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STILL LIFE SMALL DEATHS

The Greek word xenos (ξένος) from which my name is derived, means stranger, guest, or foreigner. In ancient Greece, xenia (ξενία) denoted the sacred covenant of hospitality: the reciprocal bond between host and guest, an ethical obligation to welcome the stranger. The term later lent itself to a genre of Roman wall painting depicting modest provisions offered to guests: fruit, flowers, bread, seafood, meat, and other material assurances of welcome.[1] In these arrangements of food and objects—the painted stand-in for the host's welcome—the still life finds one of its earliest iterations.

Still life, or *nature morte*, has always attended to the quotidian, to the small deaths that structure daily existence: the cut flower, the killed game, the fruit ripening toward decay. Yet embedded in its origins was a latent question about belonging: who is welcomed, who is nourished, who is permitted to share in the earth's abundance.

This exhibition brings together largely New York based artists from my own queer community, who are working in and against the still life tradition to ask what *xenia* might mean now.

Ohan Breiding's *Still Life with Blue Shark and Douche* stays close to the genre's traditional compositions: offerings arranged on a draped surface, bathed in dramatic light, anchored by the ornate vessel and the cut flower. The work continues Breiding's ongoing queer still life series, which pairs objects associated with queer desire with those that speak to ecological and environmental collapse. Here, Breiding inserts a douche and, draped lavishly over it, a blue shark. An endangered species of personal significance to the artist, the shark becomes a memento mori—nature awaiting its death.

Dana DeGiulio's two small paintings carry the weight of requiems. In one, a skull surfaces from the pale ground, signaling a departure; the oldest of vanitas symbols, its form so loosely worked it seems to dissolve in the same gesture that conjures it. Around it, apples or peaches flushed red and orange hold the most life, seeming to roll out of the frame. The skull recedes almost entirely into a haze of white in the other, the warmth of the scene concentrated in a single orange. The still lifes are not so still, departed guests still asserting their presence.

A similar proximity to loss haunts Elizabeth Glaessner's small, tender painting of a plucked turkey posed against a dark ground, a direct nod to Goya's *Still Life, Plucked Turkey and Pan with Fish* (1812). Glaessner's paintings typically move through psychological inner states and bodily thresholds. Rare among her works for its absence of a human figure, this still life renders the carcass in soft flesh tones, a feast turned elegy, so that the act of painting itself becomes an act of mourning. The bird reads as a de-mythicized, exploited America, ritually sacrificed to sustain a national myth that has already collapsed.

Justine Kurland's *The Cardinal* strikes a similar chord: the vivid red bird hangs by its feet, its head dropped toward a wooden ledge, set against a darkly collaged ground of painted book pages. A recent convert to painting after a long career in photography, Kurland works from photographs of her late father's paintings, copying them by hand. The act has become the closest relationship the two ever had, a closeness reached through representation.

[1] See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 1990

For Rachel Stern, the vanitas of still life is inseparable from desire. Her photograph *Decadence* stages a lavish spread of fruit, vegetables, and flowers that shows in saturated detail that ripeness and rot aren't so far apart. The word DECADENCE is spelled out across the scene, scattered to concentrate the act of reading. True to Stern's practice, language appears here as a tangible object that decorates life, a linguistic veil behind which the allegorical and the specific collide. The letters render the image's subject literal: this *is* decadence, even as the objects perform the word's etymology, a decay already embedded in decadence. Stern's work flirts with the petite mort—desire pushed to the point of climax and collapse. Here the print is hung against a collage installation that the artist created onsite, combining photocopied photographs and silver prints Stern took of graveyards, medical museums, and churches.

In *Sheet*, Erin Johnson photographs a single tomato adrift in the folds of a rumpled sky-blue bedsheet, the fabric pooling around it like the drapery of a classical still life. The lone fruit, vibrant red against the cool cloth, distills the genre's traditional offerings into a single specimen. The surface of the bed, however, shifts the still life from the table to a site of intimacy and the *petite mort*. The image draws on Johnson's 2020 project *Tomatoes*, a multi-channel video installation in which a group of artists gather in a circle, eating, licking, and squeezing ripe tomatoes, sharing gentle intimacies. Johnson uses the tomato as an emblem of interconnectivity and abundance, a portrait of collectivity in which individuals come together as distinct parts of a whole.

