

# G STILL LIFE PAINTINGS

THE ACTORS on the still life world stage are pieces of cutlery, fruits, vegetables, flowers, pottery and wrinkled tablecloths. The roles they play give voice to dramas ranging from the aftermath of hunting forays as in works by William Harnett, scrupulously arranged eggs and white bottles à la Giorgio Morandi, classical flowers, crockery and fruit in paintings by David Leffel, family memorabilia and kitchen detritus in oils by John Rise to plastics, bubble-wrap and fruit in pastels by Robert Peterson. Still life vividly painted in verdant hues and brimming with visual poetics, occupies a vaunted niche that transcends its humble beginnings.

Still life, once the nearly exclusive province of women painters, has become an important endeavor for artists of both genders.

Feminist pioneer Georgia O'Keeffe literally launched still life into the heavens with her monumentally scaled and sky-filled flower and bone murals that were so large that they became abstractions.

"By painting them big . . . I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers . . . when I started painting the pelvic bones I was most interested in the holes and what I saw through them—particularly the blue from holding them up in the sun against the sky . . ." O'Keeffe wrote in the catalogue for her 1939 "An American Place" solo exhibition in New York.

Taos painter David A. Leffel chose still life early in his career that now includes portraits, figures and an occasional landscape.

"The central attraction for me in the beginning of my painting life was the lack of model fees and the fact that you can only paint so many self-portraits. With still life you just go out and buy some fruit, pick up some vases or hard objects relatively easily. Also I just had a natural feeling towards it compositionally," Leffel said recently. "Still life gave me a lot of

insights into all other aspects of painting as well. When you work with a model you're sharing your space with another person. When you work on still life you are completely alone which becomes a much more meditative experience."

Leffel is trying to create movement, portray abstract qualities like light, the play of edges, and variations on compositional structure while remaining true to the overall shapes of what he is seeing.

"I try to establish a strong connection with what I'm painting. There is a relationship between seeing what you are painting without preconceptions and the physical act of picking up paint with your brush. Once you are comfortable at manipulating paint the fear of making a mistake fades away and you are able to concentrate on seeing what is actually in front of you without illusions," Leffel said.

Leffel was born in New York in 1931. He studied at the Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League in New York where he taught for 20 years. Leffel moved to Taos in 1992 where he continues to paint and teach.

John Rise of Albuquerque earned a master of arts in printmaking before founding a company that built easels, stretchers and other artist materials. Following the sale of his business Rise devoted full time to painting and recently earned his master's of fine arts degree in painting at the University of New Mexico.

"While I was in business still life was the only kind of painting I could work on for an hour or so and come back to a week later," Rise said. "My interest in still life was born while I was working on my masters in printmaking. I was a detective novel buff and read all of Raymond Chandler's works as well as other writers." Rise then incorporated the tools of the fictional detective trade into still life arrangements.



DAVID A. LEFFEL "SILK BROCADE WITH ROSE" OIL 14" x 16"  
SHOWING AT TOTAL ARTS GALLERY · TAOS  
NEDRA MATTEUCCI GALLERIES · SANTA FE

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"Those early still life paintings became my best means of expression and the focus of what my art was about. I was inspired by Max Beckman's self-portraits that were a perfect source for gangster and detective faces but my favorite painters were Rembrandt and Velasquez," Rise said.

During his business career Rise spent many hours in museums studying paintings. His interest in the detailed reality in Velasquez' paintings led Rise to study the trompe-l'oeil paintings of the 1890s.

"My studies led me to consider the differences between masculine and feminine space as well as the masculine and feminine objects that one finds in a composition," Rise said.

For his thesis Rise painted a series of vertical compositions based on the invasion of his bachelor kitchen by his new wife. The vertical structure of these realistically painted images allowed Rise to use multiple vanishing points in his compositions.

"When you compose vertically you have to build in certain distortions of space to make the painting appear to be correct when viewed from a distance. I discovered that I had to divide the picture plane into thirds and have separate vanishing points for each section," Rise said.

Rise uses memories of his late father, tarot cards, books, paint-cans, maps and other fragments of reality to tell personal stories.

Serenity, order and solitude are the hallmarks of master pastel artist **Robert Peterson's** works on paper. His uncompromising

vision turns still life into a strong counterpoint for the world's strife and chaos. Peterson was born in Elmhurst, Illinois in 1943 and now lives in Albuquerque in the silent world of deafness. Peterson said that silence is part of what he works with but gets tired of reading about how people can "see" the silence in his paintings.



ROBERT PETERSON "LEMONS IN PLASTIC BAG" PASTEL 31.5" X 47.25"  
SHOWING AT THE MUNSON GALLERY · SANTA FE



JOHN RISE "BALL JAR" OIL ON PANEL 12" X 16"  
SHOWING AT VENTANA FINE ART · SANTA FE

"Though I began my career painting landscapes I drifted into still life and it became the focus of my work. When I paint I see the image as being as real as the object. I know that my image is an illusion but I think of it as

being real . . . I don't have a final answer that would explain the connection between life and art. I am reminded of what Robert Rauschenberg said about the need to connect life and art. But I don't use mattresses, springs or angora goats with tires around them like he did. I use industrial materials like plastics and bubble wrap because they are transparent forms against the more tangible fruits and vegetables," Peterson said.

The power in Peterson's vision comes from its stark beauty and its ability to convince the viewer of its reality. Peterson is successful in bridging reality and illusion while blurring the distinction between them.

The still life stage is set and the players have found their places while the curtain rises. Let the drama begin.