

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Objects at Rest

Exhibition at Islip Art Museum Reflects How an Old Genre Is Being Reinterpreted

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

EAST ISLIP, N.Y.

The exhibition "Stilled Life" at the Islip Art Museum includes so many kinds of still-life images that it is not immediately evident how the theme is to be interpreted. But that is more or less the point: The curator, Daria Brit Shapiro, wanted to survey the ways in which contemporary artists are reinterpreting this tradition-bound, age-old genre.

The term still life refers to paintings of inanimate objects, usually fruit, flowers or kitchen items, arranged on a bench or a table. It dates to the middle of the 17th century, when Dutch artists sought new sources of income after they lost their main patron, the Roman Catholic Church, following the Protestant Reformation. They began to produce pictures of motionless nature for sale to private collectors. But the concept goes back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who liked to depict foodstuffs in paint and mosaic.

There is little still-life painting in medieval or Renaissance art, for there is no place for it in the Christian tradition, and as the main patron for art during this period, the church was much more interested in artwork that illustrated scripture. So with the exception of the heretical 17th-century Dutch, it was not really until the 18th century, and the emergence of a secular tradition in European art, that still-life painting gained wider currency.

Because of its humble subject matter, the still life was frequently looked down upon as a lowly, ungainly genre. But with modernism, in which the form of a painting took precedence over the content, the still life

came into its own. Cézanne revolutionized art with formalized, faceted paintings of apples, while still life was central to subsequent innovations in painting by Picasso, Matisse and others.

Much of the art in "Stilled Life" draws on elements of this history, depicting artfully arranged groups of objects. But the sensibility is often markedly different, with contributions including conventional, naturalistic still-life paintings of fruit (Gail Schulman and Jane McGraw), Surrealistic still lifes (Gustavo Souto) and sometimes zany contributions in a variety of media, such as video, installation and assemblage art.

Traditional still-life painting was often used to represent the transience of life. That is also a popular theme here, with several artists depicting fruit or flowers well past their peak.

The best of these is Nomi Waksberg's photograph of flowers that have wilted in their vase, the petals darkened and coiled with age. It elicits an overpowering feeling of sadness and futility.

Other artists search for beauty in decay, rendering sad or ugly subject matter with polish and finesse. John Murello's digitally scanned image "Yesterday" (2005) is an exquisite, purely aesthetic representation of dried, crinkled old leaves, the shapes somehow reminiscent of the buff torsos of ancient statuary. Its visual beauty draws you in, but the seductiveness of the image is at odds with the melancholy subject matter.

Then there are artists who dispense with traditional still-life arrangements, cobbling together objects culled from everyday life. Julie Mardin assembles and photographs piles of broken plastic dolls, while another



Photographs by Barton Silverman/The New York Times

MOTIONLESS The "Stilled Life" exhibition includes Megan Cump's "Playing Dead," far left; Nomi Waksberg's "Self Portrait With Tokens, Tulips and Nutrients," left and above, on the wall; and Melissa Eder's "Still Life With Silver Slipper and Suitcase," below.



photographer, Melissa Eder, presents a picturesque group of incongruous accessories on pink fur. Look closely, and you will notice that the scale of the objects is out of sync; a cupcake seems the size of a pair of shoes.

Other artists treat the theme more literally, interpreting still life as life slowed down, or stilled. Joseph Scinto's digital video uses stop-frame animation to show stages in the consumption of an apple, while Joanne Klein presents a graphlike representation of a day in June measured in small, shaded units of time. This is a kind of conceptual still life.

Despite the diversity of the imagery, what is largely absent here is the treatment of the portrait as a kind of still life, an idea pioneered by Picasso and popularized by artists everywhere throughout the 20th century — think of Andy Warhol's screen-print portraits, or Francis Bacon's paintings of popes, after Velázquez. Perhaps Megan Cump comes closest, depicting herself lying dead in a field, her nose bloody. Here the artist herself has become a still life.

"Stilled Life," Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, through Sept. 10. Information: (631) 224-5402 or www.islipartmuseum.org.