OBJECTS OF HISTORY

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Introduction

"Those Who Cannot Remember the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It."

*George Santayana*

People have a habit of forgetting or ignoring the past when seeking the future. Yet without the knowledge and traditions of the past, there is no firm foundation to create a grand new future. This thesis exhibition of nine oil paintings of still-life subject matter (November 28 - December 3, 2004) at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Commons Gallery sought to remind us of our recent past in a manner that provided a cautionary guide to the future.

Contemporary American news headlines were the subject matter for these nine paintings. Events from the news accounts were depicted through the use of still-life objects. Following the rich history of still-life paintings, each item within the composition symbolized an element of the narrative. It was through the allegorical use of objects that the complete tale was told.
History

Still-life painting has a long and rich tradition. The first recorded use of the term still-life came during the middle of the seventeenth century in Dutch inventory records; however, this genre began even earlier. In ancient Roman villas in southern Italy, a vast array of still-life objects was painted in murals that showcased the opulence of the homeowner. Popular among these motifs were depictions of scraps of food accompanied by images of drinking doves. According to the writings from this age, the images had both a secular and symbolic connotation to them. "Its aim was to capture and give permanence to the evanescent nature, to be used as decoration and as a status symbol, and finally, to evoke the idea of mortality" (Ebert-Schifferer 23).

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the general population of Western Europe began to place a greater emphasis on the afterlife making illusionist illustrations of everyday objects less desirable. It was not until the early fourteenth century that there was a renewed interest in the material world of still-life objects. An example of this renewed interest can be seen in the frescoes done by Taddeo Gaddi at the Baroncelli Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence. Here, Gaddi painted two trompe l’œil niches containing liturgical objects.

The earliest non-mural still-life paintings depicted people in daily activities with objects that took a subservient role to the characters painted in the scenes. It was not until the fifteenth century, in some of the works of Jan van Eyck’s followers that the figure was excluded and the still-life objects themselves became the primary focus. This first occurs on the exterior shutters of private devotional pictures showing items that were connected to the individual in the interior:
Especially popular at the time were diptychs, of which one wing presented a painting of the Virgin, the other the portrait of a worshipful donor. A painting in Amsterdam, showing the Madonna in an expansive landscape, was originally part of such an ensemble. On the back of the panel there is a still-life unique for the period, the mastery of which far outshines that of the painting on the front. Its various elements are all directly related to the Virgin: the book represents her piety, the towel her purity, the pitcher and bowl her virginity. (Ebert-Schifferer 29)

The significance of these objects was easily understood by the general population of the time and empowered artists to create works that allowed still-life paintings to eventually separate completely and become their own unique genre. At the close of the 16th century, the still-life genre had quickly become a popular subject: “Suddenly, the paintings of this new type appear simultaneously in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and Italy” (Ebert-Schifferer 75).

By the seventeenth century, a plethora of themes was contained within the still-life genre. The premise of death, time, and the five senses were some of the more common subject matter depicted. Specific objects were associated with these diverse themes. Skulls encapsulated the idea of *memento mori* signifying our mortality. Metaphors for the passage of time were depicted by clocks, candles, and hourglasses. The five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell were alluded to by certain objects. A mirror or an astronomical instrument represented the sense of sight. Playing cards or a chessboard alluded to the notion of touch. Musical instruments or sheets of music often
symbolized hearing. Items of food correlated to the concept of taste. Last but not least, smell was depicted in the form of perfume and flowers.

Flower paintings flourished during the early half of seventeenth century especially in Holland in correspondence with the flurry of interest for tulips. "The tulip fever took hold of members of all classes who were involved in these speculations, and it did so to an extent that can hardly be imagined nowadays" (Schneider 141). This great demand made some of these flowers worth as much as gold. Artists such as Jan van Huysum, Rachel Ruysch, and Balthasar van der Ast capitalized on this trend. With elegance and beauty, these artists were able to capture the delicate quality and rich hues of the flowers. Capturing the flora in paint was a way to preserve the flowers indefinitely. In addition to their symbolic meaning, the flowers became a status symbol: "Their beauty was not merely a matter of aesthetic pleasure; they were always looked at with a commercial value in mind"(Schneider 141). This idea contributed to the erosion of metaphorical relevance that continued in the following periods.

