

## Silent Witnesses on the Table

Still Lives Today

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[ RICHTJE REINSMAN ]

The still life is alive and well in art. Most contemporary Dutch and Flemish artists regard the Christian message as outmoded, but some do not mind a bit of moralism, as long as it's ambiguous and only implied. The lusts and burdens of earthly sensuality should keep each other in balance.

The still life is not a fashionable subject, one would think. The displays of fruit, game, flowers and skulls which were painted in the seventeenth century are so famous that they have become clichéd. One would not expect a twenty-first century artist to elaborate on this genre, since the first rule is to be original. Yet the genre is booming.

Last year the largest still life of all times was completed in the new market hall in Rotterdam: the *Horn of Plenty* by multimedia artist Arno Coenen (born 1972). In Coenen's digitally designed panorama, giant fruits, loaves of bread, fish and other traditional ingredients of the still life whirl around a dazzling white sun. Coenen calls his monumental still life an ode to the old masters of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch painting. In a number of important aspects his explosion of edibles is in fact just the opposite of a still life: everything is moving, free of gravity and without a blemish. In a traditional still life the objects displayed lie literally still, mostly on a table. There is often the suggestion that the expiry date of the wares is close at hand. Sometimes a broken flower indicates the decomposition that will inevitably come. Coenen's *Horn of Plenty* looks more like an ode to supermarket advertising than a warning of the approaching end. Nearly all product advertisements are indebted to the still life tradition, even though, of course, they carry a commercial rather than a religious message: one is no longer admonished to invest in imminent eternity but in consumption in the here and now. Coenen's work takes this advertising imagery, derived from art but now freed from its perishability, back to art. Whether he wants to comment on the phenomenon of advertising or our consumer society as well is doubtful.



Gijs Assmann, *Vanitas (for Karin)*, 2009, ceramics, iron, wood, found objects, paper bird, 58 x 46 x 38 cm, Collection Margeet De Koster and Fred Velders, Den Haag.

## An ambiguous genre

Since time immemorial the still life has been an ambiguous genre, in which attraction and repulsion often vie for precedence. While the reminder of death can be to some an incentive to lead a more virtuous life, to others it can be a license to enjoy the life of the moment with abandon. Whether each classical still life was painted with quite such an edifying intent is however debatable and some art historians doubt it. The still life is also known as a rewarding field of research for studious and experiment-minded painters who were undoubtedly more interested in the anatomy of a carcass or the way light was reflected on a glass than in propagating virtue. Nonetheless, for centuries the genre has been linked to Christian morality.

Contemporary still life has disconnected itself from both Christian morality and painting. These days it is a theme that pops up everywhere: in photography (Elspeth Diederix, Krista van der Niet, Scheltens & Abbenes), in sculpture and installation (Merijn Bolink, Tim Breukers, Koen Theys), in drawing and collage (Erik Mattijssen, Ruth van Beek), in video and new media art (Sara Bjarland, Les Oiseaux de Merde) and even in performance art and theatre (Uta Eisenreich, see further).

Painter and sculptor Gijs Assmann (born 1966) made his first vanitas sculpture while still at the Amsterdam Rijksakademie, as a present. *Vanitas*

(for Stephan) (1992) became the first of a large and still-growing series of portraits in vanitas form. A selection of eighty-nine works can be seen on Assmann's website.

'I was educated with the idea that you must behave as if you had thought up everything yourself,' he says. 'But I want to show that my work is part of a larger tradition. The message of transience in still lifes attracts me too. That balance between *memento mori* and *carpe diem*.'

Assmann originally created ceramic vanitas, but gradually started using all kinds of materials. He also, more and more often, added his own ingredients, like coconuts, sausages and doorstops, to the usual vanitas components.

The general moral admonishment of the traditional vanitas becomes a coded morality with him, tailor-made to suit the person he is portraying, who can then be subjected to identification and interpretation by each individual viewer. 'They are declarations of love with a critical undertone. Like the messages written to accompany presents given at Sinterklaas (the feast of Saint Nicholas) in the Netherlands which, though they include some gentle ridicule or criticism of the recipient, are accepted as long as they are tongue-in-cheek. Not that I want to judge anyone. But I do long for an art that, like in the Middle Ages, doesn't just serve as a commodity but also brings about a confrontation in one's daily life with difficult subjects like mortality.'

