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STILL-LIFE PAINTINGS

Janet Rickus paints the objects that are connected to our daily lives

By Lauren Levato Coyne, Eagle correspondent

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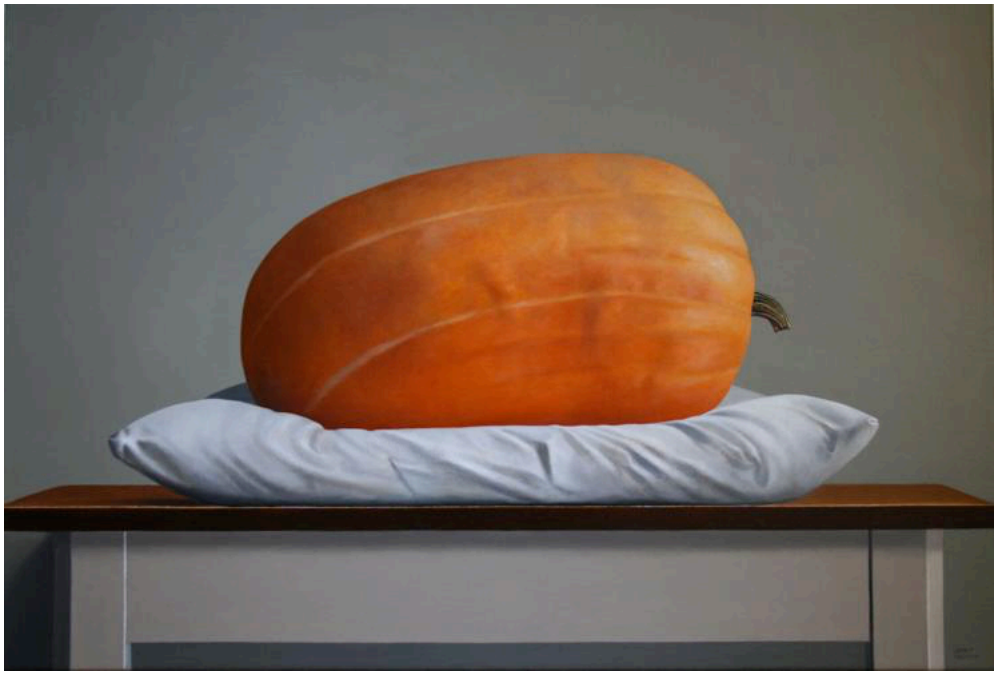
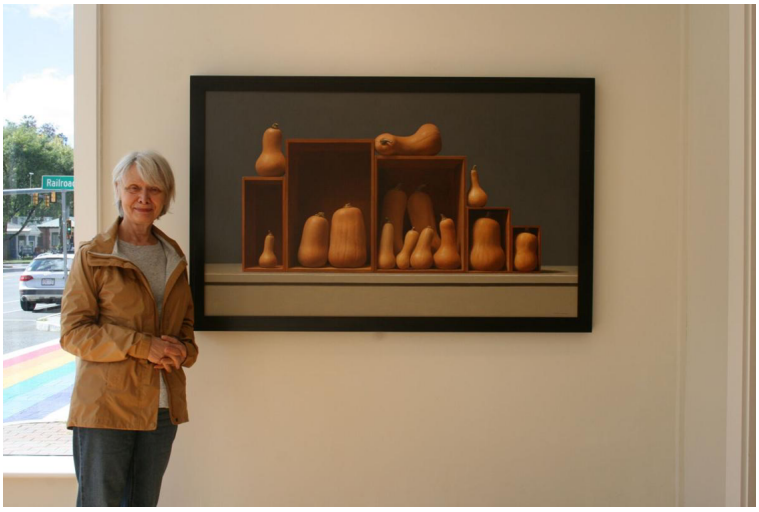


"At Rest," oil on canvas, by artist Janet Rickus.
IMAGE PROVIDED BY JANET RICKUS

GREAT BARRINGTON — The earliest recorded still life paintings date back more than two millennia and are referred to as Xenia, a Greek word meaning a specific kind of generous hospitality extended toward houseguests.



Still-life painter Janet Rickus next to one of her oil paintings at Bernay Fine Art in Great Barrington.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BERNAY FINE ARTS

Historians of the still life genre, such as Norman Bryson in his book "Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting" are quick to point out that the Xenia, though recognizable to our contemporary eyes as a still life, is a proto-version of the genre. For the ancient Greeks and Romans the Xenia was an extension of this hospitality and operated as both a promise and record of the culinary bounty provided by a host to their guest.

