NATURE MORTE

Contemporary Still Life

Guildhall Art Gallery
7 Sep 2017 – 2 Apr 2018
cityoflondon.gov.uk/naturemorte
CONFRONT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN.

Explore the transience of time and the challenges of mortality as the 16th-century tradition of still life meets modern art. Featuring 100 works by major international contemporary artists - including Michael Craig-Martin, Polly Morgan and Gabriel Orozco, as well as London-based artists - this exhibition goes beyond the two-dimensional and invites you to pause and look anew at the human condition.

cityoflondon.gov.uk/naturemorte

Events:
Late Night View with music and bar: 16 Feb
Curator Talks: 14 Sep, 12 Oct, 16 Nov, 14 Dec, 11 Jan, 8 Feb, 22 Mar; 1pm-1.45pm FREE
Please visit website for further events and full details, including how to book

Admission
£8, concessions £6

Opening
Mon-Sat 10am-5pm; Sun 12noon-4pm

Getting there
Guildhall Art Gallery, Guildhall Yard
London EC2V 5AE

Moorgate, Bank, Mansion House and St Paul’s
Cannon Street, Moorgate, Liverpool Street,
City Thameslink & Blackfriars

Find out more about travel in London by visiting the Transport for London website tfl.gov.uk/plan-a-journey

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Putting the thrill into still-life

A dying genre is reanimated in this rich and audacious exhibition, says Rachel Campbell-Johnston

In English we call it still life. In French they say nature morte. Translated literally that means “dead nature.” And it is no accident. It emerges, that the curator Michael Petry chose to use the French title for his new Guildhall Art Gallery show. Contemporary audiences, their responses too often blunted by the brush and the brush, can easily dismiss the still life as dull and outdated. The prospect of looking at flower arrangements and still-life fish hardly sounds enticing. Yet, although you will find both in this Guildhall exhibition, you will also discover plenty that’s rather less predictable: a sparrowing confection of gemstone and gold; a still-life created from a ground-down finger bone; a sickening close-up of freshly washed entrails; a stuffed rabbit with hair rollers curling its ears.

This show translates a traditional genre into contemporary language. It sets out to reinvigorate a once-popular tradition, to make it look not just fresh again, but feel politically, socially and, most saliently, philosophically relevant.

The still life first came into its own in the mid-17th century. It was then that Netherlandish artists began to paint their silence paintings of objects that, instead of being treated as mere props in some more salient drama, were treated as main players. You can see this in a number of otherwise fairly unremarkable paintings that, drawn from the Guildhall’s collection of Dutch golden age paintings, now go on show.

Pieter Claesz shows us a dinner to be swilled down with a tankard of ale. Whatever the subject, the curators of this show suggest, the term “still life” cannot do justice. These are, quintessentially, allegorical images. They are freighted with messages about life, its meanings, its morals and, most saliently, its fundamental brevity. They are, basically, the curators argue, all about death, but it was left to the French, in the 19th century, to coin the name that best conveys up this darkly brooding symbolism.

A newly restored 18th-century painting, on show for the first time, makes the point clear. It is not particularly riveting. There are books in the foreground, at the back a candlestick. And before conservation a pot and paintbrush, which had been added two centuries later. Now, removed by restorers, they reveal a human skull beneath. This canvas, like so many works of its genre, was intended to function as a “vanitas.” The name. Latin for “emptiness,” alludes to the transience of human existence and warns of the worthlessness of all our earthly goods. It is this presence of death that gives this picture its gravitas.

Nature Mort is a touring exhibition, designed to accompany the lavishly illustrated book that Petry published a few years ago. It has already been in a number of international venues. This is the only chance to see it in the UK. Its fundamental argument is that these images of frequently mundane objects have been adapted over centuries. A tradition that can be traced back at least as far as ancient Egyptian tomb paintings is reinvigorated by contemporary artists for our modern age. This show presents anything from textiles to taxidermy, digital projections to a skull made from the dead. The result is a collection of images, each with its own imaginary range of work, but death, it emerges, is the most treasured prize. In this case, it is the crown.


...and a Cello, 2002, painted by Michael Craig-Martin.

Painted candles or Damien Hirst’s diamond skull. But don’t be dismayed. This is an intellectually vivid (despite the banal text panels) and visually striking show. It intersperses its handsome of delicately uninspiring but perfectly illustrated paintings with a vibrant array of modern pieces in a broad range of media.

