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Life Still: A Sequence of Paintings

Reimagining Dutch Golden Age Still Life

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UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

Life Still:

a sequence of paintings reimagining

Dutch Golden Age Still Life

by

CHRISTOPHER COOK

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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At no time during the registration for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

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Abstract

This research project refers to a sequence of forty-nine monochrome paintings, made between 2016 and 2020, which took as starting point Dutch 17th century still life painting. The works use an idiosyncratic graphite medium to interpret, appropriate and reposition the genre, resulting in a sequence of common focus. The sequence is illustrated in full, and is accompanied by a chronology of individual works presented in the public domain. The reflective essay studies the progress of the sequence from early experimental beginnings to later works made in full awareness of their theoretical contexts. A background to the making process considers the use of monochrome and improvisation, and charts the shift to appropriation methods which extend to include modern, anachronistic elements. Dutch 17th century painting is assessed, along with examples of contemporary adaptations, and texts such as Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked* inform the interplay of theory and practice. Specific circumstances of making are revisited to reflect on the impact of external factors, such as residencies and exhibitions, including the radical curatorial format at York Art Gallery, in which works from the sequence were interspersed with Dutch still lifes, and new works were commissioned. The conclusion considers confluences in the sequence and assesses its contributions to new knowledge.

Introduction

In his renowned text *Looking at the Overlooked*, critic Norman Bryson re-examines the still life genre in painting, arguing for its rehabilitation into mainstream art history. A central pillar of his argument concentrates on what he views as the zenith of still life painting in mid 17th century Holland, the Dutch Golden Age, which he sees as “a dialogue between this newly affluent society and its material possessions.”

This reflective text reports on forty-nine works painted between June 2016 and June 2020 that were distinct from previous (and concurrent³) studio practice by consistently taking Golden Age still life painting as reference point, and sampling directly from that genre. The changes to both theme and methodology generated a sequence that explored distinctive new aesthetic and intellectual terrain, and thus displayed a notable homogeneity.

The processes, ideas and circumstances that affected the development of that sequence⁴ are examined as far as possible in chronological order. The text thereby attempts to capture a naturally-forming interrelation of practice and theory, and the repositioning of the work using references not embodied in studio processes will be resisted, to retain the authentic genesis of signification. Theories familiar from participation in arts research and education will however be assumed as integral to my visual thinking of the time. Among these I would include as most relevant: Postmodernism and Deconstruction, Surrealism, the pictorial *aura* of Benjamin, Barthes’ *punctum*, the Sublime, Kristeva’s *abject* and Bakhtin’s *dialogism*. As such theories also became ‘ways of seeing’ the work (to borrow from Berger), they will be expanded upon in the Methodology.

Throughout the sequence, a monochromatic medium was employed that had already been in use for fifteen years, made by mixing black and silver graphite powders with resin and oil and

³ unrelated smaller works were also made during the period

⁴ ