



Still/ Life

Contemporary Dutch Photography

In 2011 Foam is celebrating its tenth anniversary. The museum first opened its doors in 2001 with the Dutch Delight exhibition, taking 'Dutch Light' as its central subject. It was a typically Dutch historical art theme, for which Dutch painting is famous the world over. Now, in Still/Life – Contemporary Dutch Photography, Foam has put together an exhibition comprised of work by Dutch photographers giving surprising interpretations of another classic subject in Dutch art history: the still life. 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. Thousands of people still enjoy this art every day in museums such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

For a diverse group of contemporary photographers, the Dutch still life remains a source of inspiration, but with a modernised and updated concept in a contemporary visual language. The Potatoes series by Anuschka Blommers and Niels Schumm, for example, is far from classic, but instead starkly graphic – and due to its subject matter also very Dutch. The works on view in the exhibition range from those based on classic

themes (flower and fruit still lifes), to modern interpretations of the vanitas symbols (constructions with objects that refer to our everyday surroundings) to nearly abstract, three-dimensional still lifes in the exhibition space.

Photography in the Netherlands has had a tradition of experimenting with staged photography since the 1970s. The still life has also been a major theme in this tradition. Exaggeration and enlargement are devices which originated from advertising and much of the staged photography of that time was inspired by conceptual as well as advertising photography.

Many of the photographers in this exhibition also work at this juncture. They move easily between established art institutions, the editorial world of magazines and publications, and the commercial advertising sphere. A clear, recognisable style can be seen in both their personal and their commercial work, such as that of so-called 'Dutch Design' which alludes to a typically Dutch design aesthetic: minimalist, experimental, innovative, unconventional and with humour.

The flower still lifes by Scheltens & Abbenes are close to being intoxicating. The intense colours seduce the viewer and pull one into the image. They are more explicit than 17th-century still lifes, in which the painters gathered their floral bouquets from far and wide, and from various seasons as well – idealised bouquets that could never have really existed. But Scheltens & Abbenes never try to pull the wool over our eyes. The strong two-dimensionality and graphic quality reveal that what we see here is a constructed bouquet. The work of Scheltens & Abbenes deals with the medium of photography itself, just as most of the other work in the exhibition.

For Fake Flowers in Full Colour (2009), Jaap Scheeren and Hans Gremmen bought some fake flowers and paint and took a photo of this bouquet. They then broke down the image into four colour separations: cyan, magenta, yellow and black. They placed the bouquets in these four colours in the studio again and re-photographed them. In theory, if these images were laid over each other, the archetypal image would be recreated. It is interesting to observe how the duo plays with our belief in photography as a faithful reproduction of reality and with colour as an essential component of this.

The photos seen in Still/Life are no longer 'taken' (as an imprint of reality), but are 'made' (staged and composed in their entirety). Subject and object converge and exist only in relation to each other. Whether the final result is purely a photo, a video or an installation, in all cases the form and the content have been entirely orchestrated by the creator. The photographers enter into relationships with other expressions of visual art in constructing their images, such as performance, video, installation and sculpture. Anne de Vries and Peggy Franck play an ingenious game with two-dimensionality and 3D, expanding their photos into the physical space. For them as well, the process and the experiment in the studio are of the utmost importance.

Young talent has been a key focus in Foam's exhibition policy since the museum was founded. The new graduates showing their work in Foam 3h, exhibitions by young photographers already further along in their careers, the Foam Paul Huf Award (the annual prize for photographers under 35) and the yearly Talent edition of Foam Magazine are essential for the discovery

and presentation of rising talents. Young talent is also a major area of interest in Foam's collection.