Dipped into sections, the hang focuses on such subjects as the depictions of food or domestic accoutrements, the works of animals or the allegories of flowers. Yet the range of approaches is suitably wide. Several artists refer directly to their Dutch predecessors. Maciej Urbaniak details an exquisite still-life with a stack of small, fractured oranges on an aging waiter’s skin. Alexander James photographs underwater still lifes. But for John Kiefer it is enough just to spell out “Dead Roses” in rusted steel capitals. The flowers, he suggests, would decay into a memory as stark as this.

Bertholdi Bell photographs a dead rat as part of a series that documents political crisis in contemporary Greece. Bill Jacobson’s blurry pictures are about the AIDS pandemic. Images in this show, it emerges, can allow to pretty much anything from mental illness through street death squads to threats to our biolosophy — although I only anyone to guess that James Hart Dyke’s painting of a rubber duck is about secret intelligence without reading the label.

At times the show is rather too all-encompasing. Does Guilliano Paris’s digital animation starring Patricia crouched up by a whale really count as a still life?

Then again, one of the points of this exhibition is to provide us an opportunity to reconsider the art-historical genre it deals with. Contemporary artists have tried to reinterpret the standard still life painting and carry them into new territories. The result is a collection of images, each with its own imaginary range of work, but death, it emerges, is the most treasured prize. In this case, it is the crown.
Five of the best

1 Basquiat
Jean-Michel Basquiat replaced the jazz improvisations of Jackson Pollock with scrawled, death-haunted messages from the street. This raw style made him a sensation in 1980s New York. His death in 1988 at the age of just 27 only intensified that reputation. Now, with the US plunged into political and social disunion, Basquiat looks like a prophet of the country’s woes. He also looks like a remarkable painter who showed how youth and rebellion can electrify art.

Barbican Art Gallery, EC2, Thu to 28 Jan

2 Degas
“Impressionist” is a woefully inadequate description of this artist of obsessive voyeurism, almost frightening observational power, and erotic imagination. Degas lived in a solitary world of his own while moving endlessly through the public spaces of Paris, from the ballet to race tracks and circuses. His studies of women sublimate sexual fascination into images of strange poetic intensity.

The National Gallery, WC2, Wed to 7 May

3 Martin Boyce
The reality of modern cities is potently recreated by this 2011 Turner prize-winning Glasgow artist in works that seem abstract yet are full of poignant associations. His installations are like frozen playgrounds where something terrible has happened and the swings are off-limits. He creates melancholic sculptural prisons from decaying public spaces, brutalist shopping centres and dreary parks.

The Modern Institute, Glasgow, Mon to 4 Nov

4 Arte Povera
For once, the Estorick Collection abandons its obsession with minor futurists and puts on an exhibition that actually matters. The 1960s Italian group Arte Povera was the first art movement to confront environmental crisis. At a time of dramatic urbanisation and economic growth in Italy, artists such as Mario Merz chose natural materials over the plastic world of pop. Here their influence on British artists from Richard Long to Gavin Turk is mapped.

The Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, N1, Wed to 17 Dec

5 Nature Morte
Mat Collishaw and Gabriel Orozco are among the contemporary artists revisiting the still life tradition here. Ever since eye-fooling bowls of fruit were included in ancient Roman frescoes, the still life’s frozen perfection has represented both life and death. It lends itself remarkably well to conceptual reinventions, including Collishaw’s eerie reconstructions of last meals on Death Row.

Guildhall Art Gallery, EC2, to 2 Apr

Jonathan Jones
Dead symbolic: art of the still life, then and now

Modern works meet old masters in a new exhibition about beauty and decay

Maev Kennedy

Death is everywhere among the roses in an initially charmingly pretty but increasingly disconcerting exhibition, the first at Guildhall Art Gallery devoted to still life art: the lovely flowers are there, but so are bloody hunks of raw meat, a bullet fashioned from human bone, and a cobwebby skull made from dust.

"It’s death," its curator, Michael Petry, said cheerfully. "It’s always been all about death. In the 17th century you looked at a vase of luscious blooms and everyone immediately got the message: this is the peak of perfection and beauty, it’s all downhill from here. That’s the element that is really hooking in contemporary artists."

