

Singing Shapes

STILL-LIFE PAINTINGS IN THE GALLERIES

by Gail Leggio

The craftsmanship of contemporary realists, in general, is at a high level, and they are being more widely recognized both in galleries and in the mainstream art press. Calls for these technically proficient artists to tackle more ambitious subject matter are perfectly legitimate. This is a complicated enterprise, however, one tied to the evolution of our cultural and educational institutions. In the meantime, artists continue to work in perennial genres such as the still life, often with worthwhile results and, occasionally, real inventiveness.

Still lifes are about relationships: between objects arranged on a table, between formal elements on a flat canvas, what Georgia O'Keeffe called "singing shapes." Those objects can also have symbolic resonance. In the vanitas tradition, fading blossoms and overripe fruit can remind us of the inevitable triumph of time. But even when the selection seems arbitrary or purely personal, the things an artist assembles—whatever their innate decorative qualities or sentimental value—are shifted into another reality, much like a ritual space designed to focus attention, to focus spiritual energies. In his book *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996) James Elkins writes: "For a while I am harmlessly hypnotized, and the world falls away, leaving me in a silent, empty place, alone with the object." That sort of concentration could be seen, in summer 2007, in an exhibition of still lifes by Jacob Collins at Hirschl & Adler Modern. Placing simple objects—a silver beaker, a bunch of radishes, a broken-apart orange—against dark backgrounds, Collins imbued them with luminescence. The intensity of that spotlight gaze was slightly unearthly, adding a frisson to an essentially conventional approach. When the convention, which extends from Velázquez to William Merritt Chase, meets the standards of old master execution practiced by Collins, the effects are dazzling. But there are other approaches.

Daniel E. Greene (b. 1934), a veteran realist who has had a successful career as a portraitist, sees still life as a way of avoiding "replicating what has already occurred in nature." A group of Greene's still lifes, along with subway interiors and carnival scenes, was on view through early November at Gallery Henoeh. "Building a still life," Greene explains, "is totally a question of selecting objects that may or may not be related and putting them together in personal ways." His still lifes often contain literal construction elements; weathered bricks serve as scaffolding for fruits, vegetables and glass objects. Good figurative painters frequently acknowledge the formal achievements of abstractionists. Greene's *Apples, Bricks and Diebenkorn* (2005) includes small

copies of the California artist's signature motifs. But Greene remains committed not only to recognizable subject matter but also to tight rendering. His still lifes emphasize the flatness of the picture plane, with extremely shallow space and diagrammatic backgrounds. In the perfectly square (40-by-40 inches) oil *Milk Bottle Toss* (2007), a neat pyramid of silvery bottles and a baseball illusionistically occupy a sliver of foreground. The rest of the image is filled with a weathered russet wooden board, divided into nine squares decorated with geometric forms in red, black and cloudy yellow. This set-up for a carnival game carries undercurrents of both occultism and abstraction. Greene's still lifes are pictorial puzzles, bold patterns in tension with mimetic elements. The central cross and large red circles of *Blue and Orange Gameboard with Orchids* (24-by-23¼ inches, 2005) are as flat as components in a painting by Mondrian or Malevich, but the scuffing of the surface pulls the image back toward realism. A spray of orchids, with fresh, cool pink-white petals and wiry stems, seems to float in front, perhaps because the support for the plant is out of frame. The artist can handle deep recession, as in *Christopher Street, Sheridan Square, New York University* (33-by-60 inches), where the sharply angled perspective of the station platform creates an eerie Hopperesque space, and the wall mosaics are compressed into a foreshortened blur. But Greene's straight-on, flat pattern works seem more distinctive. *Borough Hall* (49-by-32 inches, 2007) is a pastel, but the colors are even richer than the oil paintings in the show. It's a tight close-up of the ornate logo for the station, a Beaux-Arts B and H in a gilded wreath, with brilliant red, cobalt and amber tesserae, all lovingly depicted. Greene fell in love with the subway mosaics when he moved to New York City from his hometown of Cincinnati in the 1950s, and has painted nearly a hundred works exploring their visual themes.



