Grandma's pitcher: A Series

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GRANDMA'S PITCHER: A SERIES

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I
The Proposal

The proposal for this thesis began quite simply as an exploration of still-life subjects through a series of drawings and paintings. The main interests for investigation were the various relationships between pictorial design and ordinary objects. These are the same relationships which had become more prominent in my previous work; both in still-life pieces as well as figurative.

I believe still life was the most accessible and personal avenue for this particular exploration. Accessible, through its conveniences as a "model" and through its comprehensibility to viewers. Personal, due to a familiarity with the objects chosen in addition to the activity of their arrangement.

Viewers of my work remain an important consideration. Each viewer should understand, even on the simplest level, my art.

II
Still Life

It is interesting to note the various notions and attitudes concerning still-life painting throughout history. As a theme, still life has maintained a certain validity. This strength however, seems to have fluctuated over the years.

Most noted for specializing in and popularizing still-life themes were the Dutch Masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During a time of newly achieved independence, fortune, and reformation in the church, artists turned to more secular themes. Still life afforded artists to concentrate on the good things around them and describe their everyday life. The people quickly became patrons of this art and many artists chose to specialize in it. Eventually, still-life painting developed into a separate branch of Dutch art, complete with distinct groups of painters for various subjects; flowers and fruit, banquet-pieces, Vanitas, game-pieces, and so on. It should be noted that, although these themes became more secular, the emphasis remained on the iconography of the objects. In most banquet-pieces, for example, a glass or jug of wine and bread are used to represent the eucharist.
Perhaps it was the great abundance of Dutch Still-Life masters which led other European painters away from this theme for specialization. In William H. Gerdts' book, *Painters of the Humble Truth*, the author discusses the difficulty in researching still-life painting historically. Gerdts points out that "it was usually denigrated as a theme not worthy of serious consideration by either critic or artist" and, therefore, seldom mentioned at all.² Gerdts also examines the development of a hierarchy of artistic themes which includes still life at the bottom of the scale. This hierarchy appears to have persisted from as early as 1669 through the turn-of-the-century.³

With the rise of Modernism in America and in Europe, the regard for the old hierarchy of themes began to fade. There was a tendancy for artists not to specialize in one particular area, but to investigate several themes. For innovators--Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso; to name but a few--still life became just one theme of many to be explored and re-evaluated. Objects were no longer selected merely for their iconographic value, but for their color, shape, or form in order to investigate purely pictorial problems. Cezanne's still-life paintings are examples of this more formal study which ignored symbolism.⁴ Picasso and the early Cubists often chose simple still-life objects--a wine bottle or guitar--to explore abstraction in great depth.⁵ Georgia O'Keefe was one monumental still-life artist who chose her floral subjects for such formal qualities.⁶ With the artist's new treatment of still-life subjects came a new appreciation and seriousness in consideration of still-life themes.

In the 1960's, Pop Art brought even more attention to still-life subjects; turning the mundane into the monumental. Pop Art altered the existing values given to objects much like the Cubist still lifes. The objects artists chose to depict reflected the society around them--throwaway items; brightly colored cans and wrappers. The works of Andy Warhol, Wayne Thiebaud, and Claes Oldenburg are just some examples.⁷ Out of Pop Art came Photo-Realism. Audrey Flack's luminous air-brush paintings are a prime example of the photo-real still life.⁸ Realists such as Jack Beal and William Bailey often chose still-life subjects to investigate the affects of light and color on form.⁹ Janet Fish gained notoriety through still-life themes alone with her large-scale paintings of glassware.¹⁰ James Valerio's still-life paintings are a combination
of vibrant colors and dramatic lighting which form today's version of seventeenth century Dutch still life.\textsuperscript{11} In a more painterly and expressionistic vein are the paintings of Jane Freilicher.\textsuperscript{12} One individual to receive recent notoriety is Donald Sultan who uses unusual combinations of media and materials—tar, tile, oil sticks, etc.—to create still-life images.\textsuperscript{13}

These artists, as well as all artists, are constantly re-evaluating themes in relation to their own ideas and motives. Obviously, still life remains a strong and popular theme for exploration today and in the future.