In these thousands of years since, what began as a type of ancient vision board for a grazing table — overflowing honeycombs, juicy figs, piles of apples, nearly a dozen geese and hares so fresh they were still alive in the painting — has shifted meaning and importance many times. Culturally, the still life genre has been used to explore everything from Bacchanalian revelry to austere reminders of religious and moral conduct. They have served as grand pronouncements of wealth and also stunning reminders of our mortality. The Clark Art Institute has many examples of the genre from "Peonies" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir to Giorgio Morandi's "Still Life with Bottle ."

In the art world's pecking-order, the genre has often been demeaned as the lowest form of painting due to its very nature — looking at the quotidian and the commonplace instead of depicting valiant heroes in epic struggles or the nobility of saints, martyrs, and royals. How can a fish head on a patterned platter compare to Napoleon on his steed? The meaning and purpose of art is constantly in flux; in our specific contemporary condition a better question might be, is still life painting a radical act?

Statistics abound about our shrinking attention spans as our work and personal lives become increasingly interrupted by the beeps and dings of our devices. One study found that since 2004 our attention span for digital content fell from 2.5 minutes to approximately 47 seconds while our time spent on smartphones has increased to 4.5 hours, nearly one-third of our waking day. Still life painters stand in great contrast to these realities, employing extreme focus for several hours a day across weeks at a time staring at a single grouping of non-digital things (though paintings of defunct digital things has now risen to its own contemporary sub-genre).

For about three weeks per medium-sized painting, artist Janet Rickus looks at squash, lemons, or a carefully selected group of ceramic crockery. Painters

(myself included) often bristle at the discussion about the time invested in a painting because it's the one of the least accurate measures of a painter's skill or a painting's value.

"Lime Line," oil on canvas by Janet Rickus.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BERNAY FINE ART

Some paintings come together very quickly while others can have great stretches of inactivity before they are finished, if they are ever finished at all. Other paintings are abandoned out of boredom, aggravation, or any number of life's interruptions. But still life paintings are fundamentally about the stopping of time, freezing a moment, and taking a long deep gaze at our lives as we live them. Since the 1600s, the still life, Bryson says, has also been about examining the "problem of massive oversupply" of industry and consumer culture. What does one mass-produced ceramic bowl matter in an ever-growing supply of small, cheap mass-produced bowls, all destined for resale shops and rummage sales or worse, the landfill?

This is why the time a still-life painting takes matters deeply, and where the long looking and slow practice of still life painting offers context — dare I say balm? — to our contemporary conundrum of things and digital devices.

In her oil painting "At Rest" (2013), Rickus painted a longish orange pumpkin placed on a pillow with a stark white pillowcase. It is tender, this winter squash resting on a bright white cushion made exclusively for a human head. The textures of folds and creases both complement and contrast each other. Pumpkins and pillows can each be cheaply acquired, but the long-term economies are much different. In the language of still life paintings, the pumpkin is a reminder of the impermanence of organic, living things while the pillow is a reminder of how long our man-made synthetic blends take to break down (the average polyester fiber-fill pillow takes up to 200 years).

In "Made in Mexico" (2016), Rickus depicts a terra cotta ceramic pitcher paired with three butternut squash and a bosc pear. The painting's palette reflects the rusty-oranges and burnt-reds of the American Southwest and the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts in Mexico. Again, more reminders of what will endure and what will fade. As certain regions become more arid these colors will spread across landscapes where they don't currently exist, red rocks overtaking green trees and ochre fields.

"Made in Mexico" is an oil on canvas by still-life painter Janet Rickus.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BERNAY FINE ART

Rickus paints the objects that are connected to our daily lives, unintentional proxies for the relationships and intimacies connected to our human bodies. But looking at her work as a whole, color is the primary subject. Our lives might be full of stuff and things that make up the picture plane of a still life, but the most masterful of these paintings are about the mood they create.

Tonal palettes soothe, their sameness creating a soft space of contemplation. Bright blues and greens energize and feel active, even in their stillness. The generic floral or checkerboard patterning of mass produced, or even handmade, objects becomes personal for the viewer when nested in with the internationally familiar texture of a lime, the specific worn patina and gentle chips of an old ceramic pitcher, a reminder of the ways our things and objects continue to tell our stories across generations. In this way, Rickus is not only a master of the genre but a master of time as well.

Rickus is represented by Bernay Fine Art in Great Barrington. Her work also can be viewed on artsy.net.

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