

Still • Life

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As Editor

Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age

ROBERT VAS DIAS

Still • Life

and Other Poems of Art and Artifice

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Acknowledgements

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For Maggie

Preface

Still · Life because, a late morning flâneur on the streets of Paris in 1979, and wandering by accident into the Galerie Berggruen, I became intrigued by meticulously incised etchings of multitudinous arrangements of jugs, bottles, vases and pitchers, and I didn't get the point. Why devote all this energy to making pictures that didn't seem to be about anything? I went out, had a coffee, and came back. Something kept me looking. They had an edgy mysteriousness, they were provocatively ambiguous, strangely compelling. I was bemused by their apparent representational intent, but they went beyond the representational, they were more like abstracts. Back in London I got hold of books and catalogues on Giorgio Morandi, found that he'd said, "Nothing is more surreal, and nothing more abstract than reality."*

That opened up for me what I'd thought at first a problematic practice, and it also led to my becoming aware in my poetry that a preoccupation with ordinary things—their *thingness*—is not simply with "things exactly as they are" but as they are transformed by the imagination and reconstituted in art—recycled, as it were. Things are meaningful and seductive as the material for a poetry of the quotidian, as things were for the Dutch masters, for Chardin; as *bodegón* (things of the pantry) were for Zurbarán, Meléndez—the painters of *nature morte*. "Still" may imply "dead" but the painting glows with a vibrancy that lasts beyond its making, it is alive in the way assembled things affect and change each other, the way they project themselves and all around them in the play of light and shadow, colour and texture, weight and volume. It was very much as an organic, *living* construct that those "representations" appeared to me.

The title of the series of poems from *Select Things* in this book (see *Acknowledgements*) occurred to me as a result of seeing Patrick Caulfield's show at the Hayward in 1999. The ironic tone of the paintings, their celebration of banal décor and spurious

exclusivity—one of the paintings is titled “Selected Grapes”, 1981, and a print is called “Paris Separates,” after the wording that appears on a shop awning—brought to mind “select” to modify “things” that are the opposite of exclusive, that are mundane, ordinary, undercutting the temptation to give them a special sort of status or fashionability. Nevertheless they are desirable, they mustn’t be thrown away but require that they be recycled, that something be made of them. Jugs, vases, pitchers, bottles ... as well as envelopes that can be posted again, plastic containers, elastic bands—I throw away very little of anything, to the chagrin of my long-suffering wife. But what is involved in the making of poetry if not the reconstitution of words to “make it new”?

* In Italian: “altro ritengo che non vi sia nulla di più surreale, e di più astratto del reale.” In explanation of what he meant, Morandi went on: “I believe that what we see is the creation, the invention of the artist, if he is capable of removing the diaphragms, the conventional images, which superimpose themselves between the artist and things.” Interview recorded on April 25, 1957 by the Voice of America, as quoted by Renato Miracco, “Nothing Is More Abstract Than Reality,” in *Morandi 1890–1964*, ed. Maria Cristina Bandera and Renato Miracco. Milan, Skira, 2008, p.295.

STILL LIFE

Arrangement is all:

how everything falls
into its place, the inevitable
space that's been made
to receive it

making room so

space is relinquished
as the tern flashes into it
and out sequentially
so I cannot see

the exchange but only the line

of flight: the secret
of still life is knowing
where that line is
continued in the mind's

eye before it arrives

as the bird makes
instantaneous adjustments
to follow a picture it has
of its perch bounded in space.

SPEAK TO ME SILENTLY: STILL LIFE AND POETRY
A WORK-IN-PROGRESS

The Secret Starer

*Observe still life intently for long periods of time without
fearing ridicule, embarrassment, intimidation, hostility.*

Steady scrutiniser, private
ogler, look-kissed and caressed,

getting to know, hold,
fondle, thus acquainted

with grief, with joy,
warmth, the abundant arcs,

curves of the human shape
in its changing, seen in what

we make and shape: *stay me*
with flagons, arabesques of arms,

luscious handle undulation,
pout of jug-spout.

Composing Objects

A retro gestalt

Air: circulates invisible billows
of breath-and-colour-rhythms

that demarcate the object,
animates its stillness.

*If you're depicting something made
by human beings, that seems to me*

to be enough. It does describe people:

four retro dining chairs, with

moulded plastic seats, arranged around
a square café table, a raffia-wrapped

bottle of chianti, three olives,
an empty glass on top. The people,

the people left a moment ago but
bars of sickly pink and brown

light and shadow slanting across
the space betray their joyless

after-hours conviviality, the room
empty and waiting for customers.

