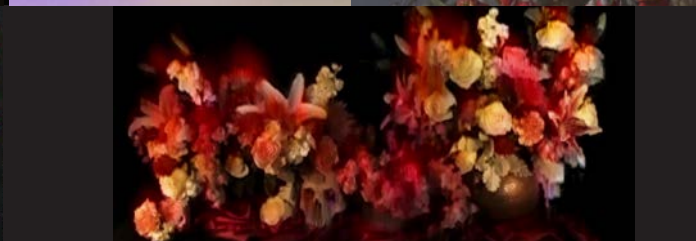


AN EMPIRE OF THINGS

19 APRIL TO 26 MAY 2018



Grace Cossington Smith Gallery and Abbotsleigh are delighted to present An Empire of Things.
Curated by Lisa Jones and Mary Faith.

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AN EMPIRE OF THINGS

**AN EXHIBITION RESPONDING TO THE OBJECT
FEATURING WORKS BY**

TONY ALBERT
TOM CARMENT
VIVIAN COOPER SMITH
PHIL DRUMMOND
SARAH GOFFMAN
HARLEY IVES
NIGEL MILSOM
MARGARET OLLEY
MARGARET PRESTON
JUDE RAE
ANTHONY SPRINGFORD
ROBYN STACEY
KEN + JULIA YONETANI

AN EMPIRE OF THINGS

“There are objects wherever you look, on the tables, the walls, the floor: pots, pitchers overturned, a clutter of baskets, a bunch of vegetables, a brace of game, milk pans, oyster shells, glasses, cradles. All this is man’s space; in it he measures himself and determines his humanity...”

Roland Barthes, *The World as Object* (1953)

Characterised as a lavish ‘empire of things’, Dutch still life painting epitomised the victory of consumerism. The infinitesimal detail given to vibrations of light passing through crystal, the translucency of grapes, or the dull smoothness of shells and porcelain extend vision into the realm of touch as the eye carefully deliberates over an array of textures and temperatures. In a mercantile economy, the sensuous allure of painting stimulated desire for the mastery of the craft and the treasures represented therein. For Barthes, the material history encoded in these extravagant demonstrations of abundance is essential to unravelling the culture that produced them. With *The World as Object*, he initiates a new direction in French post-structuralist thinking, which argues that objects are subservient to an ‘order of things’: a hierarchical classification system that through consumption establishes social order, and even determines one’s ‘humanity’. The accumulation of exotic and valuable objects in Dutch still life painting traced the trajectory of globalised consumerism in the 17th century through what could be possessed and traded. While his argument for the materialism of the Dutch in the 17th century, and the semiotic classification of domestic objects remains unchallenged, art historians have since overturned Barthes’ moral assumptions about Dutch still life painting in preference for a more complex interpretation sensitive to its ambiguities.

The category of still life has existed since antiquity, and continues to evolve today as a result of criticism, the artist working within set material series, and the actual objects circulating within a given material culture. In his pivotal book on still life, Norman Bryson argues that although there are rapid inflections in the types of objects represented under the influence of shifts in ideology, technology, and economics, there is little actual innovation in the essential elements of still life as a result of this influence. ¹ In other words, the key features of still life, such as a table, vessels for drinking, instruments for eating and objects for consumption or decoration have changed surprisingly slowly. We still participate in relatively constant routines of life in the household interior, even if the rise of social media has made domestic life increasingly theatrical. Despite the ongoing popularity of still life, the genre has been denigrated historically as trivial, base, and unworthy of critical attention. The judgement

of still life as a low-stakes, secondary genre is ideological in nature. Because the 'low-plane' role of domestic maintenance has traditionally fallen to slaves, women and the working classes that were systematically excluded from the 'high-plane' cultural realm, any representations of this material reality were dismissed as having no serious value.

Today, however, the subjects that might once have belonged to the 'higher' genres of history or religious painting are played out in still life works across all mediums, suggesting the collapse of medium and genre hierarchies in favour of inter-disciplinary practices. Likewise, the historical marginalisation of the still life genre due to race, class and gender ideologies make it the perfect site for contemporary intersectional analysis: how might still life works reveal the ways in which interlocking systems of power impact the socially marginalised? Everyday life, the bread and butter of still life, is now anything but a trivial subject. According to the philosophers Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, everyday life is the site of revolution!