Painters began to use objects as merely compositional elements for their paintings. An example of this movement can be observed in the eighteenth century paintings of Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. Within his work, the still-life objects appeared to have been chosen not for their symbolism but for their banal everydayness. This interest away from allegories culminated with the paintings done by Paul Cézanne: "Solely concerned with the fundamentals of his art within his autonomous visual system, he quite deliberately ignored details of texture so that he could devote his entire attention to the principles of form"(Ebert-Schifferer 311).
During the middle of the twentieth century, Pop Art had a profound impact on still-life paintings in the United States. The objects became metaphors for consumerism and mass production. Andy Warhol chose iconic objects such as the Campbell’s soup can that symbolized the materialism of the 20th century. His works stressed the illustrational and graphic nature found in print advertisement and the objects themselves: “Warhol’s pictures have nothing whatsoever to do with painting in the classical sense. He deliberately depersonalized the artwork” (Walther 658).

On the other hand, and more recently, the importance of painting in a classic manner had come full circle in the contemporary works of Janet Fish and others. Fish’s paintings speak of the variety of different textures of objects, yet, there is no symbolism behind her choices in objects: “Her paintings of things can be seen as pure delight, beautiful objects that convey no message, that cause the mind to stop thinking and to contemplate the marvel before one’s eyes” (Katz 37). In general, by the end of the twentieth century, artists have ignored the rich and symbolic meanings that once were associated with still-life objects.

A notable exception to this trend was the works done by the Photo-Realist, Audrey Flack. Her air brushed paintings recalled the vanitas of old by incorporating the traditional symbols of our mortality with contemporary consumer items. In her painting, Marilyn, Flack had juxtaposed a candle, mirror, hourglass, calendar, pocket watch, fruits, and a rose with an old photograph, glass necklace, perfume bottle, powder compact, and lipstick.
The Exhibition Paintings

Very few individuals other than scholars today have a wealth of knowledge dealing with the stories of the Bible and Greek mythology to decipher all of the symbols located within paintings. “Objects of History” is an exhibition that attempted to create new narratives that relate to people in today’s world. Because our society is formed from many different cultures, it is nearly impossible to find a common narrative that we all share. What are the contemporary tales that we as a whole have incorporated into our culture? Is it possible for us to create stories that reach a wide diversity of different people? Although this notion goes counter to a Post-Modern idea of diversity, this was one of the main premises of the show. For this body of work, the solution to this dilemma was in selecting current historical events as topics. The stories in the news are observed or read by many individuals all around the world in a variety of media. In spite of language barriers, current news headlines are among the few narratives, especially nowadays, that transcend a given culture; the question of media spin and liberal/conservative interpretations not withstanding.

Still-life objects were picked to chronicle these events. Rather than using a photograph, which gives a single snapshot of the event, the selection of these painted allegorical stories using real objects allowed for a more encompassing perspective. This enabled a more fluid use of time so that events that took months to conclude could coexist within the same composition. In addition, the use of allegories gave the pictures some sense of ambiguity. Although this seemed like a contradiction to the purpose of these paintings it was not. Because individuals might associate different connotations to the objects, the stories evolved to encompass more events. This references the premise
that history repeats itself. Human nature has not changed despite how many technological advances we have made. The basic forces that compel people remain in our subconscious. These forces make us repeat the mistakes of the past repeatedly. Certain contemporary events echo prior moments in time and by leaving the interpretation of the paintings somewhat vague allows the viewer to bring to bear his or her own knowledge of history in deciding what event was being narrated.

