid rather than face. The skull, which has always

served as a historical symbol of the bodies impending end, becomes a material that fulfils illusion of permanence when deterioration is turned into something desirable.

Whilst Hirst engages with mortality through spectacle, Laura Letinsky approaches it through absence, residue and the aftermath of consumption, she employs fragments rather than whole still life setups in her work, especially within *Untitled* (from the *III Form and Void Full* Series, 2011). Items that are usually disregarded take centre stage of the piece of work, such as half eaten fruits, wrappers. These features allude to historical still lives, but Letinsky depicts what is left behind rather than plenty and luxury. Some parts of the piece reveal mortality, what's left over after food has been consumed, desire has faded and the moment of pleasure has passed. However, Mark Durant (2004) examined that Letinsky had drawn inspiration from seventeenth century still life by adopting its ambiguity and fragmented storytelling. Like Dutch painters who implied narratives through subtle object placement, she uses leftovers and traces to suggest open-ended stories.



Fig 9, Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #03*, from the series *"Ill Form & Void Full"*, 2011

Letinsky's surfaces are frequently overexposed and pale, giving the impression that everything is delicate, it conveys the rubble of daily existence rather than refined symbolism. Meyer (2013) claims that Letinsky "transforms the still life into a meditation on waste, bringing her images into line with current worries about overproduction and the widespread usage of disposable products. Her still life's draw attention to the gap between refined appearance and the disorganised reality of consuming. The remnants in her images bear the

burden of environmental stress rather than being neutral, for example, the fruit rots and plastic outlive human life. The compositions subtly acknowledge that modern existence is characterised by a continuous flow of goods that surpass our needs as human beings, mortality appearing as a gradual buildup of rubbish rather than as a dramatic symbol.

Together, Hirst and Letinsky show how mass production has redefined still life for a society. While both artists address mortality, they do it within the framework of modern existence. Hirst turning the *momento mori* into an object of desire, whereas Letinsky emphasises how commonplace items from daily life build up, outliving their immediate use and subtly signifying the passing of time. Their work shows that the contemporary *vanitas* now explains how earthly pleasures are created, shared, and discarded rather than cautioning against them.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore how objects within still life operate as carriers of meaning, revealing the complex interplay between life, death, and material symbolism. Throughout the

research, the central question has focused on how everyday objects become “Loaded Things”. Items that exceed their physical form and instead communicate cultural, emotional and philosophical significance. By examining the historical symbolism of still life, the semiotic frameworks that shape our interpretation of objects, and the reinterpretations within contemporary art, this study has demonstrated that still life remains an active evolving language, one that continues to speak to human experiences of impermanence and existence.

Alongside the written research, my own practical work has contributed to shaping this investigation, particularly through my studies of fruit within still life compositions. Although my late work in second year engaged more explicitly with themes of life and death, these ideas continued to support my exploration of materiality in my current work. Working closely with fruit, observing its surface, and gradual deterioration revealed how a single object can embody both vitality and decline. The process of arranging and rearranging fruit and witnessing the subtle changes that occur as it ripens or begins to collapse, demonstrated how still life communicates through physical behaviour as much as through symbolic meaning. Doing this has allowed me to have an understanding that still life is not just an unchanging genre, but an ongoing and everchanging genre, one of which objects can shift, soften and decay, where meaning emerges through these quiet transformations.

Many of my findings were validated and explained in the dissertation, the study of historical still lives demonstrated how early interpretations of the genre, in which items directly addressed moral considerations on mortality, were affected by symbolism. Then, semiotic theory demonstrated how still life function as signs that change based on cultural and contextual interpretation, offering a framework for comprehending how meaning is created, interpreted and controlled. Modern artists, on the other hand, demonstrated how still life is still changing, with items now expressing worries about consumerism, and the unpredictability of contemporary existence. In all these instances, object represent the difference between presence and absence by acting as a bridge between the observer and broader human experience.

Ultimately, what has become clear is that still life offers a powerful means of thinking about existence through things. It captures the paradox that objects can be both alive with significance and marked by decay. This dissertation has demonstrated that objects are never neutral, rather, they are always imprinted with remnants of human history, emotion and experience. I have learnt through research and my own experience that still life genre is still relevant because it recognises an intimate and universal truth, that life and death coexist in every moment, in every object, and in every act of looking. This study has shown that still life is still a very relevant and expressive form of combining theory, history and artistic practise. It enables us to find purpose in the material world while facing impermanence. We encounter ourselves through objects, whether it being memories, desires, fears or mortality. Thus, still life continues to provide a foundation for comprehending what it means to be alive, to evolve, and eventually to let go.

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