Meg Shields, *Nasturtiums and Potted Plant*, 2006

COURTESY FISCHBACH GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Meg Shields (b. 1953), whose “In Particular” series was on view September 6–October 6 at Fischbach Gallery, also emphasizes the arbitrary aspect of the still-life genre. She calls her arrangements “contrived compositions that have real things in them—like Marianne Moore’s description of poems as artificial gardens with real toads in them.” Her tabletop groupings are playfully arbitrary. In *Nasturtiums and Potted Plant* (2006), the elements scattered across the horizontal space—a ceramic parrot, a string of beads, a Delftware vessel holding red blossoms—are connected by the repetition of the color blue. The brushy background of a whitewashed wall and a scrap of flowered wallpaper calls attention to the painterly artifice that supports the illusion. The nearly square (11¼-by-11½ inches) *Memory* (2007) is a tighter composition. Sheets of paper—one with black-and-white schematic figures demonstrating tasks, another with a rich blue-black abstraction—and a serrated circular saw blade emphasize the flatness of the picture plane. Other objects have more solidity: a lamp with a bare bulb, a twist of orange peel, a stack of old books. But they are also successfully mapped as formal shapes because they are viewed from a high angle and truncated by the edges of the canvas. Shields is thinking about spatial relationships cogently, although she isn’t breaking new ground.

The Italian painter Roberto Bernardi (b. 1974) began his career as a restorer of old masters paintings (he worked at San Francesco a Ripa in Rome), and Mannerist and Baroque elements are detectable in his still lifes. But he is also a Photorealist of hard-edged lucidity, as seen in his October show “Still Lives of Contemporary Glass and Crystal,” at Bernarducci Meisel Gallery. A few years ago, Bernardi was close to quoting Caravaggio. *Luci dal Profondo* (2004)—depicting a silver bowl overflowing with figs, apples and grapes—could be a detail from a Caravaggio, one of those miraculous little still lifes that draw the viewer’s attention away, momentarily, from the religious and erotic turbulence of the main event. Bernardi drags his subject out of the chiaroscuro depths of the old master and into something like the pure white space of Irving Penn’s innovative commercial photographs. Even when he uses a dark background, that mainstay of Zubáran’s Spanish Baroque, Bernardi’s mode of visual attention is distinctly modern. *Luna Park* (2007) is a hyper-realistic study of candies in transparent jars, the blatantly artificial confections observed with hallucinatory clarity and reflected in a highly polished tabletop. Bernardi’s Janus-faced mimesis relates as much to photography as to the phenomenal world. There is nothing casual about his method. After selecting the objects, he arranges them on a reflective surface, then lights them, using both natural and artificial sources, with the care of a skilled cinematographer. He uses a digital camera to capture remarkably crisp detail; the photograph becomes the template for a meticulous oil painting. This method yields a surprising range of effects. *Luna Park* has a Pop Art vibe. The sugar-surfaced gum drops, hard multicolor jawbreakers and foil-wrapped candies are as bright as a pinball machine, and their wattage is only slightly muted in reflective doubling. *Gli*



