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Figures

Figure 1

Letinsky, L. (no date) *Untitled #48*, *Artsy*. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/laura-letinsky-untitled-number-48-from-the-series-hardly-more-than-ever-1> (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Figure 2

Claire Forshaw (own image)

Figure 3

Tate (no date) *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's Emblems (1696)*, *Tate*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/v/vanitas> (Accessed: 03 December 2025).

Figure 4

Calle, S. (no date) *The Hotel, Room 28*, *Tate*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/calle-the-hotel-room-28-p78301> (Accessed: 03 December 2025).

Figure 5

Mann, S. (no date) *Untitled (Body Farm #18)*, *Jackson Fine Art*. Available at: <https://www.jacksonfineart.com/artworks/31335/> (Accessed: 07 December 2025).

Figure 6

Mann, S. (no date) *Untitled #48*, *Sally Mann*. Available at: <https://www.sallymann.com/body-farm> (Accessed: 05 December 2025).

Figure 7

Claesz, P. (no date) *Pieter Claesz - Vanitas, circa 1630.jpg*, *Wikimedia Commons*. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Claesz_-_Vanitas,_circa_1630.jpg (Accessed: 05 December 2025).

Figure 8

Berg, S. (2017) *The true story behind denying the Holocaust*, *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-38758249> (Accessed: 08 December 2025).

Objects of Affection: The Emotional Life of the Still Life

How do photographers use everyday objects to project emotion, construct identity, and communicate absence or intimacy?

Throughout history humans have formed sentimental bonds with objects. They give us a sense of security, comfort, and connection. This attachment stems from childhood, when we first learn to feel attached and safe, as seen in the small child with their favourite blanket or teddy, to adulthood, with their collection of family photographs and holiday souvenirs. Collecting objects helps us remember important moments and express who we are.

The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only "behind," spiralling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future.

(Stewart, 1993)

Artists throughout history have used this knowledge within the still life genre to reflect our emotional attachment to objects through symbolism, composition, and arrangement, expressing deep personal meaning and memories. Artists choose objects that carry emotional weight, such as a burning candle symbolising life, or, as in Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory*, clocks and watches symbolising the passage of time. As said by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, "We never look at just one thing, we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." (1973)

Photography keeps still life important and interesting today. It has changed how still life is made and helped it become more popular in modern culture. Photographers like Laura Letinsky, Sophie Calle and Sally Mann use still life in their photos. Individually, they show us how, in the 20th and 21st centuries, photographers continue to transform domestic objects into symbolic means and ideas.

In traditional still life arrangements, objects are carefully selected and ordered to create a visually pleasing or meaningful image. This tradition has continued in contemporary practice, with photographers using props, designing sets and constructing elaborate scenes to photograph. Other photographers search for striking arrangements to provoke thought. These photographers see extraordinary pattern and meaning in everyday things. Some images are cluttered, but there is an implied order among the chaos.

As the media has evolved from 17th-century oil paintings to more modern photography, a large portion of the meaning of still life has changed as well. While still life once mainly showcased wealth through images of lush banquets and luxury goods, and death and decay through objects like skulls and rotten fruit, it now also explores contemporary themes such as technology and environmental concerns.

Even with changes in media, the techniques and themes around still life continue because our relationships with domestic objects remain deeply emotional. We continue to see ourselves and others in the things that surround us, assigning meaning, memory, and feeling to the ordinary pieces of everyday life, like seeing the child in the unfinished apple (Fig. 2), or seeing one's partner in a wedding ring. This continuing human tendency to project emotion onto objects is why still life photography remains such a powerful way to communicate ideas. Photographers are still showing us how emotions can be expressed through the simplest of things.

One of those photographers is Laura Letinsky, with her series *Hardly More Than Ever* (1997–2004), which features still lifes that capture the remains of everyday moments. Her pictures show tables with crumbs, half-eaten fruit, used cutlery, empty glasses, and messy tablecloths, objects that hint at what happened after a gathering, not during it. These everyday leftovers tell us about relationships and conversations that took place.



Figure 1

For example, in the photograph *Untitled #48* (Fig. 1), two almost empty glasses sit close together, hinting at a private moment between two people; they represent the absence of the consumer. Within the images, Letinsky uses negative space to create a pause and a sense of emptiness. Her photos also nod to old Dutch Still Life paintings, the *vanitas*, a genre of Still Life painting that used objects, like that of the burning candle, to represent the fleeting nature of life, but she changes the genre's visual language by replacing objects of luxury with the mundane leftovers of everyday life. In doing so, Letinsky moves Still Life away from celebration and wealth towards absence, and even waste, offering the viewer a space to mourn a time that has passed, creating a feeling of impermanence and the emotional narratives within the domestic space.

