

Still Life:

Things
Devouring
Time

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Edited by
Katie J T Herrington
& Dawn Woolley

Published by
The Stanley & Audrey
Burton Gallery,
University of Leeds
in conjunction
with the exhibition
**Still Life: Things
Devouring Time**
(21 November 2018–
23 March 2019).

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ISBN
978-1-5272-3282-2

The Stanley & Audrey
Burton Gallery,
Parkinson Building,
Woodhouse Lane,
Leeds, LS2 9JT.

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Design: Journal
Print: Pressision

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Foreword

This catalogue provides a lasting legacy for the exhibition ***Still Life: Things Devouring Time***, produced in collaboration with Dr Dawn Woolley of Leeds Arts University. Dr Woolley's PhD thesis, *Consumed: Stilled Lives and the Pathologies of Capitalism* (Royal College of Art, 2017), provided a fantastic scholarly framework for the project and we are particularly grateful for the financial support provided by Leeds Arts University which has made this publication possible. The exhibition contains some visual feasts, stunning artworks that I am sure all our visitors will enjoy. Examples of the still life genre from our own collections are mainly by 20th-century artists in an avant-garde style. They include works by members of The Bloomsbury Group such as Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and others as well as figures including William Scott and Ben Nicolson. The loan of a historic Dutch still life from the National Gallery provides a glimpse of an older tradition and a different aesthetic. We are delighted that The National Gallery was able to support us in this way.

Contemporary artists featured in the exhibition raise issues around the sustainability of contemporary lifestyles. I hope visitors will here find food for serious thought and reflection as well as food for their eyes!

Stella Butler
University Librarian and Keeper of the Brotherton Collection,
University of Leeds

Introduction

1. The Dutch Republic was the first nation state of the Dutch people. See Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 1983.

Still Life: Things Devouring Time is an exhibition exploring consumerism through the lens of historical and contemporary still life artworks. The artworks in the exhibition draw attention to urgent contemporary concerns relating to consumption and sustainability. By raising awareness and provoking thought they seek to critically intervene in these issues.

In the genre of still life natural and man-made things that are mostly inanimate take centre stage. The inclusion of things in artworks has been discussed since Greek and Roman times. During the Middle Ages motifs such as flowers and animals featured in manuscripts and books of hours where they held symbolic, religious meanings. The representation of symbolic things in art continued with the emergence of painting on panel in the Southern European Renaissance of the 15th century. There they featured in religious and allegorical subject pictures and portraits. Yet, still life did not emerge as an independent artistic genre until the 16th century. It did so in Northern, rather than Southern Europe, flourishing in the Low Countries, Flanders and the Netherlands. The popularity of still life peaked in the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age, when that nation was a dominant force in the trade of goods across the world. This was in large part because, unlike the Catholic south, the Low Countries favoured Protestant beliefs epitomised by John Calvin. Visual culture in the Low Countries did not represent religious narratives due to the Calvinist emphasis on direct communication with God and his words. Instead, through the representation of everyday life, it expressed ideal moral behaviour and the damage to the soul that greed, excess and waste may cause. The Dutch interest in still life was also fuelled by a belief that no facet of God's creation was too insubstantial to be noticed, valued or represented. Through the depiction of things, still life communicated changes in consumer culture and showed the strength and wealth of the Dutch Republic.¹

17th-century Dutch still life expressed moral messages through the visual representation of symbolic everyday things. The predominant categories of symbolism within the still life

2. 'Book of Ecclesiastes', Christian Bible, 1:2.

3. Most famously Duchamp exhibited a urinal that he titled *Fountain* (1917).

genre were *vanitas* and *momento mori*. They represented the impermanence of earthly goods and pursuits and the brevity of life respectively. *Vanitas* means 'vanity' in Latin. It originates from a quotation of the Christian Bible's Old Testament: 'Vanitas vanitatum... et omnia vanitas' (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity).² It was the only religious art approved of in the Dutch Republic. Still life *vanitas* paintings bring together multiple objects composed on table tops. Each item held a symbolic meaning that 17th-century Dutch viewers would have readily understood: books (human knowledge), musical instruments (pleasure), expensive collectable items, such as silverware and watches (wealth), organic things, including fruit, flowers and butterflies, (the brevity of life) and rotten fruit (decay). *Memento mori*, meanwhile, communicates the shortness of life. This is often represented through skulls (death) and bubbles and extinguished candles (the suddenness of death). It was important in the religious culture of the time to remind viewers that while their bodies and possessions would decay, their souls would survive and carry blemishes of immoral behaviour.

By the 19th century still life was relatively neglected. This was largely due to the designation of hierarchies among genres by the prevailing European art academies. Genres were ranked according to subject matter, historical, biblical and allegorical works were positioned as the highest forms of art while still life was a lower form. However, still life became of interest to avant-garde artists, such as Post-Impressionists and Cubists in the late 19th to early 20th century, who experimented with form and colour through still life compositions. In the 1910s to 1940s, Dadaist and Surrealist artists brought further attention to material things. Marcel Duchamp, a leading artist associated with the Dada movement, exhibited ordinary things in galleries, designating them as art. Through such things, known as ready-mades, Dadaists critiqued accepted notions of what can be art.³

Later, Surrealist artists, such as Salvador Dali, placed objects in unusual combinations to evoke ideas of the unconscious and desire.⁴ Mid-20th-century Pop artists also focused on things,

4. His *Lobster Telephone* (1936), for instance, included a lobster and a telephone, objects that, for him, had sexual connotations.

5. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) is among the best-known Pop Art works.

6. Petry. *Nature Morte*, 2013.

7. Woodley, *All Coherence Gone?* 2014, *Still Life*, 2015 and *Models and Materialities*, 2016.

8. Lambert and McClean eds, *Plastic Vanitas*, 2015.

but instead of making them seem strange, they celebrated their ordinariness by transforming every day, mass-produced objects into expensive, collectable artworks.⁵

A number of recent exhibitions have focused on still life, illustrating a current interest in the genre among artists and gallery visitors. The book and touring exhibition, *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvigorate the Still Life Tradition* (2013 to the present) has provided an encyclopaedic survey of contemporary still life artworks and their relation to historic still life paintings.⁶ Meanwhile, curator Frances Woodley's exhibition series has shown how contemporary artists are expanding and transforming the genre.⁷ Still life's Dutch 17th-century roots and *vanitas* symbolism also heavily influenced German-born artist, Mariele Neudecker's recent solo exhibition, *Plastic Vanitas* (2015). In that show she depicted objects in the style of historic Dutch paintings to draw attention to our use of plastic.⁸ Furthermore, a wider reconsideration of the role of everyday objects in social change and protest has been illustrated by object focused exhibitions: *Disobedient Objects* (2014–15) at the Victoria & Albert Museum and *I Object* (2018) at the British Museum.

9. From Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15, 234-236

The evolution and enduring relevance of still life is highlighted in the exhibition *Still Life: Things Devouring Time* by the display of contemporary artworks that refresh the genre for the 21st century. Willem Kalf's famous painting provides historical context for photographs, objects and installation works by Nicole Keeley, Caroline McCarthy, Simon Ward and Dawn Woolley. The show explores how the ideas of *vanitas* and *momento mori* inform the practice of contemporary artists. The artworks displayed include contradictions, unexpected use of materials and unusual combinations of objects that signify the consequences of consumerism. They foreground the waste and destruction caused by our appetite for things, encouraging viewers to consider social, environmental and sustainability issues of concern today. Things made from non-biodegradable materials and the human inclination to collect possessions contradict the concept of *tempus edax rerum*, time as devourer of all things.⁹ Today, global warming and plastic pollution are high on political and social agendas. Our information culture means that we are more aware of the problem than ever, yet it continues to grow. It is time to find new ways of promoting immediate action from individuals, governments and industry. Due to its quality of visual immediacy art is uniquely placed to challenge worldviews and move viewers to action.