In *An Empire of Things*, the still life genre is used to explore a diverse range of themes, from environmental degradation (Julia and Ken Yonetani) to the legacies of colonisation (Tony Albert, Robin Stacey). *Memento-mori* is reframed in a contemporary context by Sarah Goffman: what are the moral and ethical responsibilities of the consumer in a culture of excess and waste, and with a dependence on cheap, outsourced labour from developing countries? There are still life paintings that explore formal concerns of reconciling depth, weight and tactility, with the flatness of the picture plane (Anthony Springford, Jude Rae, Tom Carment, Nigel Milson). Decorative still lifes by Margaret Preston, Margaret Olley, and Phil Drummond reveal Australian shifts in ideology, technology, and economics. Finally, there are works that respond directly to the pervasive influence of technology on everyday life and challenge the established values of a given medium, whether it be 'truth' in photography (Vivian Cooper Smith), or the impossibility of traditional 'craftsmanship' in the moving image (Harley Ives). The incredible variety of still life practices on display demonstrates the continuing relevance and power of a genre that was once considered frivolous. Through still life, the banal rituals and trappings of everyday life are put on show within the 'higher' discourses of culture, and we are asked to slow down the way we look, and re-evaluate the familiar in a new, critical light.

Dr Jaime Tsai, 2018

¹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1995)

TONY ALBERT

Tony Albert's etchings extend ideas derived from his work *ASH on me* 2008, in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, that recontextualise old 'opportunity shop' ceramic and metal ashtrays, decorated with kitsch images of Aboriginal people and culture. The idea that cigarette butts are to be stubbed out onto the images of Aboriginal men, women and children, transforms these seemingly innocuous objects into menacing symbols of racism.

www.tonyalbert.com.au

Octagon, 2015, etching and aquatint, 21.5 x 21.5 cm (print size), Edition: PP (illustrated)

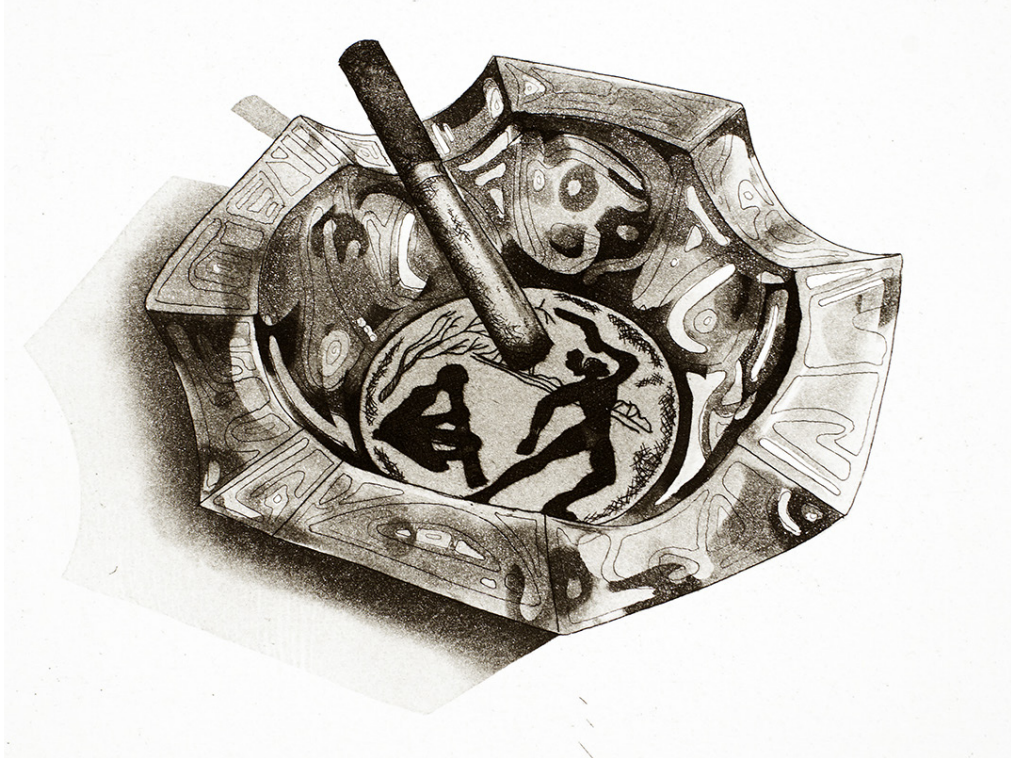
Trapezoid, 2015, etching and aquatint, 21.5 x 21.5 cm (print size), Edition: PP

Circle, 2015, etching and aquatint, 21.5 x 21.5 cm (print size), Edition: PP

Square, 2015, etching and aquatint, 21.5 x 21.5 cm (print size), Edition: PP

Greetings from Appin, 2016, etching and aquatint, 50.5 x 50.5cm, edition of 15.