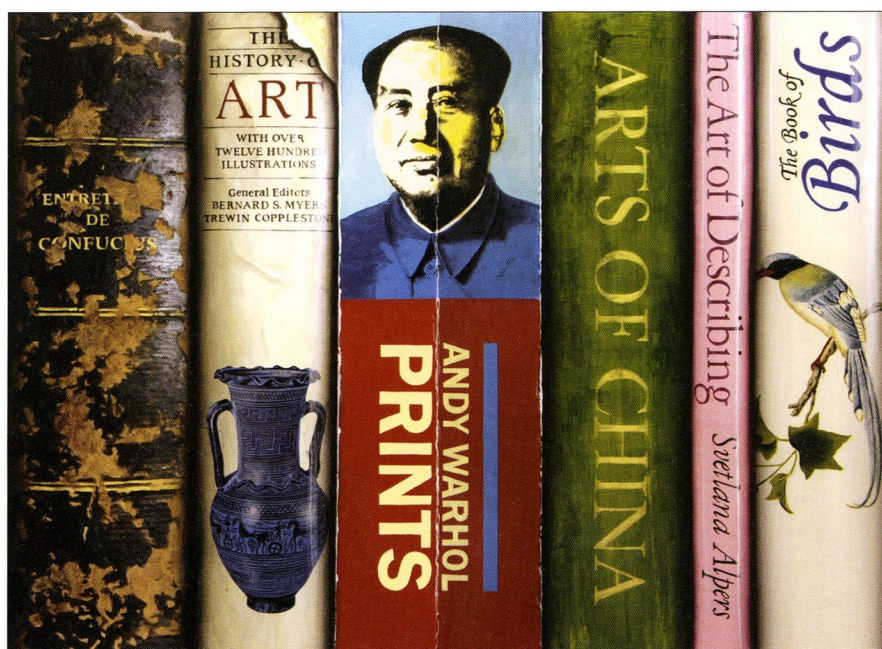
Roberto Bernardi, *Luna Park*, 2007

COURTESY BERNARDUCCI MEISEL GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Scienziati (2007) has a more classic, old master look. It's a tabletop display of half a dozen transparent vessels—and one opaque, glossy white mug—against a slightly out-of-focus backdrop of windows. The vases and pitchers, straight-sided and curvaceous, reflect and refract in dazzling patterns. An elegant carafe half-filled with water magically mirrors the windows with limpid clarity; another vessel with a few inches of wine shows us sepia-toned fragments. A squared-off vase seen through an oval one sets up a disorienting hall of mirrors. This is a fine bravura performance, rooted in the formal elegance of beautiful shapes. The arrangement would not be out of place in a still life by Giorgio Morandi or William Bailey, but the obsession with the distortions of what we call transparent glass has a contemporary self-conscious edge. Still, the curved reflection trope is a very old one, and *Gli Scienziati* has a lovely amber glow that makes it seem timeless.

Still-life artists must strike a balance between the formal dynamic of “singing shapes” and the iconography implicit in their choice of subject matter. Olga Antonova (b. 1956) is a Russian who trained at the Repin Institute in Saint Petersburg. It is easy to see her shiny kettles and china cups and plates, on view at Gallery Henoch from November 15 through December 8, as an exploration of domestic rituals. But Antonova, an admirer of the French master Chardin, insists that “subject matter is just a pretext for my execution and sensitivity to technical issues.” Still, these old-fashioned objects have social resonance as well as aesthetic appeal. If Chardin was the poet of the kitchen, Antonova finds poetry in the tea table and emphasizes the incidental grace of half-forgotten

daily ceremonies. It is possible to read feminine—or feminist—iconography in these images, but conventional sentimentality is rigorously excluded. *Seared Kettle with Green Ribbon*, 2007 (cover), dead center of the square, 24-by-24-inch canvas, has an unpretentious monumentality with its simple dome shape. But the painterly surface of the object is remarkable: scorch-marks and bold yellow-blue highlights give it the sensuousness of a piece of bruised fruit. The plain dun-violet background and mauve and cream patterned tablecloth add their tonalities to what, in starkly realistic terms, would be a faded copper kettle. The artist Antonova most resembles is, in fact, not Chardin, with his vegetables and game birds playing texturally against shiny metal and matte earthenware, but the marvelous British painter William Nicholson. Nicholson (1872–1949) made a specialty of vanity table still lifes with reflective silver objects. Antonova mines this vein in *Two Metal Cups on White Cloth* (2007), a deceptively simple tour de force pairing squat silver cups that reflect both each other and the window-lit room out of frame. Curved reflections were part of the old masters’ virtuosic repertoire, and Antonova highlights her skill by placing the cups on a soft white cloth embroidered with gold flowers. A painter’s canvas is itself a kind of cloth, a fact Antonova emphasizes. Many of her canvases have sewn or frayed edges. The irregularly bordered *Two Cups* is matted into a wide, roughly gessoed frame. The realistic still life has a long pedigree, and Antonova’s work clearly falls within that tradition. But she also



