

EXHIBITIONS

John Pence Gallery

For “Still Life: An Invitational Group Exhibition,” John Pence Gallery presents the work of over two dozen contemporary realists. The results are, for the most part, fresh and engaging. As a genre, the still life seems to offer subjects that are easy to control—in contrast to portraits, which entail negotiations between artist and model, or landscapes, which refuse to sit still, because nature is in a constant state of flux.

Some still-life painters, however, depict organic elements that add a temporal dimension to their work. Vanitas artists—from the Dutch and Spanish old masters to today’s realists—allude to cycles of growth and decay. The artist simultaneously celebrates beauty and warns us about life’s transience. Will Wilson’s *Golden Delicious* (2015) is a hyper-realistic close-up of half a dozen apples, their plump forms luminous against a black backdrop. Dew still clings to the green leaves on the cut stems, which are placed with a studied grace in arabesques around the strikingly three-dimensional-looking fruit. Wilson introduces the vanitas theme with the slightly mottled skin of the apples and a fly perched on a piece of fruit.

Wilson’s virtuosity—the tiny fly casts a shadow—challenges the old



Will Wilson, *Golden Delicious*, 2015

COURTESY JOHN PENCE GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

masters' high-stakes illusionism. Russell Harris evokes another tradition in *Sugar Skulls* (2016), a meditation on the "Final Day of the Dead." Three sugar skulls—emblematic of the playful macabre of the Mexican holiday—rest on a black dish, which in turn sits on a blue cloth with a lively stylized flower pattern. The angle of vision is confusing: we seem to be looking down on the cloth but straight on at the skulls, which have the fuzzy indistinctness of something from a crude mold. Scale is puzzling, too: the skulls look enormous, but they seem dwarfed by the butterfly—symbol of the soul and resurrection—perched on one of the skulls. Jason Brady tries another variation on the vanitas theme in *Empty Spaces* (2016), a stripped-down examination of two forms, a human skull and a split-open nautilus shell, bathed in sci-fi-style blue light.

Other artists play tricks with the still-life genre. Jacob Pfeiffer depicts objects with meticulous realism, but they are picture puzzles. The titles add a linguistic component, part of a long tradition that goes back to Renaissance emblems and includes rebuses and today's caption-the-cartoon contests in *The New Yorker*. In *Balls* (2016), Pfeiffer suspends three plastic bags in a neutral space. A football occupies one, a bunch of rainbow-colored small balls (in a size between gumball and billiard) and baseballs occupy the other two, respectively. The artist skillfully indicates the weight of the loads in the wrinkled, transparent plastic. By varying the nowhere space of the background from soft grey to black, he makes us aware of the single strings supporting the bags, which subtly divide the space into orderly segments.

Anthony Waichulis favors *trompe l'oeil*, a genre that goes back to antiquity but reached a peak of popularity with nineteenth-century artists William Hartnett and John Peto. Mimicking a collage of two-dimensional elements, *trompe l'oeil* challenges the notion of deep recession within the frame. In *A Love Story* (2016), Waichulis selects items that include a charming vintage erotic photograph (with a discreetly placed Post-It note), a torn page of sheet music, a faded envelope with a heart stamp and a clever modern touch: a corner fold-over of a cartoon blonde in a pensive mood, very evocative of Roy Lichtenstein. The arrangement combines flatness and illusion, formal exercise and implicit narrative.

The exhibition offered evidence for the appeal of straightforward still life, especially as a way for contemporary realists to connect with the old masters. Sarah Lamb's *Strawberries and Cream* (2016) follows a classic compositional formula. The background is inky shadows, throwing the front-lit object into high relief. The simple wood table cuts a straight line across the lower portion of the picture. The cream is luminous; the glass bottle has subtle glints of light. The green, porous-cardboard basket is angled and shadowed to emphasize its three-dimensionality. The plump, ripe strawberries are as red as rubies, with prickly flesh. The dramatic presentation has the gravitas of the little still lifes Caravaggio incorporated into his large religious paintings. The viewer is convinced by the illusion yet aware of the painter's hand. Brushstrokes are visible

along the edge of the table, in the cream that smears the bottle, in the pink heart of a sliced-open berry, in the highlights on the rim of the green basket. Lamb's work is painterly, rather than photo- or hyper-realist, and she avoids the conceptual. Her still lifes are both sensuous and classically restrained.

The Pence Gallery exhibition encompasses different kinds of still lifes and different styles of realism. In *Vetrina* (2016), Richard Maury builds an interior out of still-life elements that hint at a narrative, perhaps about a traveling artist. Elizabeth Zanzinger explores a relatively new category of subject matter, obsolete machinery, in *Royal II* (2014), a loosely painted study of an old-fashioned vacuum cleaner. Other artists in this high-caliber show include Jacob Collins, Tony Curanaj, Edward Minoff, Travis Schlaht and Sadie Valeri.

The show was on view October 7–November 12, 2016, at John Pence Gallery, 750 Post Street, San Francisco, California 94109. Telephone (415) 441-1138. johnpence.com

—Gail Leggio