Nicole Keeley. *Tide Mark* (detail), 2017.



Caroline McCarthy. *Humbrol* (detail), 2009.



Simon Ward. *Ghost in the Machine* (detail), 2013.



Dawn Woolley. *Relics* (detail), 2017.

Consumer Culture in Historic and Contemporary Still Life

Dr Dawn Woolley

1. Williams, *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 1988, pp 78–9.

2, 3 & 4. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 1990, pp 14, 60 and 136.

5. Montias, 'Socio-Economic Aspects of Netherlandish Art from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century: A Survey', 1990, pp 358–73.

In 14th-century Europe the term 'consume' meant 'to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust'.¹ From the mid 18th century onwards, the word became more neutral, meaning 'to buy things'. The exhibition ***Still Life: Things Devouring Time*** seeks to reconsider the earlier, more destructive notion of consumption. It brings to attention what is wasted, used-up, destroyed and exhausted in our consumer culture. The exhibited artworks remind us that consumption has another destructive characteristic: what remains. Today, when we use commodities we discard large quantities of packaging made from non-biodegradable materials that is transported to land-fill sites or discarded as litter. Natural resources and habitats are destroyed by this product of contemporary consumer habits. The artworks in the exhibition comment on the social and environmental impact of consumer habits through the genre of still life.

An Art of Everyday Things

The still life genre began as a marginal artistic practice, and has been denigrated because it does not depict 'the large-scale momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance'.² In *Looking at the Overlooked*, art historian Norman Bryson has written that still life painting 'assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject'.³ Objects, rather than people, take centre stage. Bryson has used the term *rhopography* to describe still life paintings. This is taken from Roman historian and natural philosopher, Pliny the Elder's description of Greek artist, Piraeicus as a painter of the 'lower genres'. Bryson declared 'The label ... is an insult: *rhyparographer* means painter of *rhyparos*, literally waste or filth'.⁴

In the 17th century still life paintings were still deemed to be a 'lower genre' and to carry both positive and negative moral associations, such as self-restraint or greed, communicated through *vanitas* symbols. However, despite the inferior status of still life paintings, they were an important element of a burgeoning art market in the Dutch Republic of the 17th century.⁵ They offered an affordable way for the growing merchant and middle classes to demonstrate their wealth through the collection of art. Still life paintings can be viewed as a type of portrait: the things depicted symbolise the social position and material wealth of their unseen owner, their consumer. The mundane subject of still life contributed to the affordability of this genre. It also meant that they could be produced with a limited supply of props and did not require expensive models. Artists such as Willem Kalf (1619–1693), Juriaen van Streeck (1632–1687) and Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) became household names by creating ostentatious still life paintings.



Pieter Claesz.
*Still Life with Jug,
 Herring and Smoking
 Requisites*, 1644.
 Oil on panel,
 430x660mm.
 Guildhall Art
 Gallery, London;
 bequeathed by
 Harold Samuel,
 1988.

6. Bryson, *Looking
 at the Overlooked*,
 1990.

7 & 8. Foster,
 'The Art of
 Fetishism', 1992.

9. Chong and Kloek,
*Still Life paintings
 from the Netherlands
 1550–1720*, 1999.

Such paintings of this period show the types of objects that people could buy. They also narrate the story of the dominance of Dutch trade around the globe through the depiction of exotic, unique and often expensive things collected from different places and cultures. The arrangement of things on the still life tables resemble 'cabinets of curiosity', collections of unusual, rare and expensive man-made or natural objects from different cultures. These collections were popular throughout Europe at the time. They reflected the personality and taste of the collector. The still life paintings also present collections from around the world that show the character and social status of their owners.

Portraits of Consumer Culture

Bryson writes that one of the unique facets of still life painting lay in the ability of the painter to change props rapidly to reflect transformations in society and culture. In the 17th-century Dutch Republic, still life paintings communicated a shifting relation to consumption and a nation becoming accustomed to material wealth. As consumer culture developed, the type of objects in the paintings also changed.⁶ Art critic, Hal Foster writes that Dutch still life paintings from the 1620s and 1630s predominantly depicted useful objects in a straightforward manner.⁷ Artists, including Pieter Claesz, an influential Dutch still life painter of the early 17th century, continued to produce still lifes in that modest style in the 1640s. *Still Life with Jug, Herring and Smoking Requisites* (1644) (left) depicts a herring, an everyday, affordable dietary staple consumed by all classes of Dutch society, and inexpensive, locally produced earthenware. This painting conveys that its owner has a modest, rather than indulgent character. Still life paintings produced later in the same century began to portray expensive, collectable objects painted in a dazzling way.⁸ For example, the drinking horn in *Still Life with the Drinking Horn of the Saint Sebastien Archers' Guild* (1653) by Willem Kalf (which features in this exhibition, Catalogue No 1) is a unique and expensive collector's item owned by the Amsterdam Museum.⁹ It was, therefore, not only the type of objects that changed, but the variety that increased.

In contemporary visual art the still life genre can document rapid changes in the type and variety of commodities available to buy. This is true of the works exhibited in *Still Life: Things Devouring Time*. For instance, in the *Ghost in the Machine* series (Catalogue No 5) by Simon Ward, the books that were sometimes included in historic Dutch still life paintings to symbolise knowledge and intelligence have been replaced by Kindle electronic-book screens. Caroline McCarthy's *Humbrol* series (Catalogue No 4) brings together a variety of containers in a way that resembles a cabinet of curiosities. However, the domestic objects in her work are not

unique, exotic or expensive and would not ordinarily be collected. My still life objects, pictured in the *Relics* series (Catalogue No 8), are made from packaging from a wide variety of commodities and resemble objects of worship, sometimes now displayed in museums. They are called relics because, like objects of historic value surviving from an earlier time, plastic packaging often lasts longer than the commodity that it contains.

The disjuncture between the short shelf life of commodities and lasting plastic packaging echoes the paradoxes encapsulated in *vanitas* paintings. In the 1960s Eddy de Jongh, an art historian, used symbolism derived from emblem books to decode the 'original intentions' of Dutch 17th-century still life painters.¹⁰ Jongh argued that in *vanitas* still life paintings objects are said to express symbolic messages of immoral pleasures and dangers to the soul; they warn us that a judgment is coming. Rare fragile glassware, such as that seen in Kalf's *Still Life with the Drinking Horn* (Catalogue No 1) and delicate musical instruments, in Streeck's *Vanitas* (17th century, unknown date) (right) often seem to be balanced precariously close to the edge of tables, teetering and poised to fall.

In bouquet paintings, such as Ruysch's *Still Life with Fruit and a Vase of Flowers* (page 19), the inclusion of butterflies and moths signal that the delicate fruit and flowers will be consumed. In that work, peaches beginning to spoil also provide a *momento mori* message, reminding the viewer that life is short. The extinguished candle in Streeck's *Vanitas* communicates the same notion (right). Hence, historically, the genre of still life did not simply serve to demonstrate a consumer's wealth but also to warn against excessive consumption. The paintings contain moralising messages about wealth, greed and waste. Simon Ward's *Signs* series are high resolution digital scans of signs made by homeless people. The large scale images also communicate a moral message about wealth by reminding us of the scale of social inequality in the world today (Catalogue Nos 6 and 7).

The *vanitas* painting's relation to time is paradoxical because, through the representation of fragile objects, it implies that life, along with pleasure and wealth, is fleeting. However, by reproducing the objects in a painting they are immortalised. The *vanitas* message implied in contemporary 21st-century advertising is very different. Commodities are presented to us as things that are disposable and can save the consumer some time. My series *Memorials* alludes to the disjuncture between the life span of consumers and the consumed (Catalogue No 9). In my photographs, as in historic Dutch still life paintings, the organic objects are beginning to decay while the man-made objects remain unchanged.



