

Still Life

Inspiration

One of the principal genres of Western art – essentially,
the subject matter is anything that does not move or is
dead

Tate Museum

A still life is a picture of objects that have been arranged in a composition. Photographic still lifes are usually made in a studio setting where artists use precise composition and lighting to render shape, show the surface of objects, establish mood, and draw the viewer's attention to certain elements. Artist often use natural and manmade objects carefully selected and placed in the scene to serve as symbols or metaphors. The still life has a long tradition in art history, specifically in painting.

Museum of Contemporary Photography

<https://www.mocp.org/education/resources/still-life-the-object-as-subject.php>

Still life photography is a genre of photography used for the depiction of inanimate subject matter, typically a small group of objects. Similar to still life painting, it is the application of photography to the still life artistic style. These can also include flowers and food.

BCG Set Subject definition

Still life photographs can be found. They don't always
have to be constructed.

Judge's comment

Key considerations:

Choice of objects
Background / surfaces
Placement of objects
Lighting
Framing

The choices you make must work together to make a cohesive and powerful image.

Choice of objects

Consider:

- Symbolism
- Meaning
- Narrative
- Objects might also reference the history of the genre

Backgrounds and surfaces are also significant elements and require as much thought as the objects

Placement of objects

Consider:

- Balance or tension
- Stillness or energy
- Depth

Lighting

Consider:

- Lighting that supports your objects and arrangement
- Light can be soft, harsh, gentle, dramatic, neutral...
- Light can be natural or artificial

Framing

Consider:

- Negative space
- Angle of view

Technical considerations

Consider:

- Depth of field
- Shutter speed (a still life doesn't have to be static)
- You may need a tripod

Inspirational artists



Photographer: Marian Drew
Melon Coral Clouds, 2015
Archival pigment on cotton
75 x 90 cm

Image source: <https://michaelreid.com.au/art/melon-coral-clouds-2/?context=16132&v=6cc98ba2045f>

More images: http://www.turnergalleries.com.au/exhibitions/14_drew.php

Her new works are more joyous affairs, the table-tops are festive arrangements of found objects including fruit, hybrid ornaments, shells, coral and plants. Most were found at the artist's retreat on the Central Queensland coast at Agnes Water, and photographed in front of printed, or actual, land and skiescapes. The still-life arrangements also refer to the 18th Century fad for exotic and fanciful figures, and ornate table sculptures that stimulated conversation and humour at the dinner table.



Photographer: Chloe Bartram
Marjorie #20

Image source: <https://www.chloebartram.com/majorie#20>

This work was made in 2011. I know I didn't do my Nanna or her story justice. At the time it was all I was capable of creating.

My Nanna died in 2015, just over three months before the birth of my first child. I keep the story on my website as a reminder to create with care, always.



