

ART MARKET INSIGHTS

MUSEUM CURATOR

Collecting still life paintings

Learn about the trends in still life work and the collectable artists currently painting in this ever-shifting style.

By John O'Hern

The novice French scholar would translate *nature morte* as “dead nature.” Whereas, it is the equivalent of “still life” in the world of art: a picture of inanimate objects.

Pushing the envelope of still life,

Will Wilson has made an image of “stilled life” in his painting *An Arrangement*. A male figure makes an arrangement of peonies in a vase—the stereotypical still life in your grandmother’s house. He is assisted by his shadowed twin or “Shadow Self,” armed with

floral clippers and backed by an ominous cloud. Carl Jung suggests that we make an arrangement with our shadows in order to grow and to be whole. The hermaphroditic peony symbolizes the male and female aspects of the flower arranger complementing each

other in a living arrangement.

Still lifes are not always bursting with symbols. The earliest works in the genre are found in ancient Greece where paintings and mosaics of poultry, game, fruit, and vegetables represented the gifts that hosts would provide for their guests. The offerings and their representations are known as *xenia*.

David Ligare’s *Still-Life with Grape Juice and Sandwiches*, (*Xenia*), see page 44, is a contemporary example of this genre. Ligare has made paintings based on historical

content for over 25 years. This is one of many examples of his use of a stage or altar to hold gifts. Intrigued by opposites, Ligare paints the confined space of the altar, the edge of the vast openness of the sea and the strong Mediterranean light casting a shadow to balance the asymmetrical scene. The common objects in this work are food offered to strangers in a kitchen where Ligare volunteered. The calm clarity of Ligare’s paintings echo his conviction that “it is important at this moment to make paintings

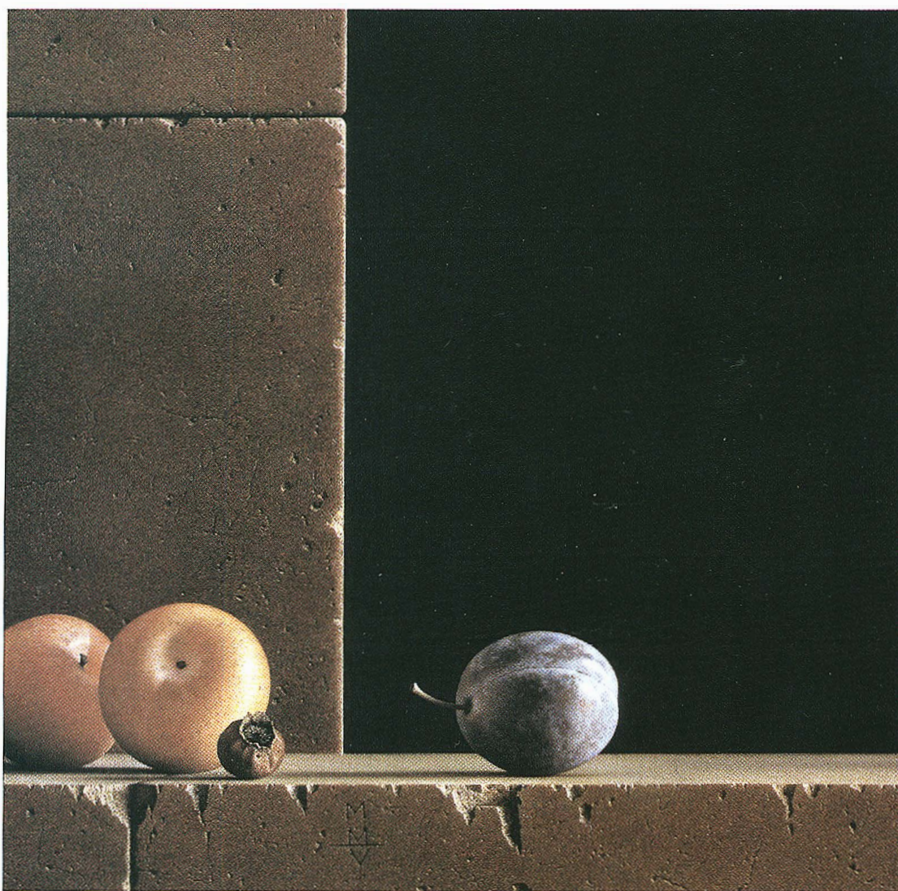
that attempt (at least) to be literate and scholarly.”