Jurriaen van Streeck.
Vanitas, undated.
Oil on canvas,
1473 x 1270 mm.
York Museums Trust;
gift from J B Morrell,
1944.

Today, *vanitas* might also warn us about irreversible environmental consequences caused by our dependence on plastic. Blemishes on the soul are replaced by materials that do not biodegrade. They become traces of our consumer habits that persist, filling up landfill sites, polluting seas, and killing wildlife. Now, the objects are almost indestructible and often discarded before they show even slight signs of wear and tear. They are not short-lived. For instance, Nicole Keeley's photographs, *Tide Mark* (Catalogue No 2) remind us of this undesirable outcome of our consumer practices. Namely, the pollution of the world's river and ocean environments by waste plastic products.

11. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 1983, pp 114–5.

12 & 13. Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, 2005, p 177 and 184.

Commodity Advertising

Although Dutch *vanitas* paintings are interpreted as moral warnings, paintings like Kalf's *Still Life with Drinking Horn* (Catalogue No 1) depict expensive desirable objects in an attractive and enticing way. By depicting objects in fine detail, Dutch still life paintings also exhibited the skill of craftspeople working in the Dutch Republic at that time. In her broader discussion of the relations between painter and craft maker in 17th-century Dutch art Svetlana Alpers has claimed:

If we want to delight in finely crafted tiles, we look at them as they were represented in a painting by [Johannes] Vermeer. In taking on the responsibility for craft, the painters also increasingly become the purveyors of luxury goods.¹¹

In this sense, the paintings functioned like adverts, informing the Dutch people which goods were desirable. Contemporary advertising continues to express these ideas. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams's history of advertising notes that an early form of public advertising, known as the posting of bills, took place in 17th-century Europe. He explains that by the 19th century in London, a form of public advertising, called fly-posting, had become a large, organised trade. Williams found that advertisers used innovative methods 'turning hoardings into the "art-galleries of the people"'.¹² He argued 'Advertising is also, in a sense, the official art of modern capitalist society: it is what "we" put up in "our" streets'.¹³ Conversely, in the 20th-century, Andy Warhol and other Pop artists such as Claes Oldenberg and Joseph Cornell turned commodities and the aesthetics of adverts into an artform. Similar to *rhyparographos*, these artists celebrated the things that were popular, but deemed to be low culture: tins of soup, fast food and souvenirs.

To acknowledge the relation between still life, commodities and adverts, some of the artworks displayed in *Still Life: Things Devouring Time* are reproduced as posters and displayed outside the Gallery-based exhibition, in commercial advertising spaces in the city of Leeds (Catalogue No 7). The intention is to turn public streets into art gallery-like spaces and disrupt the repetitive order of consumerism. The posters challenge the cultural and political discourse that dominate visual culture and create a space for viewers to consider the consequences of consumption.

The historic and the contemporary artworks featured, both in this exhibition and outside the Gallery, contain contradictions and paradoxes, ironies that encourage the viewer to engage in critical reflection. In a *vanitas* painting, the painted surface is rich and sumptuous like the food and tableware depicted, but the symbolism of the objects warns against the indulgences

14. Brown, 'Dialectical Irony, Literary Form and Sociological Theory' 1983, p 544.

displayed. The visual style of the painting contradicts the symbolic message and the viewer must decide which message is correct. This mode of interpretation is ironic: the obvious meaning is undermined by the symbolic meaning, forcing the viewer to conclude that the opposite message is being communicated. In 18th-century literature irony was often viewed as 'corrective' because the author is detached and objective. The viewer is left to make up their own mind. Richard Harvey Brown, a professor of sociology, says irony is enlightening because it demands active participation from the viewer, stating that irony 'simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meaning of both may emerge'.¹⁴ Ironic use of materials and unusual combinations of objects challenge the values perpetuated in consumer culture. In contemporary still life, objects are given centre stage in order to question the prestige of consumer society and foreground the wasteful, destructive consequences of our insatiable appetite for things.



Rachel Ruysch. *Still Life with Fruit and Vase of Flowers*, undated. Oil on canvas, 990 x 830mm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; bequeathed in 1973 by Henry Rogers Broughton Fairhaven.

Carbon, Plastic, Action! Information Addiction and Art

Dr Sergio Fava

1. Allen, *Cumulative Carbon Emissions and their Implications*, 2011.

2. Boden, Marland and Andres. *Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO2 Emissions*. doi 10.3334/CDIAC/00001_v201.

3. 2015, 2016 and 2017 were the warmest years on record, along with the average global CO2 concentration (highest ever recorded in 2017, at 405.0 ppm). NASA “Seventeen of the 18 warmest years in the 136-year record all have occurred since 2001, with the exception of 1998” 2018, <https://go.nasa.gov/2mjzvJu>.

4. See, among many other sources, ‘Heatwave in northern Europe, summer 2018’ bit.ly/2KIM-FHC or the NASA’s Climate Monitoring Societal Impacts, <https://go.nasa.gov/2mjzvJu>.

5. At global level. At regional and national levels, there is some variability, and some countries have been able to reduce emissions. But global emissions continue to rise, and they are the ones that count for climate change. On the acceleration rate of emissions, see Blunden, Arndt, and Hartfield, eds, *State of the Climate* in 2017. 2018.

A Silent Roar

As I write these lines and as you read them, something huge and invisible, something seemingly unstoppable, is growing. It grows around us, enveloping us, ever increasing. It grows around you in your sleep and your waking moments. I write, without metaphor, about a literal killer giant from whom no one is safe. It has many names but you will never see its face — for it has none. You can, however, see the countless deaths. The damage. The destruction and the suffering. This faceless killer grows from us. From our choices, habits, actions, jobs, inactions, hesitations, procreations, doubts and biases. Its relentless growth is like a planetary roar we cannot hear. One of its many names is *cumulative carbon emissions*. They are the principal determinant of dangerous climate change, another of the names we have given this silent monster.¹ Greenhouse gases (GHG) continue to accumulate, along with other forms of destruction of the biosphere. Plastic pollution, meanwhile, is a visible and pressing issue, causing high levels of toxicity, killing countless animals and finding its way back to the human food chain. GHGs increase the greenhouse effect, which leads to higher temperatures, which leads to climate extremes, which in turn leads to death and destruction. This causal sequence is very well-known and extensively documented.

Despite this, today we pump more GHG into the atmosphere than ever before, and use more plastic than ever.² The consequences have started to make themselves apparent.³ Droughts, floods, heatwaves, hurricanes and forest fires have increased in intensity, distribution and frequency in the last few years.⁴ This has led to great loss of life, human and otherwise, as well as untold damage. Yet, these losses are usually described in monetary terms, as recovery costs amounting to billions of dollars. We know this, but emissions continue to increase, faster and faster.⁵

Plastic pollution is a more visible face of the same global destruction of the biosphere. Plastic finds its way into landfill, or worse still into the environment. Even the furthest reaches of our planet, such as the uninhabited Henderson Island in the South Pacific Ocean (pp 24-25), are touched by this plague. This destruction has often been equated to the driver of a car accelerating as a cliff edge comes into view. But there is another analogy, a very old one — thousands of years old, in fact — that I would like to propose can help us understand a critical part of the problem that is underrepresented.

The Poisoned Arrow

In a philosophical text written sometime between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE in a collection of literature known as the *Majjhima Nikaya* we are told of a man who is paralysed by his own pressing questions. To be able to act ethically and soundly,

he feels he needs to answer those questions first. These happen to be the most difficult of questions. So difficult, in fact, that we are still asking them today. Questions like ‘Is the cosmos eternal and infinite?’ or ‘What is there after death?’