A.L. Steiner captures the spontaneous still lifes that surface in the everyday, gathering them into her signature photo constructions. In *Stilleven with rambutans (for Ksenia),* the familiar provisions and arrangements of the still life table reappear scattered through the contemporary world, snapped on the street, in the kitchen, at the party. Fragments of bodies and their appetites surface throughout; a cornichon and a pickled onion gently leaning against a nipple, a vulva covered with rambutans; erotic hints that suggest the potential petite mort. Two disco balls provide the light by which the entire constellation seems to be lit: both fragmented and abundant on a planet running out of time.

Sig Olson too finds still life in the overlooked corners of the everyday—the stillness of a dog's paws resting on a bed, an ex-lovers vulva covered in pomegranate seeds, those ancient emblems of Persephone and the underworld. Olson's paintings are the photographs abstracted; tracing the dissolution a scene undergoes in memory. Shaped by the queer community of 1990s San Francisco, they photographed friends and lovers they would lose by the decade's end. Turning from representation toward abstraction, they let a remembered scene loosen into color and texture as the surface soaks up the paint, and the subject's small death becomes the ground of the still life.

Viewed from above, a brown paper bag sits on a pale plank floor in Siobhan Liddell's *Sunday or Monday*, its flaps splayed back to reveal a small cluster of humble objects—keys and a ceramic mushroom—nestled inside. True to her sculptural sensibility, the painting sits between the two- and three-dimensional realms, pulling still life off the picture plane and into the space of the viewer's body. What might read as discarded or overlooked becomes, in Liddell's hands, a quiet meditation on attachment and access, on the treasure-like qualities of trivial things. The keys and the mushroom sit side by side, the manmade against the naturally grown: one a small instrument of entry and ownership, the other in essence belonging to no one.

For Pamela Sneed, still life emerges from one's own stillness. Across her *Breath* watercolors, thin washes of deep purples, pinks, and reds meet denser thickets of yellows, greens, and blacks; the

colors gather at the center and dissolve toward the edges, recalling the hues of an abundant bouquet. Here the arrangement has been absorbed into pure gesture; what remains of the genre's abundance is its color and its swell, the bloom felt rather than depicted. Sneed built her career as a poet—works like *Funeral Diva* (2020) reflect on the AIDS crisis and Black history, on loss and survival and the labor of bearing witness, an accumulation of what has been mourned and what has endured. More recently she has moved into visual art by way of art therapy, and her watercolors hold the amorphous quality of what it means to be reflective outside of language.

Angela Dufresne literally pulls nature into two small paintings, from a larger body of work, framing each with foraged twigs and branches. In one, a sycamore branch—distinctive for its spiky seedballs—is rendered against a soft green ground; in the other, a black-and-yellow swallowtail butterfly rests against a similar green. In both, the foraged wood reaches in around the painted image, nature insisting on its three-dimensional presence at the borders of representation. These seemingly modest natural objects appear almost as relics—which they may one day become, as so much of the living world reaches us first through images and objects.

Haley Josephs' painting at first appears to show a deer mid-leap through a lush landscape, the kind of pastoral scene that has framed the animal in art for centuries. Nothing in the image gives it away, but the deer is in fact a deer-shaped lamp—which makes this a still life after all, a painting of a domestic object rather than a living creature. Josephs offers the deer as we like to picture it, wild and free in the landscape, yet the real animal, far from this fantasy, has in many places become a source of ecological damage, overpopulated and stripping forests bare. And increasingly we meet such creatures not in the wild but in the objects that replace them, the living animal receding behind its likeness. Josephs' lamp holds both the longing for unmediated contact with nature and the growing difficulty of it.