The composition of these thesis paintings ran counter to some of the major traditional conventions of still-life arrangements that flourished during their height in the seventeenth century. Painters such as Floris Claesz van Dyck, Floris van Schooten, and Pieter Claesz followed strict guidelines such as the edge of the table being parallel to the horizontal edge of the canvas. Another standard practice was to have a carefully pressed tablecloth located within the composition. Traditionally, the creases of the cloth would run in parallel towards the background regardless of the laws of perspective. My own sensibilities made me choose a more dynamic format with creases and wrinkles in the fabrics moving in all directions in order to create a more visually exciting set up. Also, the edge of the table was never shown from a parallel angle to the picture plane in any of the paintings. Although these conventions were not applied, this does not indicate that nothing was adopted from a traditional standpoint. The layout of the objects employed a classical setup with the still-life items arranged in simple geometric patterns of a diamond or triangular composition.

In most of the paintings, there is no single strong light source. Rather than having the audience concentrate their attention at one particular area though the use of chiaroscuro lighting, a subtle illumination was applied. The purpose was to allow the
viewer to find his or her own path in the composition; therefore, an individual could appreciate the slight shifts in color as sunlight, which was the primary source of illumination, was reflected off of the objects. This nuance of color cannot be generally observed in a photograph, but can be suggested via differing opacities and transparencies in the painting application to allude to these subtle changes in hue intensity:

The sensitivity and consequently the registration of the retina of an eye is different from the sensitivity and registration of a photographic film. Normally, black-and-white photography registers all lights lighter and all darks darker than the more adjustable eye perceives them. The eye also distinguishes better the so-called middle greys, which in photography often are flattened if not lost. (Albers 14)

Each of the items selected for these paintings had a connection to events even if they were tenuous at best. Other factors such as what objects were readily available, cost of purchasing the objects, and what items made for a visually dynamic composition were of secondary concern. Many of the objects chosen came from my own private collection.

Contemporary toys from the eighties to the present are prevalent in the compositions. These items are meant to specifically target the time span when these paintings were done. Because none of these toys were produced before the eighties, this situates the painting squarely in a chronological time frame. Using toys that were highly sought after made them easily identifiable to a large group of consumers. In fact, some of these toys have become part of the fabric of our contemporary Pop Culture.

The level of complexities grew with each new piece. An increasing amount of objects were used with each consecutive work. Personal preference for an abundant
variety of objects was one of the factors for this. A second reason for the increased complexity was due to the fact that an object from one painting was included in the following works connecting each of the paintings. These props were then used as the actual still-life setup located at the front entrance of the exhibition.
Symbolism in the Paintings

The first painting in this thesis series, "JUSTification", dealt with the alleged reasons given by the United States of America for engaging in military operations against the Iraq regime during 2003. The title was spelled in this manner to underline the United States government’s stance that this war was a just one. This desire to discard peace in favor of war was metaphorically depicted in the tank rolling over the peace symbol. Many of the other objects chosen for this painting also contained some connection to the military or to war. The samurai helmet, although not technically situated within this part of the world, is geographically from the same continent. Other connotations of the helmet are linked with the warrior’s code, bushido. Located in the upper left corner of the painting are sabers. These curved blade swords were predominantly connected to the Middle East. In the bottom left-hand corner of the paintings was a slide mount that had the letters W.M.D., an acronym for weapons of mass destruction. After the events of September 11, 2001 this term became popular among politicians and the media. The perceived threat that Iraq’s dictator, Saddam Hussein had, or was trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction, was the reason claimed for going to war. This alleged threat convinced President George W. Bush that it was vital for the United States to invade Iraq in 2003.

“In the Spider’s Den”, the second work produced for this exhibition, depicted the events leading to the capture of Saddam Hussein in December of 2003. Even after the complete occupation of Iraq, the United States of America failed to locate and detain the Iraqi dictator. To aid the troops in the apprehension of the top leaders of Iraq, the United States gave each of their soldiers a deck of cards with photographs of Iraq’s top leaders
on them. Saddam Hussein was pictured on the ace of spades. Hussein was finally apprehended in what the media titled a “spider hole” on a small farm near Tikrit, Saddam’s hometown. This term, “spider hole”, referred to the fact that some spiders create holes in the ground where they wait to ambush their prey. The Ty’s Beannie Baby spider represents this location in the painting. In the foreground is the cover of a Time magazine that showed Saddam after his capture. Playing cards spread out in the front alluded to the cards mentioned earlier. On the right side of the painting is a red vehicle called the Aegis. This toy came from the anime television show called Gundam Seed. The antagonist group of the series captured this robot that transforms itself into a ship. The vehicle used its claw-like arms to seize an enemy robot in an episode of the show.