Photographer: Laura Letinsky
Hardly More Than Ever

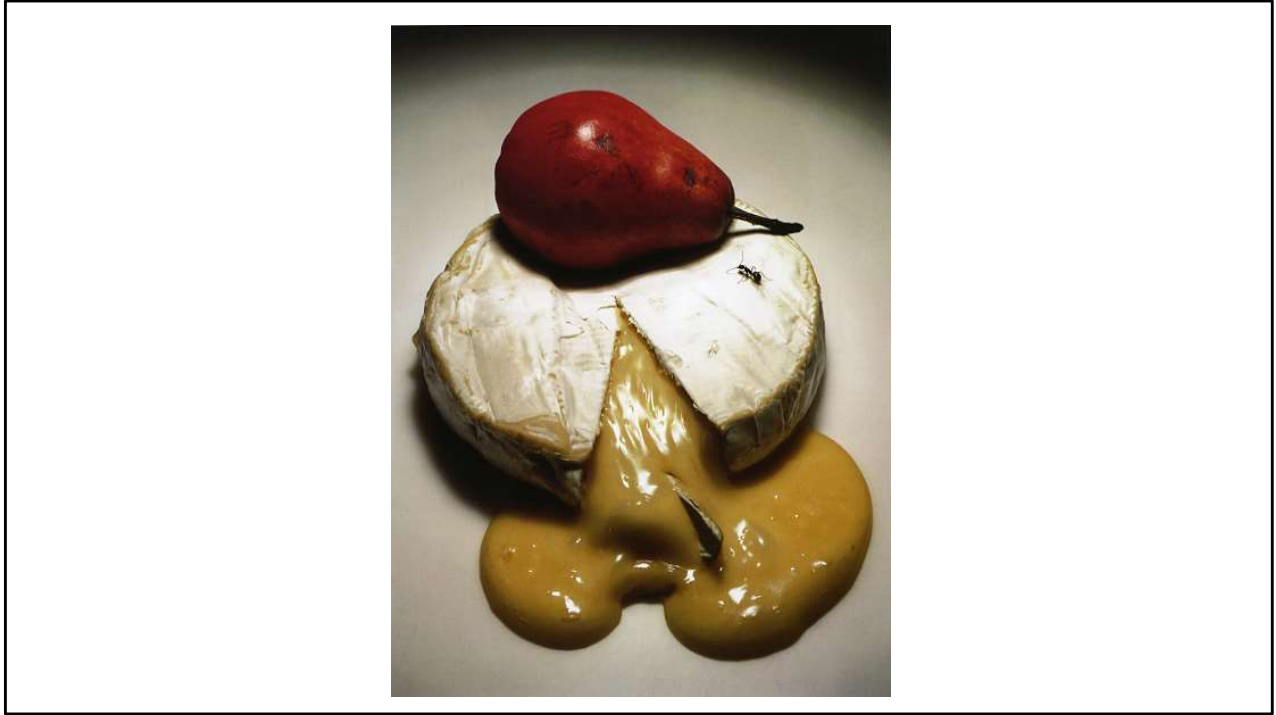
<http://aperture.org/blog/interview-with-laura-letinsky/>

Still lifes increasingly drew my interest. It interests me as a genre in the same way that concepts of love interest me—its association with the feminine, its characterization as “less important,” its affiliations with domesticity and intimacy. There seemed to be potential there, room for exploration. I realized that still lifes were a vehicle to explore the tension between the small and minute and larger social structures. For the last fifteen years I’ve explored this realm, increasingly weaving in questions about perception, about how we see and understand the world around us, and about how photography conflicts with and constrains our sense of our environment by reinforcing certain ideas we have about perception.

https://www.mocp.org/pdf/education/MoCP_Ed-Still_life_image_set.pdf

Letinsky’s pictures of love are composed of Necco Wafer colors – peach, blue, green and yellow – and contained within an elegant formality. These visual attributes are fully unleashed in her most recent series, *Morning and Melancholia*, still-life compositions discovered in the remains of daily meals that reference Dutch and Flemish painting.

Together, both series of photographs offer an extended essay on fragility, the domestic arena and, according to Letinsky, the photograph's transformative qualities.



Photographer: Irving Penn
Ripe Cheese,

<https://irvingpenn.org/still-life>



Photographer: Joachim Froese

Rhopography #15

2000, 3 Silver Gelatin Prints, 46 x 116 cm

Image source: <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=55309>

<http://www.joachimfroese.com/rhopography.html>

Rhopography refers to the Greek word rhopos, meaning trivial objects, small wares, trifles. This old fashioned term for still life painting is the title for a series of images, which depicts dead insects and food left and references the tradition of the Baroque still life.

Instead of using digital technology, the photographs in this series are manipulated through traditional 'analogue' processes. Although the pictures show a scenario that does not exist in reality, their language stays strictly within the tradition of documentary photography that signifies truth, including sharp focus and the black border around each print. Informed viewers these days expect to be fooled by digital images, but can be taken off-guard when deception is presented in 'old fashioned' black/white photography.

Historically painting in the 17th Century was at a similar crossroads as photography

is in the digital age. Baroque still lifes developed a naturalism that challenged preconceived ideas about painting and marked the beginning of 'photographic thinking'. The use of optical tools, and the suppression of all painterly gesture, led to seemingly truthful depictions, which nevertheless were highly subjective constructions of, and reflections on, society and religion.