G. Daniel Massad’s *The Garden of Hesperides*, see page 42, is a similarly classical composition. Massad invites the viewer to make her own interpretation of the myriad objects in the composition. It’s almost enough to contemplate the masterful use of pastel and the meticulously-rendered beauty of the weathered stones and dusty objects. The title, *The Garden of the Hesperides*, forces us to dig deep into our knowledge of Greek

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G. Daniel Massad,
The Garden of Hesperides,
pastel on paper, 41½ x 11½"
COURTESY OF FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

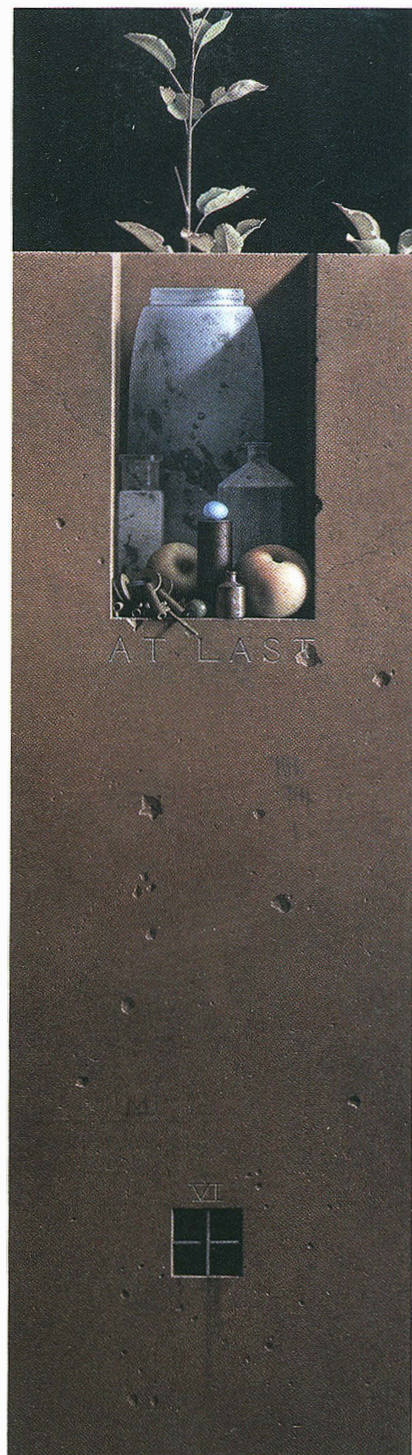
G. Daniel Massad, *Three Plums and Rosehip*, pastel on paper, 11 x 10⅞"
COURTESY OF FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK



myth—or into Google for a hint. Are the apples the golden apples of myth that Hercules labored to find “At Last?” Is the robin’s egg a symbol of regeneration and the birds in the garden, or is it an intense blue compositional element?

In contrast to Ligare’s and Massad’s classical references and highly controlled

application of their media, **Nancy Switzer** revels in paint, applying it heavily to her canvas to create scintillating images of banal everyday objects. The visual chaos and energy of light reflecting off tin cans is recreated in lavish slathers of paint. In her painting *Pearllys*, see page 45, Switzer reveals what Ligare and Massad have hidden—the hand of



the artist. She lets you see how shapes and reflections are created with paint. White and shades of gray become light and metal cans revealing the beauty and structure of objects we open and discard without a thought. Switzer knows what we have been missing.

Jeffrey Ripple (opposite) places flowers, fruits, and branches in a spaceless setting.

Seen from above, the objects rest firmly on a plane, but one without a discernable edge. The camellia of *Pomegranates, Camellia, and Guavas* suggests another space while the guavas lie chastely and the pomegranates display their luscious flesh and drop their seeds on the yellow-green plane. The eye reads the color of the plane as gold, reminiscent of Chinese and Japanese painting and the icons of Byzantium. Ripple tempts the viewers' eyes to savor each of the objects

as itself as well as a part of a whole.

William Shepherd's arrangement in *Peruvian Effigy Jar*, page 43, violates a "rule" of composition by displaying four objects on the fabric-draped shelf rather than an uneven number. He animates the arrangement, however, by placing them closer to the right margin of the picture plane and spacing them rhythmically with varying distances between them. The left hand bowl faces right and the design of the right hand vase faces left, tying

the arrangement together. Shepherd is a master of painting texture. The gloss of the bowl and the sheen of the embroidery are set off by the matte Peruvian jar and the woven rug. The whole arrangement is given a surreal quality by the low lighting casting shadows up the wall.

In these artists' hands still life takes on a vitality far from *nature morte*—and far from the still lifes in your grandmother's house. ●

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John O'Hern is Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, NY, and the originator of the biennial exhibitions, Re-presenting Representation. He feels guilty for having too much fun at his work. His fun began at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY where he was in charge of public relations and publications. He served as chair of the Visual Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts and writes widely about trends in contemporary realism.

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