

## A Closer Look: The ineffable poetry of still life helps us see the artful in the ordinary

By Rosemary Carstens



Scott Fraser, Monkey Infemo IV  
Oil on Board | 43 x 24.75 inches | 2017

these paintings than one immediate blast of boldness or impression of subject matter. They require quiet contemplation — there's a story here, a mystery or an insight awaiting discovery, and it reshapes itself according to the viewer.

Five award-winning artists, whose shows often sell out, feel enlivened by the challenges of painting still lifes, with impressive results. William Acheff, Jenness Cortez, Scott Fraser, Kyle Polzin and Daniel Sprick shared recent works and discuss what motivates them.

Monkeys, matches and moccasins; books, bowls and bones; spurs, sharks and warriors. Glimmers of bright fall color on glassware, a feather's delicate texture, the worn glow on a well-ridden saddle or a celebrity's iconic guitar. These things and more are portrayed in contemporary still life paintings as artists find resonant beauty among limitless choices.

The still life tradition, a realistic painting or drawing of a posed scene of inanimate subject matter, came into being in the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly in the Netherlands. Dutch and Flemish masters often included arranged displays of shells, books, skulls, flowers, insects and at times even dead animals such as game birds. Displays of food were common and richly portrayed by artists such as Pieter Claesz [1596/97–1660], one of the most famous Dutch still life painters of the era. His Still Life with a Fish (1647) reveals his mastery and is at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. So-called "vanitas" still lifes were also popular at the time and contained references to the transience of life and the material world, as in Adriaen van Utrecht's Vanitas Still-Life with a Bouquet and a Skull (1642), which is rife with symbolism, while other popular interpretations contained didactic, moralistic elements.

Today, still life artists roam far afield from long-ago traditions and bring fresh ideas, humor and creative storytelling to the genre. One thing remains characteristic: Each painting strives for realistic, keenly observed portrayals of its subject matter and each gives the art lover a great deal to think about and discover over time.

Still life paintings invite us to step closer, to see as the artist does — the tiniest reflection, the minute gradations in color as light upon an object changes to shadow or is affected by adjacent hues, the barely visible alterations in the rim of a hand-thrown pot. There is much more to

## SCOTT FRASER

Thirty years ago, a young Scott Fraser returned from a year in Europe with his mind filled with work by Old Masters and contemporary artists he'd viewed while there. He set his sights on becoming equally skilled. Today he is highly regarded across the nation for his intensely realistic and imaginative still life paintings. "For me," says Fraser, when asked what comprises a successful still life, "it could be its narrative quality, the handling of the paint or use of color, or the artist's powerful composition." In his own work, he strives for strong relationships between objects and theme, drawing on humor, color, nuance, art history and family references. *Monkey Inferno IV* exemplifies how Fraser combines personal and intellectual processes in the development of a painting. When his children were young, he built a tramway out of clotheslines and pulleys and made a little gondola out of string and a sardine can for them to transport small toys (and sometimes the pet mouse) back and forth. A little raft from those times, like the one depicted in this painting, still hangs from a plant in his studio. Fraser decided to incorporate them into his *Monkey Inferno* series. The artist explains: "It's true I am channeling some old Warner Brothers cartoons, but there is also a historic reference. Seventeenth-century Spanish realist Juan Sánchez Cotán created still lifes in framed dark niches, which were my inspiration for the shadow box here. The curve achieved by the piled up matches is reminiscent of a catenary arch such as Cotán might have painted. There is a strong visual tension between the jumble of match sticks, the surprised duck and the wayward monkeys with their elaborate rigging — the lit match is crucial both to the narrative and the composition." This piece contains more than 1,000 individually painted matches — no small challenge for Fraser, who works always from life. For extremely detailed passages, he uses a magnifying glass on both the object and his painting. As he tells it, "Things like bugs on crackers are a killer!"

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