He seeks guidance to these pressing questions and is offered a parable: a man has been wounded with a poisoned arrow. Friends and a doctor are at hand, but the man says:

I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, ... until I know the given name & clan name of the man ... whether he was tall, medium, or short ... until I know his home village, town, ... until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew ... whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated ... whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, ... I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.⁶

Inevitably, the man dies, without any answers.

Information Addiction

In these times of climate change, a self-inflicted wound, we continue to demand full answers to questions that will not save us. We already know enough to act. The causal chain from GHG emissions and plastic production to destruction of habitats, economies and life is very well-known. We have become addicted to information, to the false idea that more information will provide the answers. Instead, the answer lies in action.

We consume bad news every day and mostly continue as before, to avidly consume more news the following day. Addicted to the consumption of information, just as we are addicted to the use of plastic, we continue a futile search for answers that we can never fully attain.

We do not seem to realise that our demands for ever more information have become part of the problem and prevent us from taking action. Our addiction to more — more information, more disposable goods, more fossil fuels, more sources of entertainment, more of everything — is blind unto itself. We have enough now. We know enough now. Waiting for yet more information has become part of inaction. Without action, information will only lead to social, economic and ecological chaos.



Bert Kaufmann.
Tagebau Inden
Open Coalmine,
Inden Germany,
2009.



Michael Brooke.
Rubbish on East
Beach, Henderson
Island, South
Pacific, 2011.

7. This is true of environmental art, a genre with which artists have increasingly engaged in the 20th and 21st centuries.

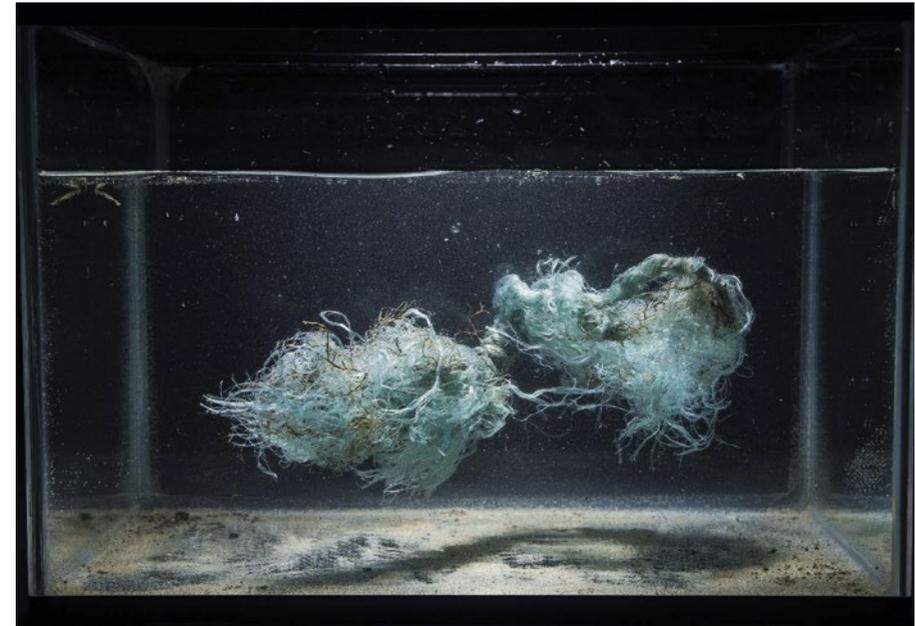
The Power of Art

It is time we give more importance to other modes of prompting immediate action and less to our endless craving for more information.⁷ Art has always been at the forefront of sharing new ideas and new worldviews. The still life work in this exhibition continues and develops this tradition. It shows how artists are recycling waste materials in their artistic practice, inviting viewers to contemplate the lifecycle of those materials and their role in that cycle. Looking at the work included, we can see the consequences of our addictions in different ways. Consider Willem Kalf's *Still Life with the Drinking Horn* (Catalogue No 1) in the light of Nicole Keeley's *Tide Mark* (Catalogue No 2) series. That juxtaposition of abundance and waste suggests that our feasting on the resources of the earth is our very demise. It does so without imposition, not inviting reflection based on yet more information, but asking us to consider the issues ourselves.

In what Dawn Woolley calls the 'cultural and political discourse that dominates visual culture' (see Woolley's essay in this catalogue, p 18), there is a risk that art can become a form of advertising tool, marketable goods, or high-brow entertainment. Meanwhile, information and hard science are seen as some kind of universal remedy. Yet, emissions grow faster than ever. Our oceans are dying and we are amid a massive extinction event. In our cultural and political discourse we remain blind to the fact that the answer to action lies within us, not in producing and consuming yet more information. Globally, we recycle more than ever, in greater awareness than ever, and yet our oceans have more plastic than ever, are deadlier than ever. The necessary system-wide changes will only arise from immediate action, which means individuals changing their habits and demanding positive action and innovation from governments and industry. Art stands at a unique junction between affect, personal narrative, belonging, creativity and action. These continue to be part of the answer.



Willem Kalf. *Still Life with the Drinking Horn, Lobster and Glasses* (detail), 1653.



Nicole Keeley. *Tide Mark* (detail), 2017.

Catalogue

Katie J T Herrington
and Dawn Woolley
with Zoe Buckberry



Willem Kalf

pronkstilleven
ostentatious still life

Rotterdam-born Dutch painter Willem Kalf (1619–1693) settled in Amsterdam in 1653. He was active during the Dutch Golden Age. Kalf's earliest paintings were kitchen and farm interiors. However, in his mature career, he became the leading Netherlandish still life painter of the time.

During a period of study in Paris in the 1630s he began to produce small scale still life paintings. These works were rustic interior scenes in which everyday objects — for example vegetables and tableware — were foregrounded. He later developed still life painting into a type called *pronkstilleven* in Dutch, meaning 'ostentatious still life'. These works depict lavish man-made objects and expensive foods of his time, some of which are collectable today.

Cat 1 | Willem Kalf, Still Life with the Drinking Horn of the Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild, Lobster and Glasses c.1653

Oil on canvas, framed: 1138 x 1282 x 85mm

Lent by The National Gallery, London; bequeathed by R S Newall, 1978



1. The patron saint of archers, who was bound to a tree as a target for two Roman soldiers.

2. Likely a member of the Archers' Guild.

17th-century viewers would have recognised the objects in this still life as expensive luxury items that only the wealthy would have been able to afford. Their ostentatiousness and the manner of the table setting appears alien to contemporary 21st-century viewers.

The most exquisite object depicted here is *The Drinking Horn of the Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild* (1566), made from a single buffalo horn set into a silver mount.¹ Today, *The Drinking Horn* is part of the collection of the Amsterdam Museum. This expensive object was included in the painting to signify the extreme wealth of the painting's patron.² The suggestion that such a valuable decorative object may actually have been used produces an uncanny, or strange and unsettling, effect.

The painting is a celebration of expensive commodities sourced from across the then flourishing Dutch empire: the richly patterned and lushly textured Indian rug, the Venetian wine glass and the lobster with its shiny exoskeleton suggestive of its freshness. The world of trade has transformed the table from a site of hospitable domesticity through symbolic objects employed to signal the patron's status. The quantity of food suggests a social affair but the table appears to be set for a single diner. Only one wine glass is laid on the table and the food cascades towards a single place setting. Furthermore, although space is left in the foreground for the viewer to approach the table that invitation is unsettling. The wine glass is half empty and the lemon is partially peeled telling viewers that someone has begun to consume the meal. These *vanitas* symbols remind the viewer of the short-lived nature of earthly pleasures.

Nicole Keeley

‘In a contemporary world,
oversaturated with images,
how is one encouraged to look?’