Change and decay is a very practical issue with the skull made from a duster and glued household dust by the artist Paul Hazzleton, entitled Fright Wig. "It is a conservation nightmare," said the Guildhall’s curator, Katherine Pearce, watching nervously for any falling dust.

"And of course most of household dust is actually made up of human skin," Petry added, "so the circle is complete."

Darren Jones’s A Time and a Place is also cause for anxiety, a collection of objects perilously balanced on a small glass shelf, representing a rollicking weekend in the gay bars and clubs of Fire Island off New York, including ferry tickets, mouthwash, lubricant, whisky, paracetamol - and a tape measure.

The exhibition, which opens at Guildhall in London on 7 September, brings together contemporary works, including pieces by Michael Craig Martin, Marc Quinn and Matt Collishaw chosen by Petry, an artist and author, and his co-curator, the artist and dancer Roberto Echolom, and old master still lifes from the stores of the City of London.

Death is explicit in many of the contemporary pieces. Collishaw’s work resembles a 17th century Dutch still life, food piled against a dark background; it actually represents the last meal chosen by a real death row prisoner, Juan Soria, before his execution for murder in Texas.

Petry, who has just published a book on still lifes, wants visitors to look more carefully for what artists are really saying - the exhibition is called nature morte, literally "dead nature" in French.

"We are more aware of death than ever now," he said. "A generation of young artists has grown up in the last two decades in the shadow of endless killing, nonstop war in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq - and now we have two madmen with their fingers on the nuclear button."

Visitors may pass three glass vases at the entrance without realising they are the first exhibit, Petry’s work. The colours of the vases and flowers relate to the gay code of coloured handkerchiefs to indicate sexual preference; the shapes have even more intimate meaning. "It will all be explained," Pearce said, "this isn’t an exhibition where we’re shying away from anything edgy."

Nature Morte, Guildhall Art Gallery, 7 September 2017 to 30 April 2018

Women widen lead over men in college places

Press Association

The proportion of young women due to start university this autumn is more than a third greater than that of young men, new figures show, as the gap between the sexes reaches record levels.

About 30,000 more women than men are due to start degree courses this autumn, according to data from the university admissions service (Ucas).

Ucas found that about 6,500 fewer students have been placed on courses this year, compared with the same point last year. By Friday morning, 133,280 18-year-old women in the UK had secured a university place, compared with 103,800 UK men of this age. This gap is the largest difference recorded at this point in the admissions cycle, Ucas said.

Its analysis shows that across the UK, 27.3% of young men are expected to go to university this year, compared with 37.8% of young women.

Ucas suggests that one factor contributing to the gender difference is nursing, with a 9% increase in UK 18-year-olds placed on nursing courses this year. Women significantly outnumber men for these degrees, with about 28 women recruited for every man. Previous figures have shown an overall drop in nursing applications and acceptances this year, driven by falling older students.

Dr Mark Corver, Ucas’s director of analysis and research, said: "More UK 18-year-olds will be starting university this autumn than ever before but large differences in who goes remain."

In the meantime, 482,510 students had secured a university place, down about 1.4% on the same point last year, but higher than any other year at this point.

About 46,500 students have found places through clearing, the largest number placed through the annual process at this point, Ucas said.

‘The Guardian, A matter of still life and death in Guildhall Art Gallery exhibition, Maev Kennedy, 28 August 2017

What the critics would pay to see

**dance**

5 Soldiers
Drill Hall,
London
Debra Craine.
page 21

**film**

Una
On general release
Kevin Macdon page 20

**visual art**

Nature Morte
Guildhall Art
Gallery, London
Rachel Campbell-
Johnston, page 21

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**Exhibitions Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

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**Top pick**

Nature Morte
The still-life tradition
meets contemporary art
in a striking show of flora,
fauna and food that
invites you to contemplate
transience and mortality.
Guildhall Art Gallery,
London EC2 (020 7332
3700), Thur-April 2

Folkestone Triennial
A seaside town comes
alive with creative activity
involving paintings and
sculptures, symposiums
and events. Folkestone,
Kent, to Nov 5

Balenciaga: Shaping
Fashion
The designs and the
legacy of the great
Spanish couturier are put
on show in an exhibition
of more than 100 pieces
crafted by him and his
many protégés and
SW1 (020 7942 2000), to