Paul Béliveau, *Les Humanités CCLVXXXIII*, 2007
COURTESY ARDEN GALLERY, BOSTON

considers the conceptual underpinnings of her craft, the complex relationship between mimetic, illusionistic image and stained, two-dimensional fabric. In her freewheeling cultural study *Veronica and Her Cloth* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), painter and art historian Ewa Kuryluk describes a painting as “a mirror-membrane.” Antonova seems aware of that double nature: art that shows us a reflection of the outside world while insisting on its own physical properties and formal logic.

Quebec-based artist Paul Béliveau, who had his second solo show at Arden Gallery in September, approaches the theme of cultural literacy with deadpan wit. Béliveau presented a selection from his ongoing series *Les Humanités*, close-up, full-frame depictions of book spines. The visual fun in these acrylic paintings comes from the juxtaposition of colorful, glossy dustjackets, traditional cloth and leather, and worn, matte paperbacks. Surface textures are meticulously observed.

The groups of four-to-seven titles also function as oblique, sequential self-portraits, revealing the artist’s inspirations and predilections. Pop Art allusions register in the iconic faces of Maria Callas, Billie Holliday and Ingrid Bergman, and in specific titles: *Andy Warhol: Series and Singles*, with a Marilyn image, or *Andy Warhol: Prints*, with a Mao. *Les Humanités CCLVXXXIII* (2007), with the Mao illustration, also features Arts of China, a frayed leather copy of Confucius in French, Svetlana Alper’s *The Art of Describing* and an art history text. Meta-commentary underlies *Les Humanités CCLXXV* (2007), where the Marilyn Warhol is placed next to a collection of Clement Greenberg’s essays, a sci-fi novel called *Gateway*, a book titled *Heroes*, a partially seen dustjacket with the words *The Image* and, adding to the conversation, a spineless and relabeled *Panorama des littératures*. These books carry the idiosyncratic charge of items from a personal library. *Les Humanités CCXC* (2007) combines the Callas biography with Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Realism and Tradition* (a source-book), an old book on Goya, an *Antologia Erotica* and a cartoon collection. The cartoon sailor on the spine gazes raptly at Callas, with the text balloon “Je t’adore!” emphasizing the cultural interplay. *Les Humanités CXCI* (2007) presents another roll-call of admired figures: a two-volume set on Monet, a book on Gainsborough, a biography of Marlene Dietrich, a book titled *Heritage* with a Flemish portrait head, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a slim red book titled *Memoires Intimes*. Word and image, typography and illustration, flat graphic design and realistic tactile illusionism—all these visual elements come together with layers of personal and cultural meaning. The play of different widths of vertical elements within the horizontal frame creates a strong structural scaffolding for the individual entries in this extensive series. The books we read and care enough about to collect are evidence of history and taste on many levels. Despite the usefulness of computers as information and image storehouses, there will always be those who find the physical book an alluring object, both for the intimacy of the reading experience and the

aesthetic of design. This is a fresh approach to the notion of narrative in painting, as Béliveau allows us to spin out our own scenarios about the ways we come to know.

The handful of artists discussed at length in this article, all appearing in East Coast galleries this fall, take different approaches to the still life, demonstrating the vitality of the genre by thinking about the fundamental issues of presence and representation.

GALLERIES

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Telephone (917) 305-0003. On the web at www.galleryhenoch.com

Fischbach Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue at 25th Street, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 759-2345. On the web at www.fischbachgallery.com

Arden Gallery, 129 Newbury Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02116
Telephone (617) 247-0610. On the web at www.ArdenGallery.com

Bernarducci Meisel Gallery, 37 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10018
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Hirschl & Adler Modern, 21 East 70th Street, New York, New York 10021
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