The pastoral returns in Hyegyeong Choi's *Studio Table*, set in a glowing yellow and magenta wooded landscape where the painter's tools are folded into a spread of fruit, vegetables, and flowers, alongside a half-eaten bowl of noodles. Three magenta nudes lounge around and beneath the table, in no hurry to disperse. Reminiscent of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, *Studio Table* is a still life in which the figure has forgotten to leave the frame, or chooses to insist on its presence. Their lingering charges the scene with a quiet tension: in a genre defined by the absence of the living, these strangers have refused to be left out of the frame.

The figure persists in Hannah Beerman's *Still Life* (2026), where a collaged photograph of slowly wilting red tulips sits above a photograph of a person mid-stride. The bend of their body echoes the droop of the flowers, all against a vibrant pink ground of Beerman's signature restless brushstrokes. The rhyme between figure and flowers quietly binds human and plant to a shared rhythm of wilting, while the energy of the brushwork pushes back against that downward drift.

A bouquet of baby's breath is assembled in Shauna Steinbach's *Stratum Study II*, a sculptural interpretation of the genre that asks what still life might become when freed from the picture plane. Built as an ascending architecture of clear acrylic shelves and repurposed glass bottles, the work lifts the arrangement off its table and into transparent, stacked space. The delicate flowers are spaced both inside and outside the bottles; sealed within, the baby's breath literally breathes, fogging the glass with condensation. Steinbach has also cast her own fingers in plaster and set them across the tower's layers so that the severed flowers find their echo in the severed fingers. The fingers that bring on the petite mort are themselves cut away—the figure of speech meeting its literal counterpart.

Another floral arrangement appears in Willa Wasserman's *Rose in Emilie's Vase*. A single coral-red

rose sits at the center of a seemingly translucent vase, loosely gathered with pale sprigs of greenery and ringed by scattered petals, the whole composition all haze and atmosphere—pinks, creams, and faint violets bleeding into each other. Worked in thin layers that often begin in silverpoint, the image emerges from and recedes back into its ground, flirting with abstraction. The bouquet is rendered less as an object to be described than as something half-remembered, and yet Wasserman holds onto what she calls its "this-ness"—the irreducibly present, even as it dissolves.

Catalina Muñoz Schliebener's series *Fantasma*, of which only a selection is shown here, repurposes *Precious Moments* figurines—the kitsch statuettes that populated so many American homes, in which religious ideology dressed itself as welcome. The porcelain figurines were meant to map out what should matter in life: marriage, faith, our relationship to the natural world, our love for animals. Schliebener covers their faces in glitter, erasing the wholesome features and leaving behind anonymous, ghostly forms–*fantasmas*–that expose how the hospitality these objects claimed to embody was never extended to those who did not conform.

This tension finds a particularly timely expression in Sara Stern's two prints of her signature character, the marble man, photographed inside Trump Tower's marble-clad interior: a meditation on material excess, on a capitalism that organizes life around luxury objects while withholding access from most. A recurring character Stern conjures from marble façades and places in charged settings, the marble man here sits doubled on the polished floor beneath an EXIT sign glowing red in reverse: hospitality's exact inverse, the building's only word to its guest a suggestion to leave.

Le'Andra LeSeur's *Notes towards becoming* slips from still life as representation into the literal meaning of *nature morte*. Drawn from her research into landscapes and waterways marked by violent histories, the work is built from collected water and soil samples. The landscape prints—Van Dyke and cyanotype pours on soil-covered linen—are paired with blurred images of the artist's body. Together they hold the living and the dead in a single register of stillness, expanding the still life beyond an arrangement of objects; here stillness is not an endpoint but a condition of ongoing transformation.

In an era of resurgent xenophobia, of borders hardening against human movement as ecosystems collapse under extraction and neglect, what does it mean to depict the natural world? In Paris, the genre's French name carries its own charge: *nature morte*, dead nature. But the small deaths of the title carry, too, the charge of the petite mort that has flickered through these works, so that desire and decay are revealed as intimates. To attend to the small deaths is to attend at once to what we mourn and what we want. And what, then, of *xenia*—the ancient obligation to welcome the stranger, to offer the guest fruit and flowers and a place at the table? The works gathered here refuse still life as passive arrangement, treating it instead as a site of relation, care, and crisis, attending to who is made welcome and who is left out in a world of shared precarity.

- Dr. Ksenia M. Soboleva