(Keeley, 2018)



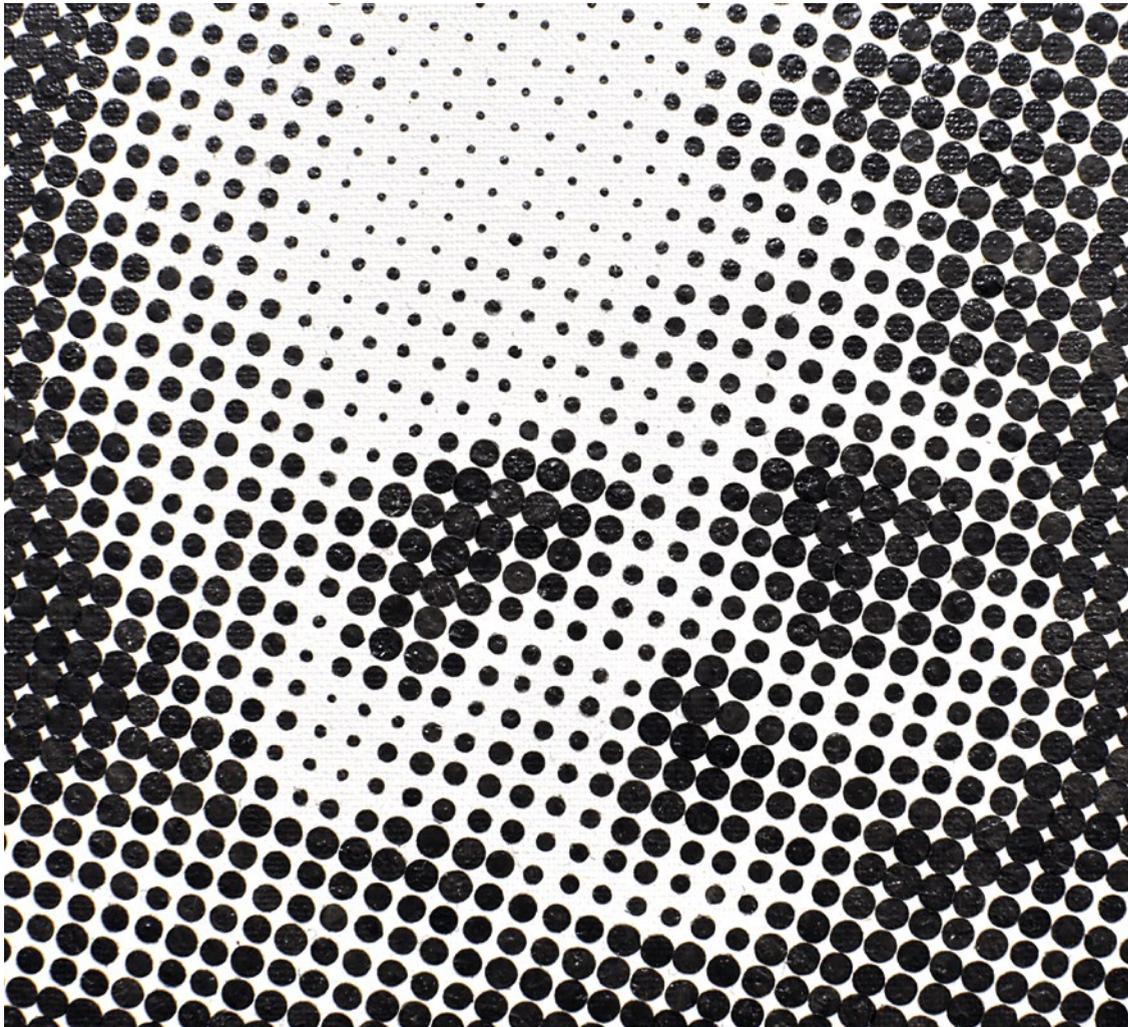
Nicole Keeley (b 1996) is a photographer with a strong interest in art theory, which underpins her artistic practice. Following a BTEC diploma in photography at City College Norwich, Keeley gained her Bachelor of Arts degree at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. She currently works as a commercial photographer to fund her experimental artistic practice. She has exhibited work in the Free Range exhibition at the Truman Brewery.

Keeley is drawn to the focus that the still life genre gives to individual objects. Litter is often perceived as a collective group of objects, but Keeley’s work emphasises the part played by every piece of litter in environmental and ecological problems. She is interested in the detail that can be found in simple compositions. This has led her to explore the extent to which things that seem everyday at first glance can become something more through their representation in art. For example, her imagery leads viewers to perceive unnatural waste products as emulating sea creatures.

Caroline McCarthy

‘Through the framework of Still Life, everyday things engage with ideas of representation, meaning and value’

(McCarthy, 2018)



Caroline McCarthy (b 1971) is a Dublin-born fine artist based in London. She was educated at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin and Goldsmiths, University of London. McCarthy has established her career with an expansive exhibition history; showing in solo exhibitions at galleries including Parker's Box Gallery, New York, Gasworks, London and Void Gallery, Derry and group exhibitions at galleries including The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London and Guildhall Art Gallery, London. Her work is included in the collections of The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Arts Council of Ireland and private collections.

McCarthy is interested in how, through the framework of still life, everyday things engage with ideas of representation, meaning and value. She incorporates the poorest of everyday materials, such as bin bags or disposable packaging, into established kinds of displays in such a way that assumptions are questioned. This brings about interpretations of her work that are impossible to pin down because they constantly hover between the humble and the monumental, throwaway and precious.

Cat 3 | Caroline McCarthy, *Vanitas*, 2007

Canvas, bin bag and metal brackets,
variable dimensions, canvas: 330 x 250 mm
Lent by the artist



McCarthy's work is comprised of two art objects. The first is a canvas to which she has adhered hundreds of dots, hole-punched from a bin bag. Together, the dots reconstruct a 17th-century Dutch still life painting, *Vanitas* (Kröller-Müller Museum 1524) by Bartholomäus 'Barthel' Bruyns (1493–1555). His historic work depicted a skull and extinguished candle, things typically employed as *vanitas* symbols. In McCarthy's work those symbols of death are made from plastic, acting as a warning of environmental threats. The disjuncture between a transitory life and indestructible plastic packaging echoes one of the paradoxes encapsulated by historic *vanitas* paintings. They depict a fleeting moment, in which a candle is extinguished for example, however, such moments in time are frozen and immortalised in the artwork.

Below the canvas hangs the second part of this work, the hole punched bin bag. The tendency of viewers to perceive the canvas as the artwork and the bin, literally, as a bin, further illustrates hierarchies of materials perceived as collectable items of value that must be preserved and commodities that are disposable. Yet, in this case, the work on canvas could not exist without the bin bag.

The materials and construction process critique contemporary consumer culture. The painstaking creation and application of the plastic disks alludes on one hand to traditional Craft processes. This contrasts with the contemporary tendency to mass-produce represented by the bin bag. Yet, they also recall the dots used in contemporary printing processes, mirroring the process of replication with which the artist has engaged.

Cat 4 | Caroline McCarthy, Humbrol Series, 2009¹

Found packaging, Humbrol enamel paint,
shelving, 4880 x 1370 x 370 mm
Lent by the artist

1. Each work in the series is identified by the index numbers of colours made by the paint company.



McCarthy's *Humbrol* series uses found packaging which she paints with hobbyist Humbrol paint. Her colour choices, various shades of grey, silver and black, are intended to imitate video cameras and other consumed electronic goods.¹ This uniform colour lends authority regardless of function. The works are displayed on glass retail shelving which alludes both to commercialism and consumer culture and its environmental impacts.

Like 17th-century still life paintings, McCarthy's work involves domestic objects. She transforms deodorant packaging, petrol canisters and milk bottles, for example, into secretive and ominous things by concealing their identifying features with different shades of grey, silver and black paint. McCarthy's application of silver paints to domestic objects gives them a new importance. It causes them to recall the expensive and luxury silverware that habitually featured in historic *vanitas* paintings. By portraying inexpensive, regularly discarded, commodity packaging as expensive McCarthy aims to expose the vanity of outward appearances, an ideology of *vanitas* art. It also, subsequently, alludes to the unsustainability of the waste that results from our vanities.