Courtesy the artist and Cicada Press. Represented by Sullivan+Strumpf



TOM CARMENT

As a *plein-air* landscape painter and a portraitist, I came late to still life painting. I waited until I was 60, when it felt right to commence. Even so, my partner Jan joked: 'Shouldn't you leave still life for when you're decrepit to leave the house?' I wasn't quite inside though. I set up my objects in the light well of our two-storey terrace, under the open sky, where I could see them and my palette clearly.

My choice of still life subjects was tied to a daily routine; my late afternoon shopping excursions to buy food. The criteria I used for choosing items became more visual. At Harris Farm Markets I picked the dirtiest potatoes with lumps of earth attached, and in the supermarket, I bought the tins of tuna and lentils with the most iconic designs.

During the 1980s I had spent a lot of time using a heavy Remington office typewriter to write letters, stories and essays. I loved the way it transformed my scribbly writing into something neat and professional. With the advent of word processing, this beautiful machine languished under my desk.

One day my son Felix showed up in our kitchen with some friends from Japan, and we began a discussion about the pre-digital era. I rolled some paper into my old Remington and lugged it up to the kitchen table, to demonstrate how things used to be done. Typing again felt weird and nostalgic, and so much more physical than using a computer. Felix reckoned it was very 'steampunk'.

After that I took it down the light well for a still life ... or perhaps a portrait.

Friends started lending me their typewriters to paint, and now I'm up to typewriter #12.

I 'art directed' each one according to the time of manufacture, trying to imagine the personality of the user. I believe that every typewriter has its own DNA of time, wear, and usage – the crooked key that leads detectives to the blackmailer.

Office typewriter, 2016, oil on linen on ply, 49 x 51 cm (illustrated)

Hermes portable, 2018, oil on linen, 41 x 51 cm

Dirty potatoes, 2016, oil on linen, 99 x 118 cm

Sirena tuna on red, 2017, oil on linen, 15 x 20.5 cm

Tinned lentils, 2017, oil on linen, 19.5 x 25 cm

Courtesy the artist and King on William Gallery, Sydney



VIVIAN COOPER SMITH

My practice is concerned with how the processes of photography may be used to examine questions of perception, knowledge and being. My work employs a series of techniques derived from the principles of Karen Barad's diffractive methodology. These techniques include re-photography, disparity and diversity in subject matter, dismantling of singular perspectives, interruption and distortion, and performativity. Each work harnesses one or more of these techniques to create photographs that challenge the presumptions a viewer may bring to a photograph and reveal the processes and apparatus by which we know the world in which we live.

Still life is a playful nod to the lineage of photography as well as a challenge to its conventions. Two photographs of an antique clock I inherited from my grandparents are shown side by side. Each image shows the clock from the same position and displaying the same time on its face. The only apparent difference between the photographs is the colour of the background and the light striking the clock from the left-hand side. Photographed in a studio, these two photographs employ the repetition of subject matter to disrupt the established notion of a unique or 'decisive' photographic moment. In this diptych, the photographic moment, as inferred by the time shown on the clocks, has been dispersed across two images dismantling the singular position of the subject and challenging the indexical link commonly associated with photographs. Of course, it may also be said that the clock is simply broken; however, this only highlights the assumption we make as viewers and our need for a truthful photograph. By using a family heirloom, I am also drawing attention to the lineage of family and the development of individual subjectivity. Disrupting these conventions challenges the idea of a singular knowable subject, whether that is a person or a clock.

Still life, 2017, digital c-type print, Ed. 5+2AP, 53 x 43 cm (framed)

Still life, 2017, digital c-type print, Ed. 5+2AP, 53 x 43 cm (framed)

Courtesy the artist and Galerie pompom, Sydney



PHIL DRUMMOND

Around 30 years ago I stumbled upon a book, *Spanish still life in the Golden Age (1600-1650)*, and was immediately struck by the ageless quality, the directness of the image and the dramatic lighting. I am trying to infuse my own work with those same qualities using Australian flora, seasonal produce and a collection of rustic Spanish ceramics. I also exhibit in Perth and like to use Western Australian Native flowers when I can, with their unusual and spectacular blooms. I want my paintings to be as much about the old world as the new world and to be a window into my own life which is spent between both rural Australia and Spain.

www.philipdrummond.net

Eucalyptus macrocarpa and peaches, 2018, oil on canvas,
120 x 90 cm (illustrated)

Callistemon injune, 2018, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm

Eucalyptus summer red, 2018, oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm

