

Still lifes have always been present in the art of Dean Home. They appeared discreetly in the margins of paintings as a commentary on the symbolism within, or as autonomous small-scale vignettes in an ensemble of larger, multi-panel tableaux. Towards the late 1990s, still lifes began emerging as autonomous pieces. For those who knew the artist, they reflected neither his passion for fishing nor his talents as an extraordinary chef. Instead, early still lifes focused on fruit—figs, quinces, pears, and pomegranates—ready to be consumed, ripe and succulent to the point of deliquescence, requiring neither hunting nor cooking. They were akin to ancient Greco-Roman *xenia*, the host's welcome gift to the guest of a nourishment that nature produces of its own. Without inference of either effort or labour, the still lifes put viewers at ease, making the paintings an object of enjoyment and contemplation. As if respecting the nature's cycle, the dominant colour palette of early still lifes was in autumnal tints of ochre, umber, and cadmium. The shape and volume were defined by chiaroscuro, built up through the interplay of shadow and light. The choice of subjects and of the dominant colour scheme constituted collectively an homage to Caravaggio and his followers, the tenebristes and the masters of the Spanish Baroque, whom the artist has admired deeply.

The chance inclusion of an antique Chinese porcelain vessel from the collection of a family friend, Paulette Calhoun, became a catalyst for a new aesthetic direction. The gleaming white of porcelain's surface and the deep ultramarine of its decorations demanded an adjustment to the overall colour palette. The taxonomy of objects within the paintings was reformulated accordingly. Parallel interest in oriental arts and culture entered the new iconography. Oriental porcelains, fragrant flowers, ink brushes ensconced in cloisonné enamel, mother-of-pearl, or semi-precious stones, and lengths of fabric, either richly patterned or shimmeringly monochromatic, accounted for a higher key, greater clarity, and sharper definition of objects in the new body of work. As the current exhibition demonstrates, the investigation of aesthetic possibilities and compositional combinations continues to the present day.

The quality of *xenia* is still extant within these paintings inasmuch as the inference of labour is excised. There are brushes but no inkwells; there are flowers but no vases; there are tea canisters but no tea pots; there are bowls but no food to fill them. In a similar vein, the primal pursuit of hunting is now a purely intellectual exercise, a connoisseur's pursuit of rarities at antique market stalls and auction houses, the passion shared equally between Dean and his partner, Aileen Ellis. The absence of the call to action relaxes the mind and invites meditative contemplation of individual objects. The subtle variation of brushwork enhances their illusory textuality and gives them weight and volume.

The illusory tactility is enhanced by the shallow space, which is among distinguishing features of Dean's still life paintings. While the artist's use of camera as an aide-memoire might generate the overall flattening out of the perspective, the flattening is exploited and extended intentionally. Unlike other practitioners of the genre, or those artists specialising in landscape and figure painting, Dean does not offer a 'break in the wall', a *trompe l'oeil* glimpse beyond the confines of the painting. The objects are placed within a shallow space against the abstracted background of darkened, undefined tonalities (or at times, though rarely, against a piece of cloth, the universal symbol of concealment). The viewer is forced to focus on what lies within rather than what might lie beyond. Though objects are placed on a flat surface, either a table or a shelf, no edges are visible. There is no physical separation or psychological barrier between the observer and the observed. The shallow space reverses the Albertian perspective, situating it behind the viewer, making them—and their gaze—integral to the composition. The perception of immediacy engenders in the beholder an involuntary desire to reach out and touch the tactile objects within. While the artist endows each object with self-reflexive meaning and significance, he neither imposes nor insists upon his personal viewpoint. Rather, the beholder, cocooned within the

intimate safety of the painting, is invited on an aesthetic journey with the artist, free to formulate their own interpretations, form their own connections, and project their own emotions.

The contemplation of individual objects is succeeded by—or is concurrent with the consideration of their relationship to each other and within the composition as a whole. The succession of elliptical shapes of flowers, bowls, pebbles, and shells rhythmically propels the eye along the picture plane. Flower stems and brush handles anchor the composition along diagonal and perpendicular axes, imparting a sense of solidity and gravity. The introduction of fabrics forms peaks and troughs that unite the objects, impart visual continuity, and contribute towards the overall armature of the composition.

Together with his fellow practitioners of the still life genre, Dean seeks to elevate the genre's rhapsody to megalographic status. In some works, it is attained through the sheer physical scale of paintings. In others, compositions can be likened to allegorical scenes through the choice of viewpoints, topographic silhouettes, and semantic connotations. Within each of the paintings, a piece of porcelain appears at the summit of the composition, towering over the minutia below. The viewer would be forgiven for mistaking decorations on the vessels for the slavish copying of existing objects. The vignettes are in fact of Dean's own design. Through the meticulous study of Chinese iconography, the artist has adapted the visual vocabulary to narrate the journey of the creative spirit through the allegory-laden depictions of rivers, mountains, and trees. The sparse application of pigment expresses respect of the original artists towards porcelain's lustrous surfaces and the poetic beauty of accidental craquelures. These vignettes also provide an important link to the artist's ongoing fascination with the Renaissance and Baroque masters, linking present series to earlier bodies of work. They evoke two-tier compositions or 'picture-within-picture' stratagem that separate the terrestrial and the celestial, the mundane and the spiritual, and allow two or more interconnected narratives to play out simultaneously within a single picture plane.

The recent publication by Amber Creswell Bell on the still life in contemporary Australian art; the curatorial focus of the Tweed River, Lethbridge, and Bellinger galleries on the still life genre; and the presence within this gallery of other still life practitioners, collectively demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the genre to—and its infinite possibilities within—the plurality of contemporary Australian art. Far from being an anachronism or escapism, the genre continues mining the visual vocabulary, built over the centuries of traditions and beliefs and enriched with deeply personal connotations, which continue imbuing inanimate objects with evocative powers. Apart from the purely sensory attraction of the paintings, stemming from the skilful juxtaposition of luscious pigments which, through energetic brushwork, create invitingly tactile surfaces, Dean's paintings invite an ongoing, open-ended aesthetic dialogue. Every fresh encounter with the painting will form new connections; every meditative contemplation will suggest hitherto unobserved associations.

- Dr Eugene Barilo von Reisberg, 2024

*Quick, said the bird, 2024*

*The vessel and the bowls, 2024*

*From the ocean and the hand, 2024*

If we consider Dean as an explorer of the sensual 'thingness' of objects that occasion sensual delight as appetitive seduction, in these three works see Home engaging in a more explicitly poetic exploration of this 'thingness'. We see suggestions of two worlds, evoking Plato's levels of particularity and the deeper realm of forms and ideas. But which is which? Things aren't so straightforward.

Examining the poetics of each work, we notice objects transformed. The hand, human touch, of flesh. Ink, with its viscosity, denotes the fluidity of attempts to materialise communication. Our brush, the tool of our expression, becomes a blunt instrument against the pliancy of ink. Feathers detach from the bird, falling away from us, to rest now separated from its whole; stones, so small and perfect, chiselled away from time immemorial.

In all this symbolism, we witness mundanity transformed into a story. A Journey. Yet, this transformation is found in something easily overlooked. The pearl shows this path contained as a whole. The pearl represents the gift, the material culmination of transformation.

The balance is not a separation of worlds but rather a heuristic division of the world. Only through a separation of the two can our attention be drawn to it. However, this separation is always poetic. The bowl presses on the line: its weight a delicate heaviness, perfectly balanced. The deftness of a sensual toil, usually bound together, becomes disunited. But a balance through chaos, perhaps is the best way to elicit our sensuous.

- Freddie Wright, 2024