Simon Ward

‘My practice is always focused towards the object itself.’

(Ward, 2013)



Simon Ward (b 1979) is a London-based fine artist educated at Nottingham Trent University and The Royal College of Art, London. Ward's works are photographic, however, he does not use a camera. Instead he records still life objects as very high resolution digital scans. He has received awards in recognition of his work, including first place in *Dazed & Confused Re:Creation Award* in 2003 and *UNSCENE The Student Turner Prize* in 2002. Ward also won the People's Vote in *The Friends Autumn Exhibition* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2007. He has exhibited at *Brighton Photo Biennial*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Wales and The Library, London.

His approach to still life is centred on objects. By scanning things, rather than photographing them, all contextual information is removed, they lie against the glass with no background. Over the course of an hour the scanner meticulously records every detail and the narrow depth of focus of the scanner lens concentrates viewers' attention on surface textures.

Cat 5 | Simon Ward, Ghost in the Machine Series, 2013¹

E-paper display screens, each work 100 x 140 mm
Lent by the artist



1. The phrase was introduced in Ryle's book *The Concept of Mind*, 1949.

2. The merged images recall early 20th-century avant-garde art movement, Dada artist Max Ernst's combination of illustrations from Victorian encyclopaedias and novels in his artist's book *Une Semaine de Bonté* (*A Week of Kindness*), 1934.

4. These include portraits of 19th- to early 20th-century historical writers — Charlotte Brontë (1816–1865) and Jules Verne (1828–1905) for example — and illustration plates from books — one probably from John James Audubon's *The Birds Of America* (1827–38) for instance.

20th-century British philosopher Gilbert Ryle coined the phrase 'Ghost in the Machine' as a critique of 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes's theory that the mind is distinct and separate from the body.¹ Simon Ward's collection of manipulated damaged Kindle electronic-book screens contain unreadable data hidden beneath cracks and fragmented, merged screen saver images.² His work echoes Ryle's theories by suggesting machines' minds are inseparable from their bodies, which contrasts with the *momento mori* messages conveyed by 17th-century Dutch still lifes.

Ward is interested in how the physical book is beginning to be replaced by the e-book in our 21st-century contemporary culture of immediacy and information addiction. Like the physical books often depicted in 17th-century Dutch still life paintings, Ward's e-books symbolise knowledge and intelligence. They also show how, in visual culture today, the still life genre can document rapid changes in the type and variety of commodities available to buy.

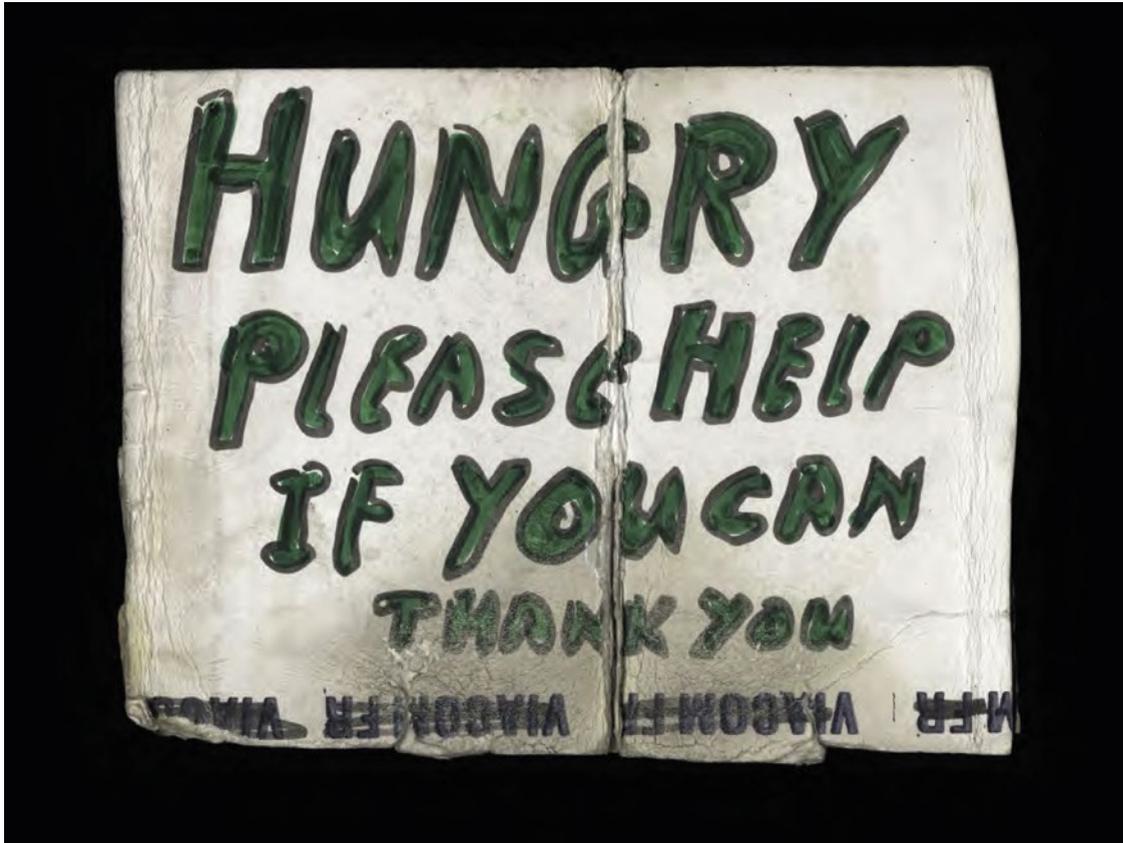
The fragility of Ward's screens underline the short lifespan of these commodities and their eventual obsolescence. They question the trust we place in technological commodities as a repository for knowledge.

Ward reduces digital devices to represent singular analogue images. The resulting images recall, daguerreotypes, one of the first techniques for producing photographic images in the early days of the media. Furthermore, the portraits of historic writers and book plates visible on the screens, together with their display in glass museum cabinets, provokes comparison to collectable library and museum objects.⁴ This critiques assumptions that contemporary technological hardware should be thoughtlessly disposed of in favour of the latest model and raises sustainability issues.