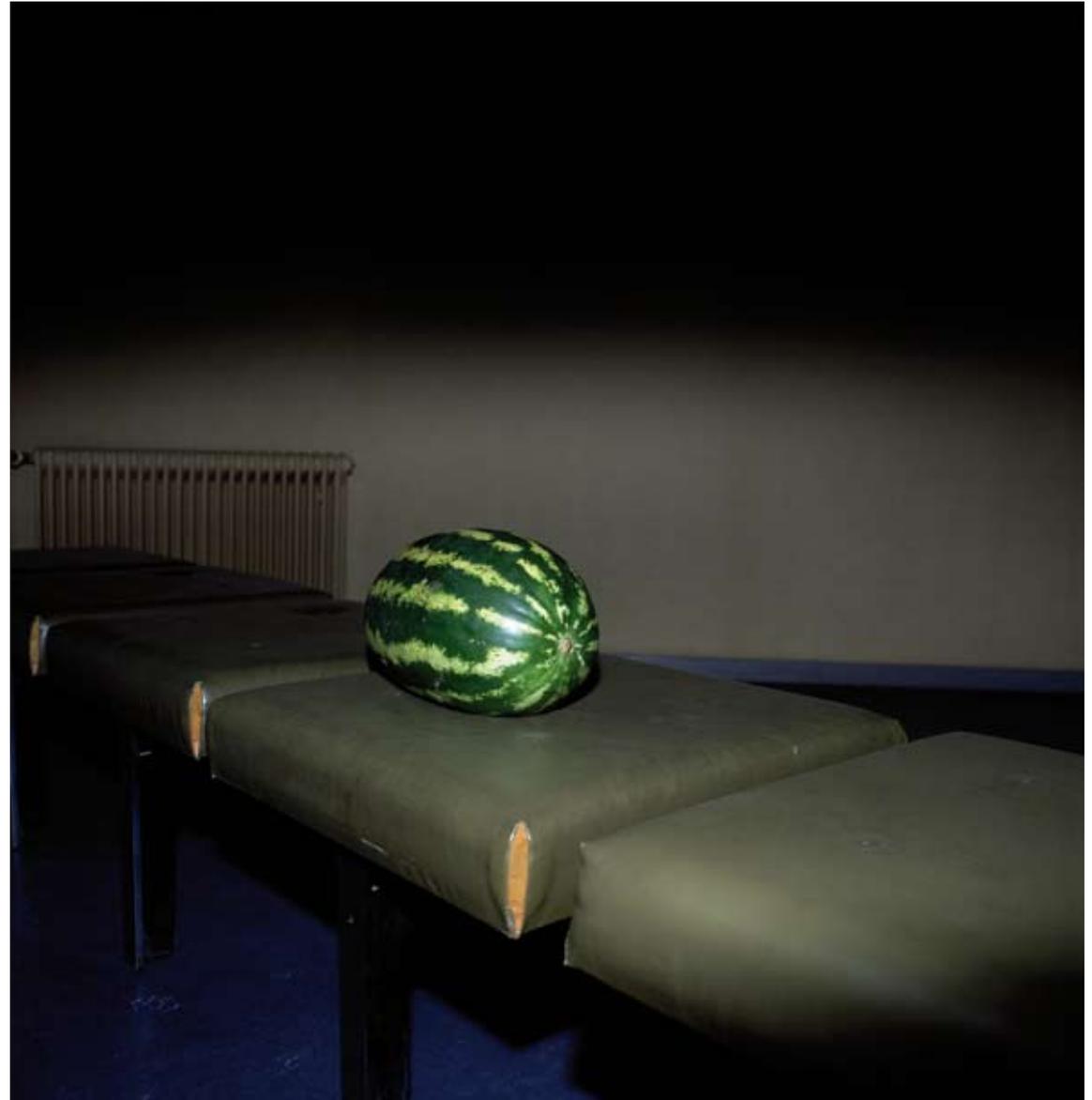
The Still/Life–Contemporary Dutch Photography exhibition was not created at the curator's desk but arose from many intriguing talks in the studios of Melanie Bonajo, Kim Boske, Blommers & Schumm, Elspeth Diederix, Fleur van Dodewaard, Uta Eisenreich, Peggy Franck, Marnix Goossens, Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky, Paul Kooiker, Anouk Kruithof, Yvonne Lacet,