### III

**The Work**

The series began with a pastel drawing, *With Paisleys* (figure 1). My familiarity with the pitcher and scarf led to their selection as "objects". Grandmother donated the dented pewter pitcher, among other objects to my growing collection of still-life subjects during my first year as a painting student. The pitcher was special to her as it had been a wedding gift and therefore instilled a sort of personal, family value in me. The scarf, on the other hand, was new; something I put together for decorative purposes. Their arrangement was accidental for the most part. I found the relationship of the objects on the table to the large patterned section of scarf hanging over the table's edge appealing. The scale chosen was simply one which felt comfortable to work with. As the image developed, other relationships began to appear; contrasts between the upper and lower portions. There is an activity of the physical elements in the upper segment similar to, yet unlike the activity of the flat patterns and shapes in the lower. The separations and emphasis of color in the lower section helps to stress the importance of this section in respect to the whole. With this drawing, it became possible to identify which ideas and relationships to explore in terms of an oil painting.

A large, vertical canvas was chosen for the first oil painting (figure 2). In previous work, the vertical format proved more challenging; it forces the image to be read up and down as well as from side to side.
and must be carefully composed. There was a need to try again with the plant, the pitcher, and the scarf; to explore their situation further. This time however, the composition should flow more, the color should be more important, and the lighting should be stronger. By placing the objects below eye-level it was possible to mask the table element and emphasize the strange flatness of the space, making an ordinary situation not so ordinary. I began by painting the sweeping curves and colorful patterns very loosely, in a painterly fashion--using more paint to activate the surface of the canvas. The connected elements formed a giant "s" through the center of the picture and scale relationships were adjusted intuitively around this. On such a large scale it was easy to be consumed by the action of painting. As the image progressed, the patterns within the folds of fabric became more focused and saturated with color. The large areas of reds balance the activity within the fabric. By softening various edges and reducing the reflective qualities of the pitcher, it became less of a focal point. The plant makes a brief entry in the top of the painting, balancing the colors, maintaining the dimensional aspect of the image, and echoing the curves found throughout. Through this painting the fact of objects on a table became less obvious and less important. Viewers must consider the situation as a whole rather than individually staged parts--much like listening to a piece of music.

My next impulse was to experiment with a much busier and colorful surrounding for the same pitcher. By selecting bright, patterned fabrics from a collected group of favorites--not unlike Matisse--it was possible to create a situation which might further reduce the importance of the pitcher. The result was a pastel drawing, On Florals (figure 3). I set up this still life below eye-level again; this time including the table edge butted at a slight angle to a screen in the upper segment. A long piece of red fabric helped to break the division the table edge created and was wrapped around into the bottom of the image. The red also served as a resting point from the large, busy florals on both the screen and table coverings. A piece of fern enters from the upper left; a "real" plant to contrast those of the patterns. The centrally located pitcher is larger and reflects its surroundings much more than in the previous works. It is allowed to become one with the scene.
Through using loose marks similar to those in the lower portion of *With Paisleys*, it was possible to maintain the intensity of color and a more expressive element.

Grandma's Pitcher II (figure 4) came from a need to re-work the *On Florals* image. I wanted to strengthen colors and concentrate on the relationships between the floral patterns and the rest of the picture. The color in this piece seems heightened, almost jarring due mainly to the compliments used. Edges were kept crisper than in previous pieces and the colors allowed to be more saturated; similar to the red areas in the first painting. The lighting was less direct, minimalizing the subject's dimensional qualities. By removing large sections of the red fabric in both the upper and lower portions the patterned flowers were permitted to "grow"; they even reflected more clearly on the pitcher's side. The competition between the flower designs and the actual pitcher became interesting. The florals wanted to take over and be more dimensional than the pitcher. They were floating about in the coral space until the shadow areas and the overlapping fern were strengthened. The shadow beneath the pitcher emphasized the solidity and mass of the object. The more pronounced version of the fern in the upper corner helped to tame the patterns and to better define the pictoral space.