Letinsky's photographs could not help but acquire a sense of loss, as there are no consumer goods around which our desires normally coalesce. They are conspicuously spare, the lust for life has expired, and along with it, any attendant sense of urgency.

(Walker, 2004)

It is this same sense of loss and the fleetingness of time which is portrayed in Figure 2. Here, the uneaten apple of my child sits, browning in the early morning sun in the aftermath of a pre-Kindergarten breakfast. With small bite marks, the apple, for a moment, becomes a stand-in for my child, standing in the sun, staring back, forcing me to meditate on the feelings of both contentment and the sense of time passing.

Similar to Letinsky's images, here the use of negative space and light helps create a sense of emptiness. The apple placed within the centre, positioned away from the other objects, reveals a moment of loneliness. The image also tells us a story of a busy and rushed life, which brings to mind the work of photographer Sophie Calle.



Figure 2

Sophie Calle's *The Hotel* (1981) explores intimacy and vulnerability by looking at the stories objects can tell. While working temporarily as a chambermaid, Calle secretly photographed hotel guests' belongings, such as clothes on beds, toiletries laid out, shoes and messy beds. Her photos are both concealing and revealing. Similar to Letinsky, Calle turns ordinary possessions into replacements for the people who own them, letting these objects speak and reveal something about the lives of strangers without ever showing us who the strangers are. Within her images (Fig. 4), Calle shows us their honest and messy lives, which, in contrast, differ greatly from the Dutch vanitas Still Life paintings, which, in some ways, are equally visually chaotic and revealing in nature, but speak a far different narrative, one of wealth, power, death and decay.



(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)

Edward Collier's painting *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's Emblems* (1696) presents a carefully arranged selection of personal objects, such as an open music book and various musical instruments, items that, at the time, signified wealth and education. If Sophie Calle's photograph *Room 28*, with its collection of shoes, an open crossword puzzle, and expensive toiletries, were transported to that era, these belongings might also symbolise privilege and learning accessible to only a select few. Yet, Calle's images do something different; they capture the hurried, everyday routines of ordinary people, shifting the focus from status to the shared realities of modern life.

The sense of abrupt and hurried abandonment demonstrated by the anonymous guest whose objects they belong to remind me of the itinerant nature and lifestyle one adopts when staying in a hotel or on holiday, and while the content of the images seem shockingly private to be viewed as a piece of art by the public audience, there is a sense of reassurance in what you see before you associates with aspects of character that you already know of and therefore find empathy with.

(Louise, no date)

When comparing Letinsky's series *Hardly More than Ever* with Calles' series *Hotel Room*, though their styles are different, there are also similarities. Calle photographs real scenes left behind by people, while Letinsky arranges scenes with leftover food, used cutlery, and empty plates. Both images, and the image of the uneaten apple, show the aftermath of human presence by looking at what remains. Letinsky's images use negative space and soft morning light to suggest a feeling that remains once people are gone. Calle's photos, on the other hand, are more like a crime scene, searching through strangers' private things. Both artists show how everyday domestic objects can hold emotions and stories.

One photographer, pushing the boundaries of intimacy and making us, as observers, feel like we are witnesses to a crime scene, is Sally Mann. Mann's work, *What Remains*, is a series of images produced in 2001 at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Centre, a place also known as the *Body Farm*, which explores the realities around death and the decaying body. Where Letinsky and Calles' images show us a space void of human presence and have used objects to talk about these missing people, Mann uses the human body as the main feature within her photos. The images show bodies that were left outdoors to naturally decompose over time. Unlike the

Vanitas paintings, where objects are often used metaphorically to narrate meaning, Mann's photos show us explicit images that force us into the reality of life and death.

If we are not made actively complicit in the violence visible or at least implicit in the photographs, we are nevertheless compelled to act as unwilling witnesses to scenes of human decay and putrefaction from which we simply cannot turn away.

(Harcourt, 2017)



Figure 5



Figure 6

The photograph (Fig.5) displays a dead human figure lying on a forest floor. The body here is the main focus, faintly lit by a soft light similar to that of the skull in Pieter Claesz's Vanitas painting from 1630 (Fig.6). The surrounding darkness of the forest scene creates negative space, which, like Letinskys' tabletops, narrates a feeling of emptiness.

The image may not be a traditional still life, but it shares many of the same features. Like the Dutch vanitas paintings, it focuses on themes of death, decay, and the passing

of time. The body in the photo is carefully placed like fruit or flowers in a classic painting. But unlike a still life, this is a real person, which makes the scene feel strange and unsettling.