The third painting is titled “Lights Out”. Darkness swept over the East Coast of the United States during the summer of 2003. It was caused by a catastrophic failure in the electrical grid system that covered several states and Canada. Many of the items selected are related to electricity; the light bulb, flashlight, and the pikachu keychain. The keychain contained a character from the popular videogame and television series Pokemon. According to the show, the pikachu, a yellow rodent type creature, was able to discharge bolts of electricity. Other items such as the fallen dominoes denoted the chain reaction of the power plants shutting down. The East Coast was presented in the foreground by a map of the eastern seaboard. References to New York City were shown in the paper buildings of the New York Skyline and an apple. In later reports by news agencies, they stated that the cause of the outage occurred due to faulty software. This concept was showcased by the two colored floppy disks located in the scene.
The trial of Martha Stewart in 2004 was the subject of the fourth painting. Martha Stewart, a successful woman who created a home decorating empire, was charged with insider trading. To epitomize her perfection in home matters was the Strawberry Shortcake figurine, a kitsch collectable piece of sentimental American culture was chosen to embody these concepts. The old tall-tale of George Washington played a prominent role in the choices for some of the items in addition to providing its title, "To Tell the Truth...". In this tale, it was said that when Washington was a child, he cut down a cherry tree. When asked if he committed this act, he replied, "I cannot tell a lie. I chopped down the cherry tree". To commemorate George Washington are the portraits of himself within the dollar bills. Cherries referred to the tree that he had cut down. Also a tiny axe was stuck into one of the cherries. Located in the foreground are two magazines. The first is the magazine that Stewart founded, Living. The other, Newsweek, had the verdict of her trial on its cover. The trial itself was hinted at by the judge's gavel in the center of the painting. Other items, such as the crab shell, were linked to the company of whose stock was in dispute. The crab was the astrological sign for Cancer, the fourth sign of the zodiac that related vicariously to the fact that the company was doing cancer research. The paper hidden in the background had the words, “sell at sixty” written in blue. This quote was the alleged price at which Stewart told her broker to sell the stock. The trial ended with Martha Stewart sentenced to five months in prison hinted at by the publishing date located on her magazine.

“What’s in a Name?” is the title of the fifth piece in the series. A typewriter is the center of interest. The words Porteus, Social Science, and Saunders are typed repeatedly over and over on the paper inside the typewriter. These names indicated the various
designations that the University of Hawai‘i’s Social Science Building has taken during the past years. In 1999, there was a huge uproar on the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s campus over the fact that the building was named after Stanley Porteus, a professor of sociology. Critics charged that he was a racist and should not have a building named after him. During this time frame, the Board of Regents voted to expunge his name from the building. Subsequent titles for the structure were simply the Social Science Building; eventually it was dedicated to Allan and Marion Saunders, supporters of higher education and women’s rights. In the background are two flyers of the University of Hawai‘i. They depict the attempt to change the logo of the university. The two Garbage Pail Kids cards in the foreground were a popular kids’ collectable in the 1980s. These stickers made fun of people’s names. Such name-calling seemed symbolic of the conflict over the name of the social science building.

