

Collection Focus 3

# STILLNESS





# Stillness in Domestic Space



David Watt, *Conversation Piece - For the Perfect Hostess*, c.1987

*Stillness* is the third iteration of the *Collection Focus* series of exhibitions drawn from the Janet Holmes à Court Collection. Through a process of studying the collection – rifling through racks, drawers, boxes, files and shelves - a selection of artworks have been gathered. These artworks span three centuries, from 1850 to 2022 and they express ideas of stillness as both the exterior domestic space and the internal psychological space of our consciousness and subconscious.

Stillness in art is traditionally associated with the genre of still life painting that was recorded since Ancient Egyptian times and then popularised during the late Renaissance of the 1600s in Western Europe. Still Life became known as a genre that features non-sentient, often ephemeral, subject matter in the form of recognisable objects and symbolic motifs such as vases, flowers, skulls, produce and game.

This exhibition moves beyond the genre of still life to consider domestic space more broadly. It shifts from the intimate detail of a piece of fruit, to the wider view of internal architectural space, to more conceptual and abstract picturing, to the human element within domestic space. The exhibition focuses in, then draws

out – changing focus from proximity to distance, playing with perspective in regard to subject matter. However, other than the odd glimpse of sky, it does not allow a view beyond the boundaries of the walls of a given room.

The *Conversation Piece* artworks by the artist David Watt borrow from the Pop Art movement to represent modern conveniences, domestic items and sundry things found around the house. They also borrow from the 18th century genre of 'conversation pieces', that were portraits of people together in domestic or garden settings. Watt's pieces picture not people, but often hands in association with the objects in a home. They are clearly composed using advertising aesthetics to provoke conversation and reconsideration of such things. Watt writes that:

“We carry with us a certain awareness, a certain expectation of the objects in the world, a familiarity with which we feel comfortable to the extent that many of these objects and the values for which they stand become anaesthetised and unquestioned . . .”<sup>1</sup>



Trevor Richards, *Teal Towel*, 1980

We take such things for granted – including the ability to turn on a light switch and illuminate a room. Electricity completely transformed life as we knew it, refashioning the world anew (as has done digital technology in current times). Watt's artworks prompt the imagination to focus in on the trappings of domestic life, provoking questions about a culture of convenience fuelled by consumer ideals and desires.

Throughout the exhibition, a cup of tea is frequently represented. It is symbolic of taking a genuine moment of stillness and pausing to enact a simple daily ritual of tea making and drinking. It is a moment that can be enjoyed alone or shared. Tom Gibbons celebrates the teacup in an abstract composition while Trevor Richards renders it as ornate against a bold patterned background.

Stillness, for many, is not necessarily about a cup of tea, quiet peaceful moments, or mindful repose, it can easily dovetail with loneliness and detachment. In Jordan Andreotta's piece, the challenging psychological barriers brought on by COVID19 are expressed by the ghost like human figure going through everyday routines enshrouded with a sheet. When indoor space is the only option, it can become stifling.



Ron Nyisztor, *Realm of Agreement*, 2013

A darker symbolic language has historically defined the genre of still life - or *nature morte* (dead nature in French). This is seen in the representation of death, here in John Gould's birds, or in the medieval picturing of skulls, as *memento mori* referring to the fleeting nature of life. From a contemporary perspective and very much using the language of literal darkness, an unsettling feeling is conveyed by Su Baker and William Riley. Baker's receding hallway is a still and foreboding space, it is like the walls are closing in. Riley, then, offers a glimpse to something else - from within the engulfing darkness there is a window of still and cloudy blue sky.

Such works mark a contrast to the cheerful kitchen corner of Guy Grey Smith, or the colourful vases and bowls or fruit. It is apparent that the once thought of 'lowly' genre of still life can change and expand to reflect current concerns about being in the world with the things that surround us.

In the still life composition by Ron Nyisztor, contemporary found building materials and techniques are on display. We see a breeze block resting on glass sheeting and wood offcuts, next to a black resin laser cut sign frame. How different is this to the traditions of still life pictured in the 1850 painting by Gould?



Jennifer Higgie, *Abstract Painting #5*, 1995

*Stillness* is about exploring the unextraordinary and finding the extraordinary in the everyday. It presents a portal through which to engage in a multifaceted conversation about the idea of stillness and the genre of still life in relation to the home and human psychology.



Guy Grey Smith, *Kitchen Corner*, 1945



Tom Gibbons, *Orbiting Still Lives*, 1959

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1. David Watt quoted in David Bromfield, "David Watt", in *A Tribute, Drawing and 3D Work*, 2000, Western Australia, Gallerie Düsseldorf and Stephanie Jones, p.5

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Inner Sleeve: Su Baker, *Prefigurement* (detail), 1986

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