

VISUAL ART

# Review: Nature Morte: Contemporary Still Life at Guildhall Art Gallery

A dying genre is reanimated in this rich and audacious exhibition

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

September 8 2017, 12:01am,  
The Times



Do It Again, I Didn't Press Record, by Barnaby Barford  
ALL ARTWORK COURTESY GUILDHALL ART GALLERY

Share



Save



In English we call it still life. In French they say *nature morte*. Translated literally that means “dead nature”. And it is no accident, it emerges, that the curator Michael Petry chose to use the French title for his new Guildhall Art Gallery show.

Contemporary audiences, their responses too often blunted by the brash and the brazen, can easily dismiss the still life as dull and outmoded. The prospect of looking at flower arrangements and defunct fishes hardly sounds enticing. Yet, although you will find both in this Guildhall exhibition, you will also discover plenty that's rather less predictable: a squirming confection of pornographic cut-outs; a bullet created from a ground-down finger bone; a sickening close-up of freshly butchered entrails; a stuffed rabbit with hair rollers curling its ears.

This show translates a traditional genre into contemporary language. It sets out to reinvigorate a once-popular tradition, to make it look not just fresh again, but feel politically, socially and, most saliently, philosophically relevant.



Nancy Fouts's Rabbit with Curlers, 2010  
NANCY FOUTS

The still life first came into its own in the mid-17th century. It was then that Netherlandish artists began to paint their *stillevens* paintings of objects that, instead of being treated as mere props in some more salient drama, were treated as main players.

You can see this in a number of otherwise fairly unremarkable paintings that, drawn from the Guildhall's collection of Dutch golden age paintings, now go on show. Floris van Schooten focuses on breakfast cheeses; Pieter Claesz shows us a dinner to be swilled down with a tankard of ale.



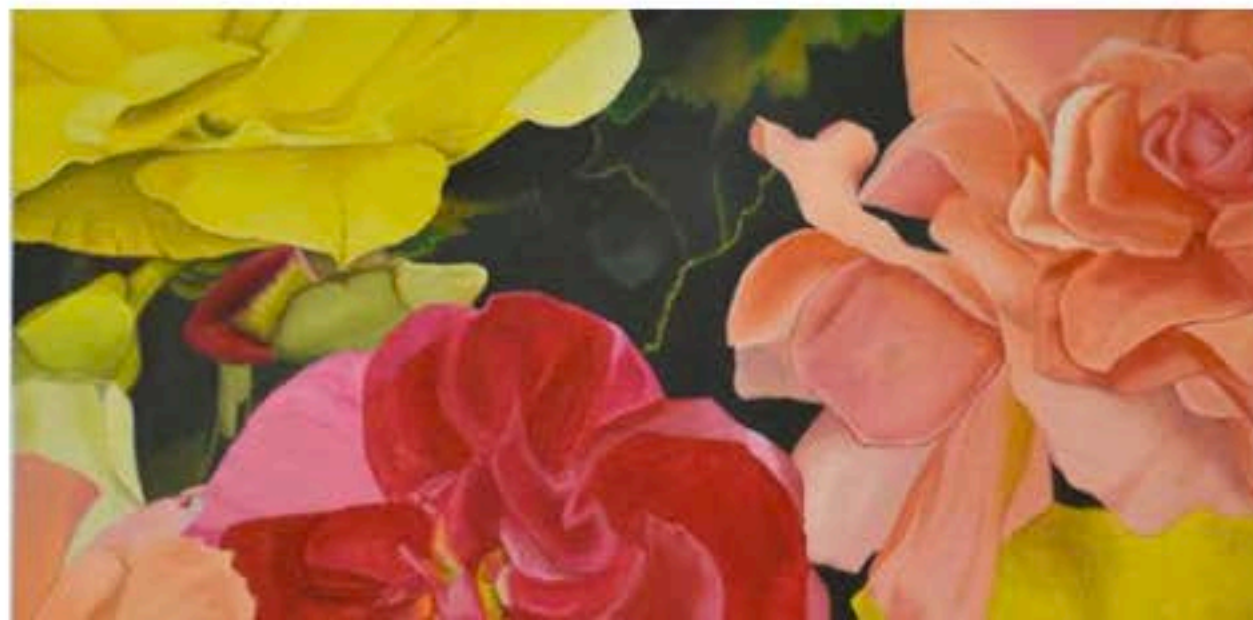
Whatever the subject, the curators of this show suggest, the term “still life” cannot do it justice. These are, quintessentially, allegorical images. They are freighted with messages about life, its meanings, its morals and, most saliently, its fundamental brevity. They are basically, the curator argues, all about death, but it was left to the French, in the 18th century, to coin the name that best conjures up this darkly brooding symbolism.