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The Times, Saturday Review, What the critics would pay to see, Rachel Campell-Johnston,
2 September 2017, p. 3
EXHIBITIONS

Nature morte
Basically translated as 'still life' in French, these 100 works on display are a very mixed bag with something for most of you with an interest in art, forming sculpture, digital and more. Until April 2, 2018, Guildhall, London, cityoflondon.gov.uk

Parallel (of life and) architecture
The Smithsons were among the most influential British architects of the 20th century and now Bath, where they designed parts of the university, honours them in this show. Until Nov 4, The Edge, Bath, edgearts.org

When we were young
Portraits of children since the birth of photography itself, including Roger Mayne (above) in a round-up of pictures from the permanent collection. From October 14, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, nationalgalleries.org

SIMON GAGE
Exploding Flowers, Skulls, Life And Death At Guildhall

Nature Morte, Guildhall Art Gallery ★★★☆☆

BY TABISH KHAN

Flowers explode, skulls stand up on long tentacles protruding from where the jaw should be, and cutesy ceramic figurines bully one another. This is still life, but not as we know it.

This exhibition brings together classical paintings and contemporary works, so that art from the 16th and 21st centuries hang side by side.

We get familiar Vanitas paintings with black backgrounds featuring skulls, flowers and fruit to remind us that life is fleeting. Artist Alexander James replicates the look and feel of a Vanitas painting with underwater photography using live butterflies and flowers, while Ori Gersht literally blows apart the genre by placing explosives within a freeze dried bouquet of flowers and recording the hypnotic carnage in slow motion.
household dust and Nancy Fouts takes her still life into three dimensions with dead butterflies stuck on to the canvas.

Among the historical artworks from the Guildhall Art Gallery's own collection, this is the perfect setting for this meeting of old and new works, with John Singleton Copley's enormous battle scene looming over all of them.

![Image](Image)

It's not all flowers and skulls — other traditional mediums are covered too. Richard Stone has crafted a poised boxer out of marble, and Barnaby Barford uses cutesy ceramic figurines to act out a vicious bullying scene where one boy is being kicked on the floor, the whole thing being recorded on a phone.

A sense of humour is present in Darren Jones' shelf full of everyday items, including a pack of tissues and some mouthwash. It's almost as if somebody accidentally left them behind in the gallery. The diversity of art on display is impressive, with over 100 works covering all aspects of life and death.

This show is a thumb in the eye for those who trot out the old argument that contemporary art doesn't require any talent and is too far removed from classical art, as this show is full of talented painters, photographers and sculptors who have built upon the Old Masters that came before them.

_Nature Morte at Guildhall Art Gallery, EC2V 5AE from 7 September to 2 April. Full price tickets are £8._

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Londonist, 4 star review, Tabish Khan, 6 September 2017

What to see this week

Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia is at the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery, British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1, from September 14 to January 14, 2018 (020–7323 8181; www.britishmuseum.org) Archaeological finds excavated from burial mounds that had been preserved in the permafrost of the Altai mountains for more than 2,500 years reveal the life of these fearsome nomadic horsemens, who roamed the vast landscape that stretches from Russia to China and the Black Sea. Organised with the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, the exhibition includes multicoloured textiles, fur-lined garments, weapons, gold jewellery, objects reflecting the warriors’ love of horses (right: a gold belt plaque of a funerary scene), tattooed human remains and even some 2,000-year-old hunks of cheese.

It highlights the cultural exchanges that took place between the Scythians and their ‘civilised’ Greek, Assyrian and Persian neighbours and adversaries, and concludes with a section on life in the region in the first centuries AD, after the Scythians had disappeared.

Nature Morte is at the Guildhall Art Gallery, Guildhall Yard, London EC2, from September 7 to April 2, 2018 (020–7332 3700; http://cityoflondon.gov.uk/guildhallartgallery) This exhibition puts a modern spin on the art of the still-life, which is so often associated with paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries. Now at the final stage of an acclaimed European tour, it explores how the genre has been interpreted by contemporary artists, with more than 100 pieces in different disciplines by such leading names as Mat Collishaw, Michael Craig-Martin, Gabriel Orozco, Clare Twomey and Marc Quinn.