Aspects of this tradition still influenced artists who accompanied the early European explorers since the 17th Century to record the 'newly found' coastlines, cultures and species of fauna and flora. These records were regarded as scientific and objective accounts but were nevertheless subjective reactions to unknown territories.

While the first phase of Rhopography focused on the depiction of dead insects and referenced Dutch still life painting, the second phase is based on the Spanish still life tradition. It particularly refers to the monk and painter Juan Sánchez Cotán and his images of fruit and vegetable in the coolhouse. Inspired by Cotán's sense of geometry the images develop a new way of mirroring objects without interrupting the directional light on the stage.

While insects only occasionally appear in the images, they still have a strong presence as if they just walked out of the picture. Cotán's monastic ideas of discipline and preservation are still palpable but have failed a long time ago and the coolhouse is left to decay and unseen scavengers.



Photographer: Sarker Protick

What Remains

<https://sarkerprotick.com/What-Remains>

The story of John and Prova, my grandparents. After many years working for the Baptist church, they settled down and moved to Dhaka, started living in an old apartment from the 60's called 'Haque Mansion'. By the next few years John suffered from a cancer and Prova had strokes. They were not able to go out anymore. For them, everything was confined into one single room. This room, the space between the corners and the dust on the walls, all were part of that existence.



Image source: <https://www.starkwhite.co.nz/still-life-ripiro-2014>

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/94699991/inside-the-magical-world-of-celebrated-new-zealand-artist-fiona-pardington>

Her still-life works have opened up a new sensory richness with their dense colours and formal composition. They feature a curious array of objects from dead seagulls to perfume bottle stoppers, cartridge cases and scarlet ribbons. Like the Dutch paintings they are modelled upon, they preserve the moving processes of life in a static instant.



Photographer: Yvonne Todd
Still Life with Diet Pills / Still Life with Lemon
1999
c-type print
395 x 680mm (diptych)

<http://www.ivananthony.com/yvonne-todd-1>
Like her portraits, Todd's still lifes evidence a fascination with the tricks that advertising photographers use to bring enchantment to their subjects, no matter how mundane.



Photographer: Yvonne Todd
Insistence, 2013

Image source: <https://www.ervon.com/gentle-disco>

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201809/yvonne-todd-77443>

The oddity in Todd's still lifes is often subtle, comprising offbeat combinations of objects, settings, and framing devices... *Insistence*, 2013, was a sharply focused color image of a trio of raw vegetables. A carrot leans on a diagonal against an upright corncob with a button mushroom placed between them. The precise arrangement of produce and uniform lighting recall the chilly perfection of Irving Penn's food photos. However, unlike Penn's, Todd's vegetables impart a whiff of psychological significance. As the title *Insistence* hints, the carrot appears to be cozying up to the corncob, with the diminutive mushroom completing a wholesome family unit. But the most perverse element is the floral clip-art border—Todd describes it as “diabolical”—that frames the vegetables.



Photographer: Zeke Berman

Untitled 1984

Gelatin silver print

15 1/8 × 17 9/16" (38.4 × 44.6 cm)

<https://www.moma.org/artists/506>

Zeke Berman's background as a sculptor is evident in his painstakingly fabricated arrangements for the camera. Using string, wood, clay, water, paper, and glass, Berman creates complicated still lifes that resist clear-cut visual interpretation. By conflating the difference between what is seen by the eye and what is seen by the camera, Berman incites our imagination and challenges our perception.



Photographer: Taryn Simon

Agreement Establishing the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, Al-Bayan Palace, Kuwait City, Kuwait, May 30, 2006, Paperwork and the Will of Capital, 2015, 2015
Archival inkjet print in mahogany frames with text in windowed compartment on archival herbarium paper

85 × 73 1/4 × 2 3/4 in

<https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2016/taryn-simon-paperwork-and-the-will-of-capital-new-york/>