The sixth painting, “Who Needs Ken Anymore?”, is concerned with the growing divide in America over same-sex marriages. Much of this debate was focused on judicial rulings dealing with the issue of whether it is unconstitutional to deny the rights of marriage to gay couples. On February 3, 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled, in a 4 to 3 decision, that the state failed to give adequate reasons to deny marriage to gay couples and ordered the state to begin issuing marriage licenses to them. In this painting, the gavel and the scales of justice represent the court and its rulings in this case. Balancing on the scales are two cards with the word “marriage” reflected on the left card, while “civil union” is written on the other. Some supporters of gay marriages have stated that the concept of civil unions do not allow the same benefits associated with marriage. This notion was given form in the uneven weight of the two cards on the scale. The
idealism of marriage was projected in the Wedding Day Barbie doll, as well as Jan Van Eyck's painting, *The Arnolfini Marriage*. This painting has become an icon of marriage used in advertisement and all forms of the media. Due to court edicts in support of same-sex marriages, the opposition had a strong desire to amend the constitution of the United States stating that marriage is a sacred union only between a man and a woman. The constitution is represented in the composition by a model of the United States navy frigate ship, Constitution. Also in the background is a political banner from the 2000 election that urges the voters to select "no" on the question to change Hawaii's constitution. In the election, a majority of voters chose to change the constitution to specifically state that marriage is a union between a man and a woman.

The prison scandal of Abu Ghraib is the topic of the seventh painting, "*Winning the Hearts and Minds*". Accusations of abuse against Iraqi detainees were reported at the Iraqi prison in May of 2004. These allegations were brought to the forefront with the release of photographs showing Iraqi prisoners in humiliating poses with American soldiers having a good time at their expense. Before these pictures became public, the United States had tried to portray a positive public image to the citizens of Iraq. "Winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people" was a quote given by the United States government as a goal of the army after the fall of Saddam's regime. When the scandal broke, there was an outcry against America by the citizens of Iraq. This quote, "Winning the Hearts and Minds", was used as a satirical title for this piece and the bases for the selection of many of the objects. The phrase "Winning the hearts" is represented in the painting by a game of Trumps. In this round of the game, the cards of the heart suit are being played. Other items such as the open Christmas present and Care Bears
dolls symbolize the supposed gifts of friendship and love that were brought to the people of Iraq. To depict the images that were brought forth pertaining to the prison abuse are the newspapers and the sculpture of a naked hooded figure. Many of the photographs show images of naked Iraqis with plastic bags on their heads with smiling Americans observing the captives. Purple rubber gloves are included within the composition because many of the army personnel can be seen wearing them in the photos.

Titled “A Need for Speed”, the accidents on the freeways of Hawaii is the theme of the eighth work. The newspaper in the background depicted one of the more tragic accidents on the H1 freeway in February 2004. Two speeding cars slammed into the back of a city and county truck that was deploying fluorescent orange cones used to divert traffic, resulting in the death of the truck driver. The lei and pinwheel are commemorative items, which people often lay next to the roadside to pay respects to those who have passed away in accidents. The videogame controller was meant to represent the unthinking mindset of the drivers who do not realize the consequence of their actions. A box of toy cars from the movie, The Fast and The Furious, is located on the right. This movie hyped the concept of street racing and extended its appeal to teenagers. Signifying the outcome of these accidents where the police are called to investigate were the box of chalk and traffic cone. Other items such as the beer bottle and short glass cup deal with the fact that alcohol contributes to many of the highway accidents and reckless behavior on the road.

In the final painting, the United States’ presidential race of 2004 took center stage. Each of the candidates’ parties were denoted by their respected animal: Dumbo, the elephant, represented the Republican Party while, Donkey from the movie Shrek
corresponded to the Democratic Party. Four issues decided the outcome of this election: the war on terrorism, the economy, health care, and moral values. Due to the importance of these four factors that shaped the election the title of work was called “Divided Issues”. Also, many of the items in the composition were related to these four issues. The stem of the flower and the test tubes correlated with health care and the issues of stem cell research. The green piggy bank symbolized the economy, while the business tie refers to the job market. The war on terrorism is suggested by the toy figure based on the Japanese manga, *Rurouni Kenshin*. This antagonist character, Makoto Shishio, sought to conquer the Meiji government through acts of terror against the citizens of Kyoto. Moral values are represented by the Aesop’s fable book, a collection of moral tales told to children all around the world. In the foreground are robot figures, Providence and Evangelion, whose background stories allude to the great apocalypse foretold in the Bible. The map in the background depicts the outcome of how each state voted. The reelection of President George W. Bush is satirized by the monkey with the crown and scepter embodied the character from the children’s book, *Curious George*. Having another four years under the administration of President Bush was represented in the shattered snow globe and candlestick holder. Inside the snow globe was a figure of Tinker Bell from Disney’s Peter Pan, which symbolized the dashed dreams for a change in the policies of the United States.
Materials and Techniques