For the past three years, Wouter van Riessen (born 1967) has been engrossed in Van Gogh's sunflower paintings. Meanwhile, based on the numerous sketches he has made of these famous paintings, he has painted twenty immaculate comic strip-like still lifes with flowers. Van Riessen's colourful, evenly painted bouquets, devoid of shadow, would be just right for a spacecraft. His flowers have an object-like, surrealistic quality.

'I like it that Van Gogh painted three versions of his *Vase with Five Sunflowers* that are all very similar, in a relatively short period of time,' says Van Riessen. 'He doesn't make a definite statement about how these flowers look, but gives different options, each with small alterations which change the flowers' ap-



pearance. I have amplified what he has done. I experience his flowers as facial expressions without faces, or as postures. There is a tired sunflower among them that is in the autumn of its life. Two other ones have a certain gaiety. Together the sunflowers form a chorus, in which the separate voices can still be distinguished. I see a parallel with my self-portraits. At different times you can have quite different feelings.'

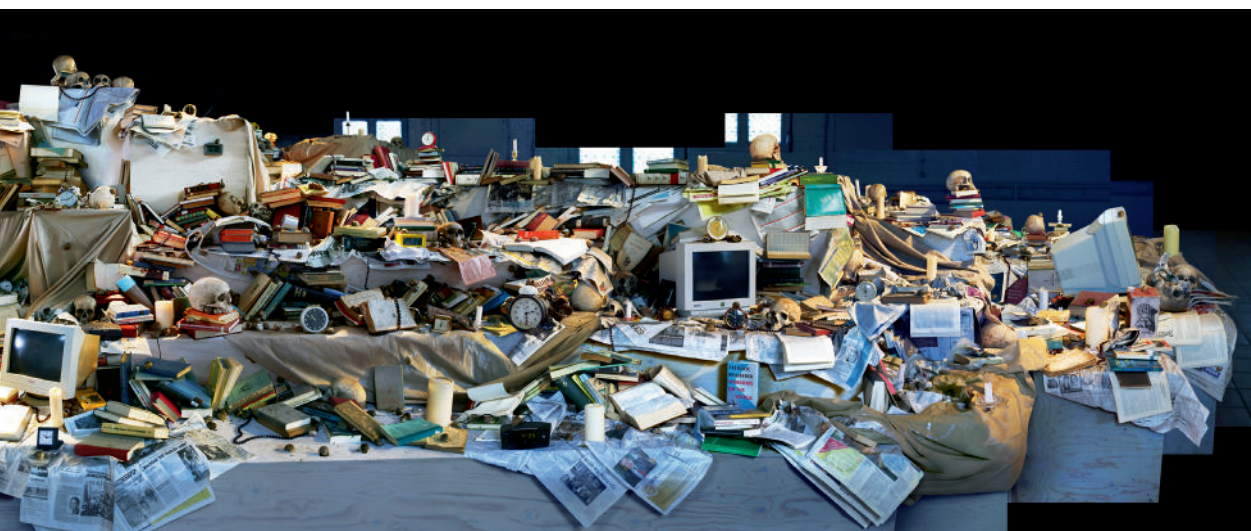
All of Van Riessen's work – which also consists of drawings, photographs and prints – deals with the human inclination to bring things to life through the imagination. Van Riessen finds the still life interesting in as far as it lends itself to this. 'When an image remains a *nature morte*, I don't find it interesting. When there is room for your own projection, you become mystically connected to things. You can draw the world closer to you.'

For exactly this reason the fame of the sunflowers is important to Van Riessen. Since the viewer can easily recognize the reference, it is immediately clear that he is looking at a retake, an interpretation of an existing composition. This carries with it the implicit invitation to interpret Van Riessen's paintings just as freely. Van Riessen guards the suggestive power of his paintings - he wants to evoke but not to specify. 'When, for example, I see something bat-like in one of the sunflowers, I'm not going to develop the bat, but will just try to capture that bat-like quality.'

Dirk Zoete (born 1969) actually portrays himself by giving shape to the world inside his head. His drawings, tableaux with masks and costumes, scale-models and installations, as grim as they are absurd, are reminiscent of Ensor's work. The vanitas theme pops up regularly, in his self-portraits for example, in which Zoete's face has already turned partly into a skull.