The medium, canvas dimensions, pitcher, and plant elements remained consistent for Grandma's Pitcher III (figure 5). This time I turned away from the reds and chose a vibrant blue paisley fabric to work with that had recently been added to my collection. By setting up an almost bird's-eye view there were a multitude of sweeps and curves to explore in a rather shallow space. It was necessary to eliminate many of the pattern's frills so as not to over-activate the composition and loose the pitcher completely. The colors were kept fresh—not as blended. The all-over light source created only subtle shadows thus flattening the image. The paint surface remained somewhat thin and two dimensional in contrast to the earlier pieces as well. Due to these factors the drawing became essential to comprehending the pictoral space. This was a rather different approach to the subject—much enjoyed. I discovered however, that I missed the more painterly activity and surfaces of the earlier pieces.

In the previous work there had been a distinct caution and effort
not to lose the pitcher and let it become of minor importance. The patterned fabrics competed, yet never really gained the upper hand. I decided to see just what might happen if the pitcher did get pushed aside. The result was interesting; another pastel drawing, *Hide-n-Seek* (figure 6). In this composition the pitcher was placed up--its upper edge cropped out of the picture--on a shelf covered by a brightly flowered fabric. Only a small shift of light indicated to the actual dimension of the shelf. The fabric appeared flat, almost like wallpaper, with a large, orange bloom at the center of the image. The loose marks of color along with the various movements of the floral design activated the shallow space.

The final painting in the series (figure 7) contained the flat-spaced shelf idea of *Hide-n-Seek*. The pitcher was more defined and reflected more clearly, yet remained cropped; this time placed to one side rather than in the center. The fabric chosen was lighter in both color and weight; its pattern had a small repeat much like wallpaper, however its surface rippled and flowed like the fabric it was. The shifts of shadow were emphasized to show more dimension and the rippling of the cloth. The rose piece of trimming was added for its dimensional qualities as well as to act similarly to the patterned vine in the previous drawing; to lead the eye within the composition. By using more paint I was able to develop the surface with a variety of loose, calligraphic marks similar to areas within the first painting. Upon the painting's completion, I found that I had come full circle with this group of paintings and comfortable with the body of work created.

Of course there were hundreds of other ideas and directions inspired by these works. At several points during the progress of the still lifes I began to think of the objects as characters or figures on a stage--the canvas. When treated in this manner, the paintings became narrative. Sometimes the objects took on other more personal and symbolic meanings. In *Grandma's Pitcher I*, for instance, the pitcher seemed to be conversing with the scarf or its tassel while the aloe plant looked on. In the second painting the pitcher could be viewed as an individual struggling for their identity in a wild and crazy world. With *Grandma's Pitcher III* I considered the importance the contents of the pitcher carried; hence the pitcher became a bringer of life, supplying
a blue water nutrient to the world. The pitcher remained empty--it had
given all it could--in the final painting and therefore symbolized the
fact that the world could and would continue to thrive without it. From
this point ideas stemmed which did not include the pitcher at all. Those
ideas are not a part of this thesis and shall be reserved for the future.
Concerning the above "subplot" ideas, that is all they are. I do not
believe they are essential to the viewer's understanding of the pieces.
I do hope however, that viewers enjoy what they see and perhaps develop
their own personal meanings for the work.
Figure 4: Grandma’s Pitcher II, 1990, oil on canvas, 60 X 36 inches.
NOTES


3 Gerdts 21-31.

4 Gerdts 235-249.


11 Arthur 130-143.

12 Strand 61-87.

WORKS CITED