Cat 6 | Simon Ward,
Signs, 2018

Vinyl, 1500 x 2000mm
Lent by the artist



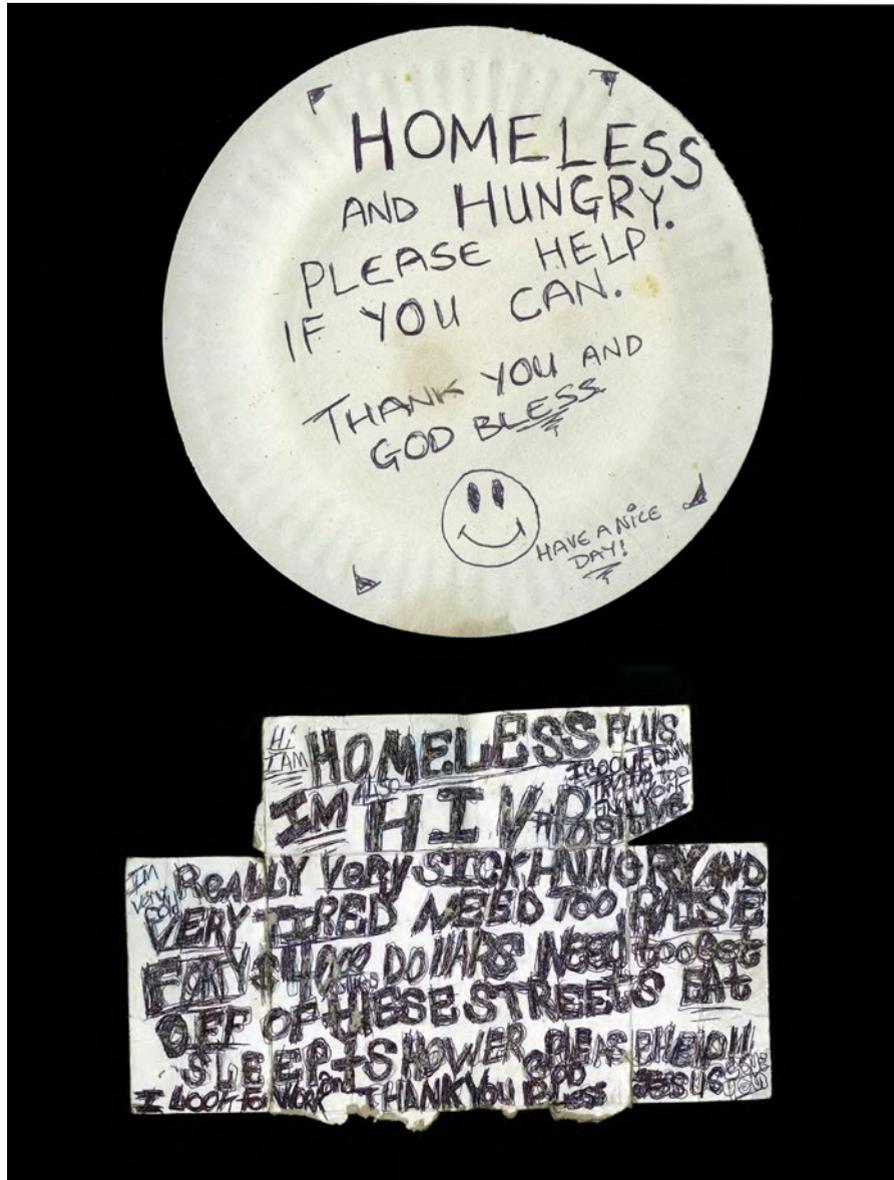
Ward's *Signs* series communicates moralising messages related to wealth. These large scale scans of homeless signs are comparable to billboards used for commercial advertising. They transform small requests for money and food, that might be easily passed by when seen on the street into inescapable announcements of the inequality produced by capitalist societies. They remind us that the pleasures of consumption are not enjoyed equally by all members of society.

Like the valuable objects teetering on the edge of a table in 17th-century Dutch still life paintings, *Signs* invites viewers to consider which commodities are valuable and valued in society. It prompts us to question the value of these objects to homeless people. But it also seeks to provoke viewers to contemplate the morality of our contemporary society. A world in which some human beings can be viewed as expendable and abandoned on pavements in a way all too similar to plastic waste and other commodities.

Ward has explained, 'I would purchase a sign from a homeless person offering them £5 to £10 to remove the sign and own it... I was interested in the marks, gestures, the stains, folds...'. His work explores the personality and individualism of each sign's creator through an examination of their handwritten marks, the typology of the work. *Signs* restore individuality to people who are often dehumanised by society. The images accentuate how much there is to learn about each, unique homeless person.

Cat 7 | Various artists Poster Campaign

Reproductive print on paper
Courtesy of artists



In addition to the gallery-based exhibition, *Still Life: Things Devouring Time* takes artwork outside the Gallery, to the general public. Reproductions of artworks, including examples of Simon Ward's *Signs* series, are exhibited in the form of posters in commercial advertising spaces around the city of Leeds. This display of contemporary still life art interrupts the promotion of consumerism that usually occupies advertising spaces. Instead, commenting on consumer culture and sustainability, including pollution and homelessness.



Digital mockup of an artwork from Simon Ward's *Signs* series as it will appear in situ on a commercial advertising drum outside The Parkinson Building at The University of Leeds.

Dawn Woolley

‘Still lifes represent different characters and positions in relation to consumer society. I am what I consume. I am an advertisement for the commodities I consume.’
(Woolley, 2018)

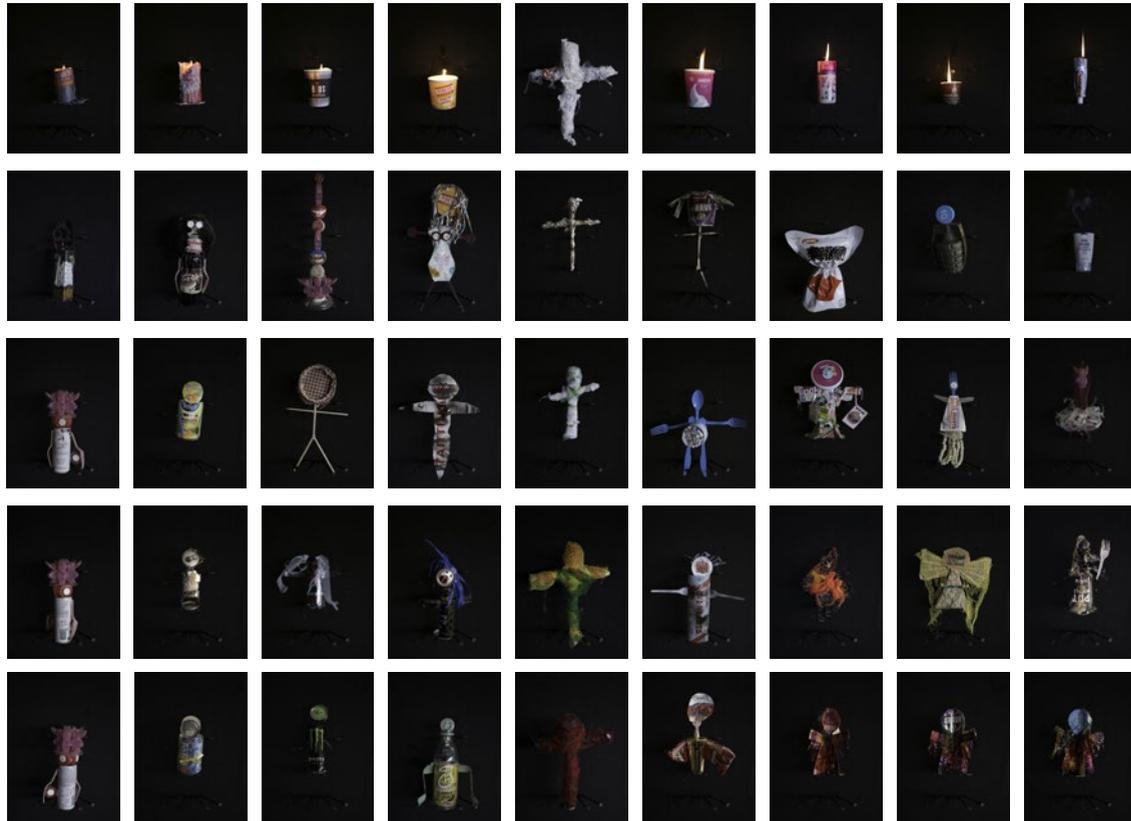


Dr Dawn Woolley (b 1980), co-curator of this exhibition, is also a visual artist and Research Fellow based at Leeds Arts University. She uses photography, video, installation, performance and sound to question issues of artificiality and idealisation. Woolley has exhibited at numerous venues nationally and internationally, most recently in group shows: *Self/Selfie* (Ballarat International Foto Biennale, Australia, 2017) and *Le Féminin Circulation(s)* (Arles, 2017) and her solo *Consumed: Stilled Lives* (Blyth Gallery, London, 2018).

Woolley's work in the genre of still life is centred on consumer culture and commodification in the context of advanced capitalist societies. She explores the social value of objects in still life, from 17th-century Dutch paintings to contemporary advertising. The practical outcomes of her research include photographic and installation works such as those shown in this exhibition, but also public interventions in physical, commercial advertising spaces in cities and in virtual ones on online social networking sites.