Lernert & Sander, Charlott Markus, Katja Mater, Krista van der Niet, Jaap Scheeren & Hans Gremmen, Scheltens & Abbenes, Diana Scherer, Johannes Schwartz, Ingmar Swalue, Marianne Vierø, Anne de Vries and Qiu Yang. These conversations, insights, discussions and the enthusiasm that emerged from them led to this exhibition. It shows that striking and innovative developments can be seen in the field of art photography. There is a large group of photographers

working on their own, trained in the Netherlands, who are also influential and working innovatively internationally. Their work is, in both form as well as in visual language, extremely important for current developments in photography.









“A laden brush, in depositing paint on the panel or canvas, hardly registers a sound, and how great is the peace palpable in those great artists of stillness: Vermeer, Chardin, Hammershoi.”

This quote is taken from *Open City* (Faber & Faber, 2010), a long, discursive novel in which the narrator walks around New York, meditating on, among other things, mortality, culture, race, the disconnectedness of modern urban life and, briefly, the consolations of great art from another older, seemingly simpler time.

In art, as in life, stillness denotes peace. The profound sense of stillness that Cole’s 21st century flaneur describes is palpable, not just within a painting by Vermeer or Chardin or Hammershoi (the stilled life), but without it, too—in the space occupied by the reverent viewer (stilled by art into quiet contemplation).

The calmness that comes off a Vermeer interior—or a ‘breakfast’ painting by Pieter Claesz or an ornate tableau of fruit and vegetables by Willem Kalf—is tangible in any room, however crowded, in which these works are exhibited. Outside of a church or a monastery, I have not experienced the kind of reverent silence that I felt when walking through the recent retrospective of Vilhelm Hammershoi’s paintings of muted interiors at the Royal Academe of Arts in London in 2010. This was a silence—a stillness—of a different order than the usual murmur of appreciation (or, indeed, reverent bemusement) that holds sway in our often-imposing temples of culture, where people tend to behave as they have been conditioned to behave when they confront officially canonised works of art.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that, when art historians or critics address the work of the great masters of still life

painting, certain words and phrases recur: ‘holy’, ‘poetic’, ‘calm’, ‘meditative’. In still life painting, there is order and calmness even in death. A human skull sits at the centre of Harmen Steenwyck’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, Steenwyck’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.

And yet, despite its stark message (‘Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth...’ Matthew 6:18), and its intention to provoke guilt or self-recrimination, Steenwyck’s skull painting is a work of supreme stillness. In its understated way, it insists on a degree of silent reflection by the viewer. Some of its quiet power rests, of course, on its formal beauty and on Steenwyck’s ability to render his subject in a way that is almost photorealist in its detail and in its capturing of light and shade and texture.

It is interesting, then, to contrast Steenwyck’s great Vanitas painting with one of the earliest photographic daguerreotypes ever created: Louis Jules Duboscq’s *Still Life with Skull* (1850). Roughly two hundred years separate them, but they are essentially the same in terms of their core composition and their allegorical message.

Created by a pioneering inventor and maker of optical instruments, *Still Life With Skull* is a photograph that utilises the tropes of Vanitas still life paintings. The skull sits alongside an hourglass, a crucifix

and a tiny skeleton inside a glass dome, every object weighted with allegorical meaning. Here, photography, for all its modernist thrust, is realist painting’s poor relation. The new, potentially revolutionary medium has not yet realised its potential or its power, but remains tied to an older realist tradition that it will soon threaten to render obsolete.

In its earliest manifestations, the still life photograph was literally an experiment in capturing stillness. The long length of time of an exposure meant that the subject had to be fixed, inanimate, utterly still. Stillness was a prerequisite, not just an end result. Duboscq’s Vanitas photograph is a study in shades of grey except for the ghostly wash of opaque pink light that seems caught inside the dome. In its almost monochromatic aspect, it seems altogether less ‘real’ in some ways than Steenwyck’s photorealist painting and exudes that strange sense of historical ‘thenness’ that old photographs often carry.