Courtesy the artist and Maunsell Wickes Gallery Paddington



SARAH GOFFMAN

I am inspired by the essay *Plastic* by Roland Barthes. He discusses the phenomena of plastic and its ability to fool the eye into thinking it is something else. He observes its very substance is non-precious, but it can be transformed into something that appears valuable '*in essence the stuff of alchemy*' and '*the very idea of its infinite transformation*'. However, plastic's convenience comes at a huge cost for our planet as the waste is undeniable and it is yet another resource that we need to manage ethically. *Plastic Arts*, is part of a series of more than one hundred vases, dishes, bowls and porcelain works using PET plastics, enamel paint and permanent marker to painstakingly copy the designs from hundreds of priceless antiques found on the internet and in my travels. The conflation of status and cross-cultural patterning represents a past littered with the desire to covet and collect beautiful, aesthetically pleasing utensils.

Some of the pieces are replicas of the Mann Tatlow collection at Wollongong Art Gallery, made for my solo PHD show there in 2017, titled *I am a 3-D Printer*. This series of works came about as a result of my lifelong obsession with blue and white china. In *Plastic Arts* I have continued to focus on the dialogues created by the Silk Road, where eventually the blue willow pattern was devised. It was this design that I was first exposed to, and nurtured by.

The act of copying forces you to question how the original was achieved. In converting the PET plastics into another form, a one-off collectable, I create a paradigm between designated waste products and notions of wealth and collectability. I think that in converting PET plastics into covetable objects I am counteracting a minuscule portion of the excesses of the society in which we live.

Plastic Arts, 2009-2017, PET and other plastics, permanent marker, enamel paint, hot glue, size varied

Courtesy the artist





HARLEY IVES

Harley Ives takes the moving digital image into an art historical discourse. In post-production he manipulates the medium for painterly effects. This highlights the qualities unique to the medium: not photographic precision, sharpness, and clarity, but medium-specific errors, or process artefacts. In other words, Ives exploits the glitch characteristics of both analogue and digital processes for aesthetic effect. The analogue artefacts present include colour bleeding, image skewing and oversaturation. Ives meticulously layers these effects on screen as though they were oils from a palette.

Flower Still Life is a single channel video work presenting a flower still life reminiscent of a 17th century *vanitas* painting. It depicts a lengthy bouquet of flowers with a human skull nestled within the arrangement. Swaying gently with a ghostly slowness, these flowers continuously decay, not in real life, but in their moving image form. In correlation with the sound, waves of degeneration move about the composition smearing colours and distorting form. The sound for the piece is the recording of an orchestra tuning to 'A' layered on top of itself numerous times.

Julia Clements is a reworking of the 1976 book *Julia Clements' Flower Arrangements*. Every flower in the book has been digitally copied from its original arrangement and collaged into 12 new arrangements. In order to arrive at the digital distortion between the compositions, this work exploits a post-production method called *pixel motion* used for creating new frames in slowed down footage. As a result, colours are often matched, but shapes are distorted or lost entirely, resulting in the image constantly morphing from one figure to the next. (From text by Jaime Tsai)

Flower Still Life, 2015, moving image with sound, 2 min seamless loop (illustrated)

Julia Clements, 2016, moving image with sound, 2 min seamless loop

Courtesy the artist



NIGEL MILSOM

Nigel Milsom does not confine himself to one genre of painting and he is more interested in what challenges him. He has achieved success with portrait painting and won the Archibald Prize in 2015 and the Doug Moran portrait prize in 2013.

Milsom sees painting as a performative practice. He does not want people to like his work because it's skilful, he wants them to get something out of it, to feel something from looking at it.

Untitled (pot plant), 2011, oil on canvas, 170 x 130 cm
Courtesy private collection



MARGARET PRESTON (1875-1963)

Margaret Preston was a key figure in the development of modern art in Sydney from the 1920s to the 1950s. She is best known for her paintings and hand coloured woodcuts of local landscapes and native flora. In the 1920s she championed a distinctly Australian style with a strong emphasis on design and motifs of modernist, Aboriginal and Asian art.

Preston's floral still life subjects present Australian native flowers as equal in beauty to any exotic species.

Sturt's Desert Pea, 1925, hand coloured woodblock print, edition 6/50,
image: 18 x 24.5 cm

Flowers in Jug, c1929, hand coloured woodblock print on paper,
plate: 28 x 20 cm

Courtesy private collection



MARGARET OLLEY (1923-2011)

Margaret Olley painted still life almost exclusively. Many of her paintings feature arrangements of fruits and flowers, set amid the pottery, art and exotica of her travels. Olley has said that flowers were everything to her and she loved their vibrancy and colour, inspired by artists such as Bonnard, Vuillard and Gauguin.