Cat 8 | Dawn Woolley, *Relics*, 2017

Digital photographic prints mounted on MDF board,
each work: 300 x 400mm
Lent by the artist



1. Two faced figures that recall the Roman two-headed deity Janus.

Woolley's research explores relationships between people and objects. She also considers the impact that adverts have as disseminators of social values. Woolley views her still life work as portraits of a type, evoking unseen subjects who possess and consume the objects on display. Her artwork *Relics* is a series of photographs of still life objects. Each thing has been made by Woolley from packaging from a wide variety of contemporary commodities. Like the objects in 17th-century Dutch still life paintings, which Woolley refers to as adverts for the craft objects they depict, she presents the objects in *Relics* as an advert for consumer society today.

The photographed objects show the vast range of products available to buy today. The packaging from which they are made show their branding and are named with human qualities and sins, such as lust, violence and beauty. Those advertising statements recall the symbolic values associated with things in *vanitas* paintings.

The things in *Relics* resemble devotional artefacts and ceremonial figures: totem poles, votive candles, and janus-figures.¹ Woolley's work alludes to objects used in worship by a range of faiths that are sometimes preserved and exhibited in museum collections. It suggests that commodities are also powerful objects to be worshipped by consumers. However, the objects in this artwork do not belong in a museum. They are not preserved due to their cultural significance but because they are non-biodegradable. Once recognised in this way, the objects reveal themselves as waste products that are routinely discarded in today's society.



Cat 9 | Dawn Woolley, *Memorials series*, 2016

Digital photographic prints mounted on MDF board
and balloons, each work: 700 x 700mm
Lent by the artist



2. Williams, 1988,
pp 78–79.

Woolley's artwork draws both on the 14th-century definition of the term 'consume', 'to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust', and the meaning it took on from the 18th century, 'to buy things'.² The *Memorials* series refers to the disjuncture between the life-span of consumers and the products they consume.

The still life objects that feature in Woolley's work allude to the human body using food, such as strawberries, and parts of animal bodies sold for food, for example, a chicken's foot. These are presented alongside party objects such as a balloon. However, the organic objects are starting to decay, while the commodities that accompany them remain intact. Each image contains a plate or dish, in *Memorials (Foot)* it is the shape of a shell. In 17th-century Dutch still life paintings, discarded seafood shells connote loose morals and dangerous sexuality as well as slovenly cleanliness. In contemporary consumer culture, where preference for sexualisation is emphasised, the moral warnings would not be seriously considered. Yet, the suggestion of an ageing, decaying body presents a threat frequently expressed in advertising: that ageing should be avoided at all costs.

The still life objects depicted in photographs and the balloons that support the large photographic prints suggest that a party is taking place. However, through the decaying food Woolley seeks to communicate to viewers that when commodities show their age they can be discarded and replaced but the consumer can never buy back time. This work symbolises what environmental experts have been warning of for decades. The non-biodegradable commodities and the high levels of consumption demanded by a culture that idealises perfect, young bodies are unsustainable. The consumer culture party will come to an end.





Additional Biographies

Dr Katie Jane Tyreman Herrington

The exhibition's co-curator, Dr Katie J T Herrington is interim Curator at The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, Leeds University Library Galleries. Her primary research expertise is in 19th- to 20th-century British and European art. Her knowledge of art history expands beyond this however and she has taught a range of subjects, from the Middle Ages to the present day, in UK universities. Before taking up her current post, she worked freelance for Manchester Art Gallery co-curating the exhibition, *Annie Swynnerton: Painting Light and Hope* (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018) and authoring the accompanying catalogue.

Dr Sergio Fava

Dr Sergio Fava is Senior Lecturer and Faculty Director of Research Students in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science at Anglia Ruskin University. His research interests are visual culture, sociology and religious studies, with particular emphasis on the spaces where these fields join; including social change and climate change mitigation, visual and environmental art, religion and environment. His work has been published in journals including the *Journal of Time and Society* and as a monograph, *Environmental Apocalypse in Science and Art: Designing Nightmares* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Zoe Buckberry

Zoe Buckberry is an Exhibitions Intern at The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery who has assisted with this exhibition and catalogue. Her research into the training and exhibition histories of artists who feature in this catalogue has contributed to the writing of biographical texts included in this volume. She studied a Foundation in Fine Art at Loughborough University and is currently studying Fine Art at The University of Leeds. Buckberry is also an artist. She is a quarter of the Leeds-based art collective *The Other Collective* and has exhibited her work in Leeds, London and Nottingham.

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Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to all the artists featured whose generosity has made the exhibition possible. We are also grateful to the following institutions for loan of items from their collections and/or permission to reproduce them: The National Gallery London, York Museums Trust, Guildhall Art Gallery London and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Special thanks go to Leeds Arts University for the funding they have provided to enable this book length exhibition catalogue. The curators Dr Katie J T Herrington and Dr Dawn Woolley have worked closely to bring about the exhibition and catalogue. We are grateful for ongoing support from The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that enables collaboration with external researchers.

Stella Butler

University Librarian
and Keeper of the
Brotherton Collection,
University of Leeds

Curators' Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the many people and organisations that have helped to realise this exhibition and catalogue. Particular gratitude goes to The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery Curator, Layla Bloom, for initiating this project, and Dr Sergio Fava, Anglia Ruskin University, for contributing an essay. Thanks are also due to the artists who have lent their work and shared information that has enabled our interpretations. We are indebted to the expertise of the designers Journal. We would also like to thank the invaluable Leeds University Library Galleries staff: Zoe Buckberry (Exhibitions Intern), Laura Beare (Marketing and Galleries Assistant Manager), Laura Wilson (Galleries Learning and Engagement Assistant Manager), Tony Rae (Technician), Laura Millward and Fred Pepper (Collections Assistants), Joanne Williams (Galleries Events and Marketing Assistant) and the Gallery Assistants.

**Katie J T Herrington
and Dawn Woolley**

Still Life: Things Devouring Time is an exhibition exploring the notion of consumerism through the lens of historical and contemporary still life artworks. In the genre of still life inanimate things take centre stage. Through still life 17th-century Dutch painters communicated changes in consumer culture. The evolution and enduring relevance of the genre is highlighted in this exhibition by the display of a variety of contemporary artworks, which refresh the genre for the 21st century, alongside an example of historic Dutch still life. Willem Kalf's famous painting provides historical context for photographs, objects and installation works by contemporary artists Nicole Keeley, Caroline McCarthy, Simon Ward and Dawn Woolley.

17th-century Dutch still life expressed moral messages through symbolic everyday things. Such subjects provided visual representation of *vanitas*, the idea that earthly goods and pursuits are impermanent. ***Still Life*** explores how the idea of *vanitas* informs the practice of contemporary artists. The artworks displayed include contradictions, unexpected use of materials and unusual combinations of objects that signify the consequences of consumerism. They foreground the waste and destruction caused by our appetite for things encouraging viewers to consider social, environmental and sustainability issues of concern today.

Things made from non-biodegradable materials and the human inclination to collect possessions contradict the concept of *tempus edax rerum*, 'time as devourer of all things'. Today, global warming and plastic pollution are high on political and social agendas. Our information culture means that we are more aware of the problem than ever, yet it continues to grow. It is time to find new ways of promoting immediate action from individuals, governments and industry. Due to its quality of visual immediacy art is uniquely placed to challenge worldviews and move viewers to action.

This illustrated catalogue, edited by the exhibition's co-curators Dr Katie J T Herrington, The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery and Dr Dawn Woolley, Leeds Arts University, features thematic essays by Dr Woolley and Dr Sergio Fava, Anglia Ruskin University. It also includes interpretative and biographical texts written by the curators with research assistance from Exhibitions Intern, Zoe Buckberry.