Here, Sally Mann's work blurs the line between art, documentation, and metaphor. By presenting the human body as a still life, she makes us question what we consider an object. Does the human body, once emptied of life, become an object?



(Figure 7)



(Figure 6)

A corpse is obviously not an actual human being, but nor is it simply a material object like any other. At best, it is a fragment or a relic of a former human being, a human being once living but now dead. As such, it inhabits a liminal region between subjectivity (the state of being a living subject) on the one hand and objectivity (the state of being an object without life) on the other.

Harcourt 2017

Pieter Claesz's *Vanitas* painting (Fig. 6) and Sally Mann's photograph both deal with the theme of death, but in different ways. Claesz carefully arranges objects such as a skull, an hourglass, and a wilting flower. The skull here serves as a reminder to us viewers that life is short, without showing us actual death. The soft colours, gentle lighting, and smooth surfaces make the painting feel calm and visually pleasant. In contrast, Mann's photograph (Fig. 7), which also contains a skull, feels raw, real, and disturbing. Instead of using an 'object' to speak metaphorically, it shows a real decaying body to represent death, forcing us to contemplate our own mortality.

Engaging with art that depicts the corpse as a subject or medium allows us to navigate the abject and interrogate a myriad of sensations and psychological reactions. Within the context of the gallery, an encounter with a corpse can be confronting, but ultimately, it has the power to demystify what is usually hidden from view.

(Love, 2022)

Though both images contain a skull, put side by side, it's clear that placement, colour, light, and artistic medium are all important for how we view and analyse information. The black and white tones and ghostly appearance caused by the photographic

process, the gelatine silver print, in Mann's images make the scene even harsher, creating a scene that could be from a horror movie. While Claesz creates a symbolic, colourful, carefully arranged scene, Mann shows us the dark reality of death. But is it the artist's medium that makes the skull an object in one image, and a 'dead person' in the other? And do we naturally assume a photograph is something real and not a copy of something that may have been real?

To understand the change in how contemporary photographers use objects within still life, we must also consider that, in modern still life, artists often present objects straightforwardly. This is because our society is not strictly controlled like it was in the 17th century, with its religious uniformity and harsh punishments. Back then, artists used objects and symbols to teach lessons and convey stories, such as the skull symbolising death and the book representing education.

Today, artists can show things just as they are. Everyday items like a teacup or a flower don't have to carry any religious meaning or hide a moral story. This change lets the artist choose more freely how they want to express their narrative, so viewers can extract information easily without having to search for hidden symbols. So, when looking back at Mann's image (Fig. 7), perhaps Mann is presenting a dead body instead of an object to narrate themes of death, simply because she can.

Virtually freed from the fictitious realisms or realistic fictions, solicited by a predetermined clientele (whether church, state, or individual client) twentieth century artists can generally speaking indulge in the formulation of their own narratives, their own structures and objects of desire.

(Rowell, no date)

Contemporary photographers continue to use objects to project emotion, construct identity, and communicate absence and loss. Artists today not only have more freedom than those in the past, with their religious uniformity and strict rules, but also have new media, such as the camera, to help capture and convey a message. Because photographers have greater freedom of speech, they can convey emotions more directly, as we have seen in the image from Sally Mann's Body Farm series, which shows real human bodies rather than using symbols. Her photo doesn't use objects to hint at death, it shows it clearly through actual decay. This change means artists can discuss delicate and tough subjects in a more open and sometimes shocking way.

Still, I think symbolic objects can be more powerful than the real thing. I believe that using objects allows viewers to think and reflect rather than feel shocked and even disgusted. Sometimes, by showing the real subject, like a dead body or a sad event, it can feel too heavy and stop people from really observing the image and giving them the time to think deeply about the narrative. For example, the piles of shoes at Auschwitz, which can be seen in figure 8, one of thousands of images taken of the shoes of Auschwitz, shows the loss of life in a way that is both real and symbolic. Each shoe, or pair of shoes, represents a person, helping viewers understand the scale of the tragedy without needing to see overly graphic images.



(Figure 8)

Letinsky and Calle both use objects to represent people. Letinsky creates carefully arranged scenes, while Calle documents objects as she finds them, but both artists use everyday things to share their ideas. I believe it is our sentimental connection to these objects that shows that still life will always have a place in art. As photographers continue to explore the line between metaphor and reality, contemporary photography will continue to find new ways for objects, both literal and symbolic, to tell powerful stories.

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