Natura abhorret a vacuo

Arrange things how you will
randomly, or obsessively

they will insinuate their inimitable
nous, alone or nestling

in proximity to others
as the single restive word I *am*

agglutinates into other
dimensions I come

to occupy: *we* together is more
than the sum of one and one.

Iron to Air, Air to Iron

Still life as monument to the Industrial Age

I would make of the iron jib crane—
Armstrong Mitchell, Newcastle, 1883—

a rhythm of its black triangles, staves
resonating in sapphire-still air above

Venice's pale turquoise harbour water;
it is famously still, silently

rusting on its ornamental brick casement,
redundant in the Arsenale,

a relic that raised great guns into
naval turrets, but see! it saturates

the space it dominates, stridently
decaying into resonant stillness.

Origin of the Jug

Journey to the maker

Joanna's mermaid painted
on the knobbly little jug

has pendulous breasts,
an ample belly and where

the scales begin, a large haunch
as befits a great fish whose tail

rises from the waves clear
around the other side of the jug:

who would have known that
halfway up the Cambrian hill

from Llanbrynmair you
could glimpse through trees

the far-off sea just before
the pottery where husband

Michael threw the pots
and cups and jugs she decorated

her eye's mind no doubt
on that myth-frequented sea?

Nature morte

Three artists in the eighteenth-century present

Apples, peaches, pears, grapes
sink into a mound of furry pulp in

Taylor-Wood's time-lapse video 'Still Life'—
what happens clear enough—but also

the glistening pomegranates,
apples, azaroles, and grapes in a landscape

in the varnished still-life oil
by Meléndez. It always needs saying:

composing the present ripeness
is the closest we get to the eternal,

a basket of fruit forever ripe, the painted
promise, still, of *the four Seasons*

*...the aim of composing a cabinet of foods
of every kind produced by our favourable clime.*

I live only streets away from Julia
who etches architectonic geometries,

patterns we inhabit and see around us
in the fabricated still, and always unstill, life.

Decomposition is the undying end
since everything will consume everything.

Two After Morandi

His sleight-of-hand

(1) Natura Morta

The sky, well, not the sky, the wall
then, is golden, the sun, no,

the light, hazing the objects
on the grey ground, well, a table

more like a dusty plain, the
objects familiar, though not, are

conjured into brown importance
as features on the little stage

of the brown room, his brain
that contains them, makes

the space in the landscape
that contains me, not me.

(2) The In and the Out of It

Two lidded flagons stand, pillars
to the portal of a grand precinct

part-hidden in shadow within.
I'm outside a minster of utensils,

mendicant on the plain looking in.
What do I expect to gain, what boon?

Do I think I'll be invited in to gawp
amongst great bottle-towers,

colonnades of vases, a town
on a strange tableland whose inhabitants

glide black-cloaked in anonymity
in a conurbation of familiar shapes

where I, the unfamiliar solitary wanderer
hammer at the gates of horn?

MY ORDER IS NOT YOUR ORDER

Suppose he sees his wife's head
as an angular oblong, her hair
a wavy brown strip down one side,
purply curly horizontal strands on top.

One eye's (much larger) above the other
which appears to have an oblique
hat brim shading it, but no
shadow, her mouth and lips are straight

lines, a rectangular *abhh*. She has
a quizzical, intent look, she looks
intelligent, she must have been
a looker. I never met her.

She's his idea. He took things, people
as they are and made them up
into his view of people, things, picturing
them so you could rearrange

the world, try it out with the strange eyes
of someone else which is always a good idea
when you're hung up on someone
else's order of the universe.

The world may be in a crazy mess, you think,
but odd perspective is all, the way things
line up, or don't, and from his perspective
everything about her fell into place.

THE MEETING

*I like to find
what's not found
at once, but lies*

*within something of another
nature,
in repose, distinct.
Denise Levertov, "Pleasures"*

For Maggie

Simply: glass and crockery arranged
on a table in the sunlight or

not, shapes that flow
into one another, simply or not,

each establishing its own
space but then quite

quietly changing it
for the other: I'm talking

still life, motionless, life-
less though it's still *life*

embracing the other
as my lips embrace

the cup, your lips
folding over the lip ...

we cannot meet like this
we cannot help but meet

at all, all is unstill and folds
 into the moment slowly

the curve that surrounds
 everything, jug, cup
 bottle, bowl, you and me.