In *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, Simon examines accords, treaties, and decrees drafted to influence systems of governance and economics, from nuclear armament to oil deals and diamond trading. All involve the countries present at the 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, which addressed the globalization of economics after World War II, leading to the establishment of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In images of the signings of these documents, powerful men flank floral centerpieces designed to underscore the importance of the parties present. Simon's photographs of the recreated centerpieces from these signings, together with their stories, underscore how the stagecraft of political and economic power is created, performed, marketed, and maintained. Each of Simon's recreations of these floral arrangements represents an "impossible

bouquet”—a concept that emerged in Dutch still-life painting parallel to the country’s seventeenth-century economic boom, which ushered in the development of modern capitalism. Then, the impossible bouquet was an artificial fantasy of flowers that could never bloom naturally in the same season and geographic location. Now the fantasy is made possible—both in the original signings and in Simon’s photographs—by the global consumer market.

For the recreations, Simon worked with a botanist and from archival records to identify all the flowers. She imported more than four thousand specimens from the world’s largest flower auction in Aalsmeer, Netherlands, where twenty million flowers arrive and depart daily, bound for international retail destinations. She remade the floral arrangements from each signing, then photographed them against striking bicolored fields relating to the foregrounds and backgrounds in the historical images, pairing each arrangement with a description of the pertinent accord. For the sculptures, selected specimens from the thirty-six arrangements were dried, pressed, and sewn to archival herbarium paper; a complete set of the thirty-six botanical collages was then placed in each of the twelve concrete presses, along with the same number of photographs and narrative texts—sealed together in a race against time.

Paperwork and the Will of Capital addresses the instability of executive decision-making and the precarious nature of survival, as well as the reliability and endurance of records: the accords and their far-reaching effects, Simon’s photographs, the preserved botanical specimens in their concrete presses, and language itself. The photographic still lifes stand in contrast to the sculptural natures mortes: as time advances, so may these artifacts transform, revealing mutable versions of themselves.



Photographer: Krista van der Niet
Fruit, 2008
C-print

<https://www.foam.org/museum/programme/still-life-dutch-contemporary-photography>
The still life could be considered a composition of lifeless, impassive objects. Although the Romans painted the first still lifes, the genre mainly became known through 17th-century Dutch and Flemish paintings. These paintings can often be categorised by subject: still lifes with flowers, still lifes of food on richly laid-out tables and vanitas still lifes illustrating the transient nature of earthly life.

In still life painting, there is order and calmness even in death. A human skull sits at the centre of Harmen Steenwyk's classic 17th century still life, *An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, one of the greatest of the 'Vanitas' paintings that so enthralled the collective Calvinist imagination of post-Reformation Netherlands. Bathed in a ray of opaque light, Steenwyk's perfectly rendered skull is an example of religious allegory writ large; an object that does not need much scholarly elucidation amidst an array of other more earthly things (a shell, a sword, a jar, silk fabric, books, musical instruments), all of which have been carefully chosen for their more coded metaphorical resonances.



