

Interior Lives

September 15 – December 4, 2021

“I have fallen in love with a painting... I have felt the energy and life of the painting’s will; I have been held there, instructed. And the overall effect, the result of looking and looking into its brimming surface as long as I could look, is love, by which I mean a sense of tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world.”

— Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* ¹

The pandemic altered “our intimacy with the things of the world.” These eighteen months have been simultaneously fearsome, tiring, and reflective: global tragedy compounded preexisting inequity; grief has been tempered with what Pamela M. Lee describes as “an atmosphere of collective depletion.”² For many of these last months, most of us were at home, becoming newly intimate with our daily, small surroundings.



Marguerite Louppe
Studio Still Life with Sketch, c. 1960

As we tentatively shift into full re-openings and adjust to new waves, our heightened awareness of the ordinary objects of domestic life is fading. Our mental and emotional sightlines are readjusting to scenes beyond our homes, but their recent domiciliary focus provides an opportunity to consider the often-overlooked genre of still life. In their static, unpeopled worlds, still lifes and domestic interiors present “the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest.”³ The still life deemphasizes narrative, and thereby the importance of human action. What remains is pure attention, buoyed by subjects made free by their very inanimacy.

Though historically occupying the lowest rung on the “hierarchy of genres,” still life provided both the subject and scene for the innovations of Modernism: the easily-identifiable objects of domestic necessity facilitated radical experiments in the representation of space. In his foundational text on still life painting, Norman Bryson wrote that “however vertiginous the painting’s ontology becomes, its play with the shifting modes of illusion is grounded in the familiar reality of tables, cups, and saucers. It is the security and dependability of that routine space which allows the metaphysical transformations to take off and soar.”⁴ The familiarity of still life’s inanimate objects enables the artist to relinquish representation, as in Serge Charchoune’s pointillist abstractions from 1943, or Prunella Clough’s monochromatic planar deconstruction in *Still Life with Mugs* (1988). In this line of thinking, the “subject” of a still life is very much up for debate: the vision of the artist is foregrounded as the objects depicted become both defamiliarized and revived by their representation.

Defamiliarization offers the chance to look anew: still lifes and domestic scenes, absented of the human figure, are small forums on material change, and the period of each work in the exhibition is made evident through style and subject matter. “We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences,” the poet Mark Doty writes. “Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations.”⁵

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Artists in the exhibition include: Serge Charchoune, Prunella Clough, Sergio de Castro, Edmund de Waal, Donald Hamilton Fraser, Serge Férat, Arshile Gorky, John D. Graham, Juan Gris, Otto Gutfreund, Marsden Hartley, Henri Hayden, Auguste Herbin, Marguerite Louppe, Jean Lurçat, Giacomo Manzù, Louis Marcoussis, Alfred H. Maurer, Renato (René) Paresce, Gino Severini, Kenneth Stubbs, Léopold Survage, and Louis Valtat

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¹ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 3–4.

² Pamela M. Lee, “Introduction: Aspiration Burnout,” *October* 176 (Spring 2021): 4.

³ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 60.

⁴ Bryson, 84.

⁵ Doty, 10.