Barbara Brown is at The Whitworth, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester until January 2018 (0161–275 7450; www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk) Barbara Brown was the golden girl of Heal Fabrics in the 1960s and early 1970s. Talent-spotted as a student, her designs for furnishing fabrics are some of the most striking and unusual ever produced in the 20th century and won awards from the Council of Industrial Design. Abstract plant forms and geometric shapes move to Brutalist machine-age patterns and vibrant designs inspired by West African weaving.

Seurat to Riley: The Art of Perception is at Compton Verney, Warwickshire until October 1 (01926 645500; www.comptonverney.org.uk) Through paintings, sculptures, light works, prints and drawings, this show explores how artists have used colour science to create optical effects. From Pointillist dabbings that heralded Modernism to the giddy illusions of Op Art, we see how Seurat, Josef Albers, M. C. Escher, Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley, Daniel Buren, Liz West and others have exploited the ways in which we perceive what we see.
A brush with death

26 JANUARY 2018

Jonathan Evens is confronted by what it means to be human at Guildhall Art Gallery

CAN an exhibition change our understanding of what it means to be human? “Nature Morte” is an exhibition that essentially makes that claim, as it invites us to pause and look anew at the human condition.

The exhibition explores the changing significance of the still life (or nature morte in French) by bringing together historic still-life paintings and contemporary artworks that illustrate how leading 21st-century artists (including Mat Collishaw, Michael Craig-Martin, Polly Morgan, and Gabriel Orozco) have reinvigorated the still life by using the language of the past to explore modern concerns.

“Nature Morte” can make the claim that still life is life-changing because the genre has never involved the innocent depiction of everyday objects, but has always utilised coded images.

For much of the history of the still-life, it has been Christian codes that viewers have been required to decipher — whether the use by Giotto and his contemporaries of the secret language of symbols developed by the persecuted Early Church or the evolution of still life as memento mori and vanitas.

Still-life painting has oscillated between imagery emphasising live objects that are depicted in stasis and those that depict dead matter, the literal meaning of nature morte. The vanitas still life, for example, paired symbols of the joys of a life well lived with symbols of death.

The still-life as a genre came into its own in the mid-17th century when oil paintings characterised by their tight focus on an assortment of objects sitting on a flat surface were used to explore the transience of time and the challenges of mortality.
Among the historic still-lifes featured in this exhibition are works by Henri Fantin-Latour, Pieter Claesz, Floris van Schooten, Willem Kalf, Thomas Sidney Cooper, Arthur Paine Garratt, Vera Cunningham, George Walter Harris, and Pieter van de Venne.

The exhibition is structured in terms of five topics: flora, fauna, food, house and home, and death. Christian symbolism is shown to have featured strongly within the iconography characterising each of these five foci.

As the exhibition amply demonstrates, 21st-century artists working with these themes and within this genre continue to engage with these symbols and this tradition. This is particularly apparent among those images that deal directly with death, where the skull beneath the skin and the flickering or extinguished candle are particularly prevalent.

Carolina McCarthy forms a Vanitas with skull and extinguished candle by punching thousands of tiny holes in a black bin bag and thereby utilising a container for our everyday waste to sign the sense of waste which death brings to life.

With Black Kites, Gabriel Orozco gives us a skull on which he has drawn a grid of graphite squares. What once was live, grimacing, articulating flesh and bone and spirit, united in movement and communication, is now static decorated display: the animate now so inanimate that it can be decorated as an object.

Cast-off human skin in the form of dust has been accumulated by Paul Hazelton for Fright Wig, a fragile skull that resembles iconic images of Andy Warhol, and which hangs precariously like Dre Head on the Knight Bus in the Harry Potter films.

Most chillingly of all, for Untitled (Bullet), Dermot O’Brien gave that artist Mark Woods a real human finger bone to shape and cast as a rifle bullet — thus the bullet that reduces beings to bare bones is formed from the finger that pulls the trigger.

A skull sculpture by Jim Skull provides the iconic image used to publicise the exhibition, and yet his beautifully intricate papier-mâché and string constructions, unlike much of the work shown here, seek to transcend death and draw inspiration from ancient tribal rituals in doing so.

Like the Hazelton image, popular culture also intrudes here, with visual resonances of Davy Jones in the Pirates of the Caribbean films.

A brush with death can be a salutary experience. Just as the taboo conversational topics of sex, death, and religion (all found in spades here) are actually the most significant and interesting of all; so a visit to “Nature Morte” will cause you to confront what it means to be human.