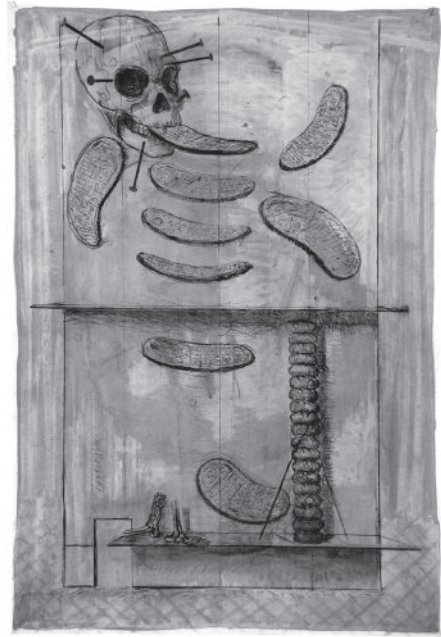
Among the works with the collective title *Flemish Voodoo* (2008) are numerous skulls, often in the company of bread. There is for example an ink and charcoal drawing on which a floating skull, pierced by nails, seems to be eating a slice of bread. More slices of bread are flying around – enough of them, should the hollow-eyed one be hungry. But what good are they to someone who

Koen Theys,  
*The Vanitas Record.*





Wouter van Riessen, *Fifteen Sunflowers in a Vase*, 2013,  
Acrylic paint on linen, 74 x 58 cm,  
Collection Akzo Nobel Art Foundation.



Dirk Zoete, *Skull and Bread*, 2008,  
Printing ink and charcoal on paper, 140 x 100 cm.  
© Dirk Zoete

is, after all, just a skull? Just as the many piercing nails can't hurt Van Zoete's skulls, his loaves of bread can't feed them. His works evoke associations with religious torture, offerings and the ritual of the Eucharist, but with Van Zoete all means of conquering or warding off death seem in vain.

### A messy festive explosion

Painter Sander van Deurzen (born 1975) chose the still life tradition to catch the spirit of the times. During his academy years Van Deurzen made installations. But having often thought that he had done something new, only to discover later that this was not the case, he opted after his final exam for what he himself calls 'a radical turnaround to painting'. 'I decided then to commit myself more to art history,' he says. 'I wanted to apply the old themes in art to topical matters. I also use landscape and portrait, but the still life suits me best because of the sense of tranquillity and transience.'

His still lifes are inhabited by toy and game figures with wildly extended limbs, blowsy Buddha figurines, dripping heaps of pudding and messy bits and pieces. Often the knickknacks and sweetmeats are gathered beneath looped garlands that hang over them threateningly. You would rather not get caught up in them. Here and there in the foreground it may be quiet, but in the back-

ground, as a rule, things are in motion. Cartoonish and disproportionate flies regularly bother the objects – a reference to the subtle lifelike flies which proclaim imminent decay in seventeenth-century still lifes.

The toys entered Van Deurzen's work after he found a box full of imaginary creatures and fairy-tale heroes at a flea market. Many of them are protagonists from the Disney stable, obtainable as a bonus with a Happy Meal. 'I recognized the vanitas theme in them. Every month McDonald's produced a new series of, let's say, ten different figures. So the children had to eat more hamburgers to get them. Then the old ones could be discarded. The turnover rate fascinated me.'

Although he is aware of the adverse effect that the overproduction of cheap consumer goods has on the environment, he is careful not to burden his paintings with moral messages. 'I find the classical vanitas pedantic. I want to shed light on both sides of our era. There's also this festive explosion, the freedom of being able to buy anything.'

The things Van Deurzen portrays are becoming gradually less recognizable. 'More and more often I try to capture the vanitas quality in the brushstrokes. I lay on the paint quite wet, so that the forms seem to melt. They spread out like melting ice-cream.'

## The language of things

Of a whole different order is the both anarchistic and analytical work of Uta Eisenreich (born 1971), an artist of German descent who studied in Amsterdam and continues to work there. Eisenreich uses photography, installation art and performance. Her interest in still life dates back to her time at the academy and had its origins in her experience at home with housework and child rearing. 'Because of the birth of my son the question of how thinking is formed, how you explain things to a child occupied me. My final exam project in 2000 dealt with unsuccessful systems for clearing up. On a carpet I made a diagram in the form of a pie in which I put household items into categories like "toys" and "edible things". But then, where would you put an edible toy? If I am not able to organize a kitchen cupboard, I thought, then organizing on a large scale in science can't be possible either. Reality is so polymorphous, it can't be caught in a single system.'

