

EXHIBITIONS

Still Life

“Still Life,” a group show (November 5–28, 2015) at Galley Henoch in New York City, acknowledged the perennial popularity of the genre, while probing the aesthetic possibilities being explored by some first-rate contemporary realists.

The veteran painter Daniel Greene (b. 1934), best known for his portraits and subway-platform depictions, was represented by *Antique Sewing Machine and Moire* (2013). The old apparatus is closely observed, but the artist surrounds it with blocks of vivid color: an emerald-green swag engulfing the supporting table and panels of sapphire blue and gold. Realism and abstraction co-exist, and the similarity of the moire patterning to modernist faux bois adds an art historical frisson.

Robert C. Jackson’s (b. 1964) take on the still life is more ironic. He plays with vintage graphics for a Pop Art feel, and his objects are unconventional and frequently absurd. His dramatis personae include balloon animals (a dig at Jeff Koons’s high-end, over-scaled sculptures?) in quirky scenarios, enjoying a buffet of sweets in *Dessert Feast* (all Jackson works 2015) and having ice cream cones atop a stack of colorful crates in *Neapolitan*. In *Buck a Shuck*, they mimic the notoriously kitsch *Dogs Playing Poker* scene, holding oysters instead of playing cards.



Steve Mills, *Strong Dollar*, 2015

COURTESY GALLERY HENOCH, NEW YORK CITY



Janet Rickus, *Borrowed Series VII*, 2015
COURTESY GALLERY HENoch, NEW YORK CITY

Steve Mills (b. 1959) calls himself a photorealist and has carved out an unusual niche. Many of his paintings are close-up studies of newspapers, piled up at intriguing angles and depicted in meticulous mimesis. In images such as *Strong Dollar* and *W.S.J.* (both 2015), you get a palpable sense of crisp white paper and sharp ink; he makes sure you can read the text (and seems particularly fond of the financial pages).

Two of the most compelling artists in the exhibition were women, and they brought very different aesthetics to the domestic and intimate aspects of still life. Janet Rickus (b. 1949) could be described as a classicist, arranging smooth vessels—as much geometric shapes as everyday objects, platonic in the way of Giorgio Morandi, albeit more saturated in color—on cloth-draped tables. Everything is viewed straight on as she explores permutations of color and shape against flat, neutral backgrounds. The formal possibilities evolve over the course of her *Borrowed Series* (all Rickus works 2015). *VII* features tightly rendered lemons, brilliant, pebbly-skinned, nestled amid white and yellow vessels, some enlivened with polka-dot patterns. Yellow and white napkins are draped in triangles over the table edge. *VIII* has a primary color palette, with similarly hued cloth panels neatly forming a fringe of rectangles.

The Russian-American painter Olga Antonova (b. 1956) depicts vessels that shimmer with personal history, never spelled out but nonetheless palpable. While Rickus's vessels click into place as components of a picture-plane puzzle, Antonova's pose for their portraits in graceful isolation. The tarnish on a piece of silver, the craquelure on fine old china, the worn texture of a piece of

cloth—are all evidence of the life these inanimate yet personable objects have lived. Her painting *Overflowing Cups* (all Antonova works 2015) shows a dozen assorted china cups, some dangling by their handles from a silver stand, with a plate forming a blue-patterned halo behind. Here, as in most of her works, Antonova keeps to a muted grey-themed palette and demonstrates skill at capturing gleams of light and soft shadows.

The reflective quality of silver has always appealed to still-life painters, notably to Baroque Dutch and Spanish artists and to the nineteenth-century American William Merritt Chase. Antonova continues the tradition with some lovely paintings. *Silver Cups on Patterned Cloth* presents a pair of simple cups that, through a haze of tarnish, let us glimpse ghostly shapes from the surrounding room. The way the cloth's pattern goes slightly out of focus as it drops over the edge of the table contributes to the illusion of depth. *Silver Teapot on Diamond Cloth* also plays with pattern and sheen, but the geometry of the eponymous vessel—round, with triangles for the lip and the space within the squared-off handle—has a monumental dignity. The diamond cloth is cleverly reflected in the curve of the round pot.

Several of Antonova's subjects have the panache of objets d'art. *Teapot with Dragon* and *Urn with Blue Flower Motif* are both close-ups, glamour shots of exquisite vessels, with background and support tersely indicated by a shift in grey. The blue decoration on the teapot features a marvelous dragon, and the artist astutely exploits the pot's hexagonal shape to explore light and shadow. The urn is even more elaborate, with brass fittings and a pair of dragonfly ornaments mounted on the urn's shoulders. Her loving attention celebrates these objects.

Among the other artists in this excellent show were Sharon Sprung, Samuel Hung and Eric Wert, whose *Oysters* (2014) is invitingly succulent, both in subject matter and in paint-handling, Gallery Henocho, 555 West 25th Street, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (917) 305-2018. galleryhenoch.com

—Gail Leggio