Ironically, though, early photographic still lifes were perceived by the public to be so real that they had to have been created by practiced masters of illusion: fine artists adept in paintbrush and pencil. In 1846, when William Henry Fox Talbot published the first installment of what is now considered to be the first commercially produced photographic book, he called it, revealingly and a little defensively, *The Pencil of Nature*. He also included a short written insert to reassure his readers that what they were buying was indeed an example of the new art form called photography: “The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation.”

The photographic still life has come a long way since then, while essentially remaining—until relatively recently, when conceptualism came into play—essentially the same. If I was asked, off the top of my head, to list the masters of the form, the names Roger Fenton, Edward Steichen, Eugene Atget, Paul Outerbridge, Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Paul Strand, Josef Sudek, Andre Kertesz, Irving Penn and Robert Mapplethorpe would come to mind.

For all of them, to one degree or another, the still life was a way of creating images of arranged beauty that relied heavily on pre-production: the setting up and lighting of a group of diverse or related inanimate objects. Within those imposed limitations, there was much room for mischief, experiment and provocation, as Man Ray’s Surrealist still lifes attest. 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. In the 1980s, Penn made formally beautiful still lifes out of blocks of frozen fruit as well as using the sordid detritus of everyday life, including cigarette butts picked up from the New York streets, then artfully arranged and lit in the studio. His crumpled and filthy fag ends might seem the antithesis of the traditional still life except for the care and attention he gave to their formal composition.

One of the bigger questions that echoes through the history of still life photography concerns what is now referred to as pre-production: is the still life a way to control in advance the end result; to try to take any element of chance—or even instinct—out of the photographic equation? Some still life photographs, though, are discovered rather than arranged.

















Potato, 2003
© Blommers & Schumm

Plate RG, 2009
© Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky

Fruit, 2008 © Krista van der Niet

Eye Candy, 2007 © Anne de Vries
(with Janis Pönisch)

Collection of Sleepings and
Awakenings, 2003 © Kim Boske

Flowerfield, 2009–2011
© Diana Scherer

Crush #1, 2009 © Paul Kooiker

Even Gun Metal Gray has
a shade of Blue, 2006
© Marianne Vierø

Winkel #3, 2007
© Johannes Schwartz

Stable State, Video still, 2010
© Anouk Kruithof

Movements of a City, 2010
© Yvonne Lacet

Elektrotechnique, Video still, 2011
© Lernert & Sander

176,140211, 2011 © Peggy Franck



Still Life with Flowers and Watch
(Videostill), 2011 © Katja Mater

A, 2009 © Uta Eisenreich

Melon, 1997 © Marnix Goossens

Still Life (Milk), 2002
© Elspeth Diederix

Fake Flowers in Full Color, 2009 ©
Jaap Scheeren & Hans Gremmen

Bouquet I, 2005
© Scheltens & Abbenes

Hanna, 2007 © Melanie Bonajo

Nude Study # 2, 2010
© Fleur Van Dodewaard

Spill 3, 2009 © Ingmar Swalue
(with Mik Zandijk)

Installation view (detail), 2011
© Charlott Markus

Balancing Orange, Pink and
Yellow, 2007 © Qiu Yang

A publication by
Foam © 2011

This publication has been
produced in conjunction with
the exhibition Still/Life –
Contemporary Dutch
Photography

Curator Foam
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Introduction text
Foam

Essay
Sean O'Hagan writes about
photography for the Guardian
and the Observer. He has
been awarded the 2011 J Dudley
Johnston award from the
Royal Photographic Society
"for major achievement in the
field of photographic criticism".

Design
Vandejong

Print
robstolk @

Paper
Maxi Gloss 135g

Publisher
Foam Amsterdam
www.foam.org

With thanks to
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
P.O. box 20061
2500 EB The Hague
The Netherlands
www.minbuza.nl

Foam is supported by
the VandenEnde Foundation, the
BankGiro Loterij and De Brauw
Blackstone Westbroek.

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