... and a Cello, 2002, painted  
by Michael Craig-Martin  
COURTESY MICHAEL CRAIG-  
MARTIN AND THE ALAN CRISTEA  
GALLERY, LONDON

A newly restored 18th-century painting, on show for the first time, makes the point clear. It is not particularly riveting. There are books in the foreground; at the back a candlestick. And before conservation a pot and paintbrush, which had been added two centuries later. Now, removed by restorers, they reveal a human skull beneath. This canvas, like so many works of its genre, was intended to function as a “vanitas”. The name, Latin for “emptiness”, alludes to the transience of human existence and warns of the worthlessness of all our earthly goods. It is this presence of death that gives this picture its gravitas.

*Nature Morte* is a touring exhibition, designed to accompany the lavishly illustrated book that Petry published a few years ago. It has already been on show in a number of international venues. This is the only chance you will get to see it in the UK. Its fundamental argument is that these images of frequently mundane objects have been adapted over centuries. A tradition that can be traced back as far as ancient Egyptian tomb paintings is reinvigorated by contemporary artists for our modern age. This show presents anything from textiles to taxidermy, digital projections to a skull made from sloughed-off human skin. Yet, however radical the style or the medium, death and its metaphors remain lurking.



Marcus Cope's Various Titles,  
2009  
MARCUS COPE





Artists from two dozen countries are chosen to illustrate the argument. A few are quite famous — Gabriel Orozco, for instance — but most are little known. Those who bought Petry's book may well be disappointed. You won't find Gerhard Richter's painted candles or Damien Hirst's diamond skull. But don't be dismayed. This is an intellectually vivid (despite the banal text panels) and visually striking show. It intersperses its handful of fairly uninspiring but usefully illustrative period pictures with a vibrant array of modern pieces in a broad range of media.

Divided into sections, the hang focuses on such subjects as the depictions of food or domestic accoutrements, the symbolism of animals or the allegories of flowers. Yet the range of approaches is stimulatingly wide. Several artists refer directly to their Dutch predecessors. Maciej Urbanek details each desiccated wrinkle on the skins of citrus fruit as carefully as Rembrandt painted the slack furrows on an ageing sitter's skin. Alexander James photographs underwater

still lifes. But for John Kaine it is enough just to spell out “Dead Roses” in rusted steel capitals. The flowers, he suggests, would decay into a memory as stark as this.



Matt Smith's Looking for a Chicken Hawk, 2015

MATT SMITH

Berthold Bell photographs a dead rat as part of a series that documents political crisis in contemporary Greece. Bill Jacobson's blurry pictures are about the Aids pandemic. Images in this show, it emerges, can allude to pretty much anything from mental illness through street death squads to threats to our biosystem — although I defy anyone to guess that James Hart Dyke's painting of a rubber duck is about secret intelligence without reading the label. At times the show is rather too all-encompassing. Does Guillaume Paris's digital animation starring Pinocchio coughed up by a whale really count as a still life?

Then again, one of the points of this exhibition is to provoke us into reconsidering the art-historical genre it deals with. Contemporary artists pick up



the metaphors of the traditional still life painting and carry them into new territories. The result is a richly varied and audaciously imaginative range of work, but death, it emerges, is the most treasured prize. You can't miss it. The grinning skulls of the *nature morte* are everywhere.

***Nature Morte: Contemporary Still Life* is at Guildhall Art Gallery, London EC2 until April 2**

Share



Save



## Related links



VISUAL ART

### Say it with flowers: unlocking the secrets of the Dutch masters

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Spring is sweeping across the country like an advertising campaign. It targets niche markets with aconites and primroses, scatters daffodil-flyers...

March 26 2016



EXHIBITION

### Bruegel and sons: the family who changed art

Nancy Durrant

A portly man, his hands on his hips and his jerkin rising above his enormous belly, struts his stuff to the sound of bagpipes. He is partnered in...

February 4 2017



EXHIBITION

### The visual alchemist — Matisse's bold curiosity shop is finally open

Rachel Campbell Johnston

You can hear the excitement. "I have at last found the object for which I've been longing a whole year," wrote a delighted Henri Matisse. "It's a..."

July 22 2017