Photographer: Paul Outerbridge
Images de Deauville 1936

Image source: <https://www.moma.org/artists/4452>

<https://www.foam.org/userfiles/about/17-217-stilllife-booklet.pdf>

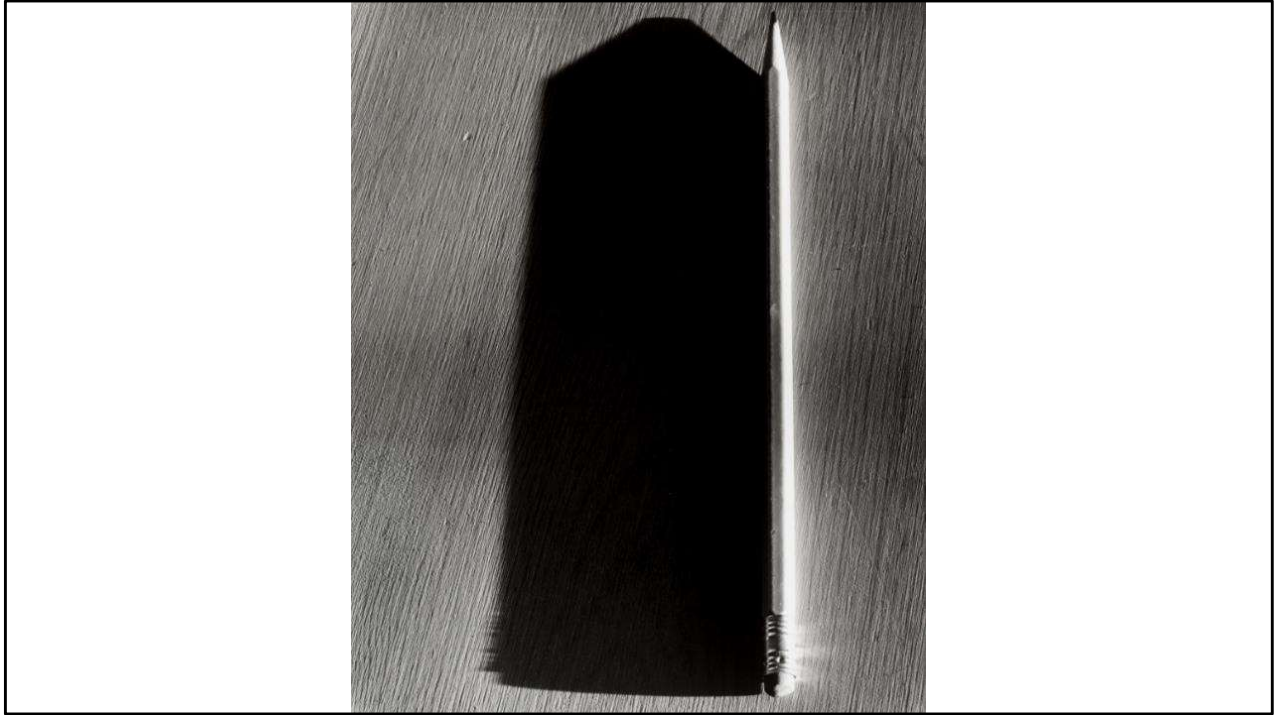
In the 1930s, Outerbridge made still life photographs that blurred the traditional boundaries between the commercial – advertising, editorial commissions for interior decoration magazines – and the artistic.



Photographer: William Eggleston
The Democratic Forest, Volume 1, Louisiana

<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8095/william-eggleston-master-of-colour-photography>

Notable elevation of everyday subjects to the status of artworks, remarkable in both depth and complexity. "Well, I've been photographing democratically..."



Photographer: Abelardo Morell

Pencil, 2000

Gelatin silver print

22 7/16 × 18 1/8" (57 × 46 cm)

Image source: <https://www.moma.org/artists/6917>

In the more direct black and white “still lives” of pens and mirrors Abelardo Morell reaches for universal issues and, with great visual and emotional intelligence, captures these domestic mysteries with the eloquence of a portrait.



Photographer: Abelardo Morell
White Vessels. Composition #3
2020

Image source: <https://www.abelardomorell.net/project/new-work/>



Artist: Stephanie H. Shih
Stone Dumpling House, 2018.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-17-contemporary-artists-reimagining-life>
Stephanie H. Shih makes ceramics that resemble foods found in East Asian grocery stores—Kikkoman soy sauce, Sriracha, and Botan Calrose rice, for example. “My work is about shared nostalgia,” said Shih. “I like creating vignettes that are ambiguous enough to speak to a large swath of the Asian American diaspora while also being specific enough to speak to distinct memories.” Shih’s three-dimensional objects stimulate viewers’ desire, inviting them to imagine touching the works and feeling their weight.



Photographer: Sasina Chomsuwan

Lemon in the Wild

Photograph (35mm film)

2020

Fine Art Giclée print (310gsm 100% Cotton Rag Paper)

60 x 40cm

<https://www.no-vacancy.com.au/still-life-1/2020/9/8/sasina-chomsuwan>

'Don't be afraid to shine in the wild'

This photo is a part of *Light Around Us*, a life-long ongoing photo series that poignantly demonstrates my photographic style; a delicate attention to natural light, form and stillness that invokes an intimate sense of calm from within.

During the lockdown, I still keep my naturalistic approach to shoot light as a subject to highlight objects in my place, such as the lemon in this photo.