The paintings were created following a specific set of procedures using a traditional, yet modified approach to oil painting based on our contemporary age. First, a digital camera was used to take a photograph of each composition. This image was then transformed into an achromatic picture on a computer and printed out onto an inkjet transparency paper. Using an overhead projector, the image was then roughly traced out with a pencil onto the pre-primed canvas. Next, a monochromatic underpainting was completed with chrome green oxide and titanium white acrylic paints in homage to painting tradition and as a way to unify the entire composition. During this stage of the painting, the placement of the objects was adjusted to correspond to any optical deviations. The underpainting was finished in a manner in which the surface of the canvas would still be relatively smooth with the weave of the canvas still visible. Any bumps on the canvas might have produced unexpected value shifts on the finish work. Once the underpainting was completely dry, glazes of transparent oil color were then applied. The transparent colors used at this stage are phthalocyanine blue, phthalocyanine green, ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, and alizarin crimson. A small quantity of paint was mixed with the medium to produce a watery glaze solution. The formula for the glaze medium consisted of five parts gum spirits of turpentine, one part damar varnish, and one part stand oil. Using a flat and soft brush, preferably a sable, the glaze solutions were brushed over the areas and then gently wiped away with a soft cotton cloth. The adjustment of the body color of the objects was achieved via scumble technique with opaque paints. This technique required dragging the paint onto the canvas
with a dry brush. Subsequent layers of both glazes and opaque paints were used to finish the painting.
Summary

Tradition plays an important role in these paintings. One of my chief goals in these works is to question the concept of the “new”. People have a habit of forgetting the past when seeking the future. Contemporary art adopts a similar outlook when discussing the next “new” thing. This view has serious faults. Without a clear understanding of what has happened in the past, one is left with an unstable foundation on which to build. The steps laid out by previous generations frame the context of works in the present. Care was taken to ensure these pieces are structurally stable and will not deteriorate in the near future. This series builds on the achievements of previous artists and attempts to merge the past with the present.

An ironic twist in these works is that the stories portrayed in the paintings will be forgotten by a majority of people in a few years. Although many of these events captivated the nightly news, their relevance to the fabric of our history, shall be nothing more than a footnote at best. Symbols that can be understood today, will, in a couple of years be forgotten. As such, the paintings in this exhibition will follow in the footsteps of past still-life paintings. Their meaning will fade from our memories and all that will remain is a shell of their former relevance to our society. Thus, the cycle will be perpetuated.
Notes

1 It has been suggested that, in the past, artists such as Vermeer may have employed a *camera obscura* for transferring the image onto the canvas. This device projected an image of an object onto a flat surface where it could be traced.

2 Chrome green oxide was used as a *dood-verf*, dead-color by some artists of the past. When mixed with white, chrome green oxide resembles a pleasant bluish gray color. Even at its darkest tone, the hue still allowed the addition of transparent layers to show a tinge of their color. In addition, the quick drying proprieties of this pigment made it an excellent choice for the *imprimatura*.

3 The traditional artist’s palette did not contain phthalocyanine blue and phthalocyanine green. These are more recent manufactured additions created in 1935, which have replaced Prussian blue and viridian in some modern palettes.
Plate 1

Exhibition Entrance
Plate 2

Exhibition
Plate 3

JUSTification
Plate 4

In the Spider’s Den
Plate 5

Lights Out!
Plate 6

To Tell the Truth
Plate 7

What’s in a Name?
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Divided Issues
Work Cited


Work Consulted