Olley drew inspiration from her home and studio and the everyday objects she gathered around her. Her studio has been recreated in the Tweed Regional Gallery at Murwillumbah. It features original architectural elements such as windows and doors, relocated from her home studio at 48 Duxford Street, Paddington. The interiors are filled with more than 20,000 items collected over many years as subject matter for her paintings. In 1997 a major retrospective of her work was organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Calendulas in a basket, 1997, oil on board, 61 x 76 cm

Courtesy private collection



JUDE RAE

Something drives me to return time and again to the genre of still life. This often small, quiet category of painting has informed all my work from portraits to larger interiors as well as etching and video. The least rhetorical of the observation based modes, it can have a wordless eloquence that takes one back to the very condition of painting. Traditionally loaded up with allegory and religious symbolism, the trappings of status or domesticity, I prefer its other inclinations: to detail, to the overlooked, even the abject. Unlike other genres which lend themselves to expression and narrative, still life is a strange and largely mute mixture of the analytical and the sensual.

The still life studio functions as a laboratory of sorts; a space of stability where light can be controlled and objects considered in relation to one another in the context of the painting at hand. It is a limited environment opening onto a field of visual immediacy that feels anything but... In fact the familiarity of the studio is a welcome anchor as, with time and patience, vision itself emerges as evanescent, mobile. More than once it has been remarked by those who see my paintings as being very tranquil, that my work process must be similarly 'peaceful'. Quiet perhaps, but not peaceful. The way a painting looks does not necessarily reflect the affective and cognitive conditions of its making. I am reminded of Matisse's remark, made towards the end of his life when he was designing the serene chapel (Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence) in Vence: *'I've always worked like a drunken brute trying to kick a door down.'* I suspect that he was referring more to the rigours and downright persistence of his interior processes than to the physical nature of his practice. (from *In Plain Sight*, Jude Rae 2017)

SL385, 2018, oil on linen, 122.2 x 137.2 cm (illustrated)

SL380, 2018, oil on linen, 51.3 x 46.3 cm

Courtesy the artist

SL321, 2014, oil on linen, 41 x 45 cm

Courtesy private collection



ANTHONY SPRINGFORD

Anthony Springford's life and art are shaped by his fascination with the history of visual culture, and of intimate, domestic and bodily life. He is drawn to the texture and viscosity of old images or déclassé luxuries from the recycling bin of taste, and his paintings are like an uncool form of 'remix culture' (which has also been pretty uncool since the 1990s): He samples and rehashes techniques, ideas and styles that culture-at-large has chosen to forget. His work is intended to be funny. Alongside painting, Anthony has a PhD in Art History focusing on Baroque still life, aesthetics and social history.

www.anthony-springford.squarespace.com

Real spaces, 2017, oil on linen, 76 x 101 cm (illustrated)

Cow spine in studio, 2016, charcoal and pastel on paper, 67 x 101 cm

Giant black Spanish radishes, 2012, ink and pencil on paper, 56 x 76 cm

Lillet, tape, pinecone, marble, 2017, oil on linen, 76 x 610 cm

Courtesy the artist



ROBYN STACEY

Rouse and the Cumberland Plain is a large scale 'forest floor' tableau still life image that visually encapsulates the temporal changes to the land and the property over successive generations of one family. The two tree stumps from the property date back to the original tree felling of the Cumberland Plain. The background row of plants demonstrates the change to the vegetation and the right side of the image contains eucalyptus and native grasses that were endemic to the region. The native plants are replaced by those introduced by the Rouse family – some for commercial purposes, the oranges and grapes, others like ferns that were fashionable for decorating and for cooling throughout the home. From its inception, farming in the colony was approached as an industrial enterprise and the tools and implements in the photograph – modern scythes, water sprinklers, pest sprays, text books with formulas and chemical compounds reference this early manufacturing approach to farming in Australia.

Rouse and the Cumberland Plain, 2011, type C print,
print size 110 x 185 cm, edition 1 of 5 + 3 AP

Courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery



KEN + JULIA YONETANI

In 2010 Ken & Julia Yonetani completed a Synapse art-science residency awarded by the Australian Network for Art & Technology (ANAT) which resulted in a three-month collaboration on location in Mildura with scientists at the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre and Sunrise 21. Still life: The Food Bowl is the resulting body of work. It is made entirely from groundwater salt that as part of salt interception schemes has been pumped out of the ground around the Murray Darling in an effort to try and reduce salinity in the river system.

Murray River yabbies, 2011, Murray River salt, 33 cm diameter

Courtesy the artists and private collection





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