In 2010, in collaboration with the graphic designer Julia Born, Eisenreich made the photo book, *A not B*, a kind of semiotic picture book for all ages based on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale – an intelligence test for children that presents them with ever-changing combinations of items from a suitcase and has them describe the relationships between them. Eisenreich's book contains photos of eggs, matches, ladybugs, pins, fruit, deflated footballs, teapots, Post-it notes, ash trays and a lot of other things. Her plain graphic compositions give these commonplace objects an aura of enormous importance. But what do they demonstrate? What do they symbolize, of what are they derivatives? The book has an obstinate, cheerful, liberating air of investigation. Language, signs, objects - what refers to what, when does something become readable, when is something self-evident? Why do we use things for packaging our purchases? What do we project on our food and our possessions?



Uta Eisenreich, *A not B # 11: Bananadrama*, 2010.

Tim Breukers, *I LOVE YOU*, 2014,  
Clay, 23 x 11 x 23 cm, Private collection.



Eisenreich is presently collaborating with the performance artist Eva Meyer-Keller and singer-songwriter Miss Kenichi (Katrin Hahner) in a production based on the theatrical text *Objects Lie on a Table – A Play* (1922) by Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). Eisenreich and Meyer-Keller, with visual artist Rebecca Sakoun, had previously based a shorter performance on it called *Things on a Table* (2015). Stein moved in the progressive artistic and literary circles of early twentieth-century Paris and was friends with painters like Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse, who all three revitalized the still life through cubism. Stein's wild, poetic text full of puns is noticeably influenced by their painterly quest and Stein's kaleidoscopic textual collage fits in well with Eisenreich's unsettling humour. Stein replaces objects with language; Eisenreich replaces language with objects. Their visual still-life marriage in *Things on a Table* produced alternating effects of recognition and alienation that were overwhelming. The audience sat in front of a screen on which a table, which was being filmed on the right side of the room, was projected. While Stein's text was being recited, hands on the table were busy constantly creating new arrangements of objects. Sometimes the things were what they seemed, other times they stood for something else. They transformed from thing into symbol and back again, as the public's eye was directed from one interpretation to another with the help of words and theatrical manipulation.

Aukje Koks (1977) likewise plays with collective and personal symbols in her work. To her, painting and writing are very closely related. In 2012 she made an installation for the exhibition *Time, Trade & Travel* as part of a collaboration between the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam and the Nubuke Foundation in Accra, Ghana. Partly as a result of Pieter de Marees's travelogue from 1602, Koks became intrigued by the way in which the objects brought from Ghana by seventeenth-century Europeans acquired a totally different function and status, often with strong symbolic connotations, and by how European traders tried to take advantage of this.

At Belgian and Dutch flea markets Koks bought objects of the kind that colonial traders used to take with them to Ghana in those days: a copper pan, a rope, a strainer, a knife, keys. She used this collection as an idiom to portray sayings of the Ghanaian Ashanti, like: 'The ears of a chief are like a strainer, there are more than a thousand ways to them'. She also discovered sayings that related to the relationship between the Ashanti and Europeans: 'If there had been no poverty in Europe, then the white man would not have come and spread his cloths in Africa.'

## Table theatre

To summarize then: the still life is still being used as a bearer of coded moral messages, but it is being done in a new way. Unequivocal piety is no longer part of it. The contemporary still life provides a handle for (self) examination, analysis of the human spirit and the spirit of the times and the exploration of our changing relationship with our mortality, our possible soul, our possessions and eternity – but without reaching any compelling conclusions.

Yet even though the artists no longer uphold a standard Christian conviction, they seem to consciously make use of the moralistic image of the genre, even as they prefer to leave us with conjectures and questions rather than conveniently arranged conclusions. By their choice of still life they seem not only to indicate that their work can be understood symbolically and have possible moralistic connotations, but they also ensure that it becomes part of the impressive chain of still lifes in art history. In this way they invite the audience to compare their contemporary displays of objects with all those other arrangements of things that have been immortalized through the centuries.

The still life is especially suitable for this game of looking back and forth, since the genre deals invariably with concrete goods that are depicted on a domestic scale. In the defined area of the table theatre the similarities and differences between various eras and places are clearly visible. For until the end of time, our food and our possessions will not only testify to our existence but also to our desires and fears. New elements are concerns about our garbage with regard to the environment, our consumer society, and the promise of digital perpetuity. Our tendency to measure our status and happiness by material things is undiminished, as is our concern about what we have and what we think we need to make the most of our existence. The still life will most certainly be rediscovered again and again by many artists as an ideal genre to confirm, unveil and examine who we are and who we want to be. ■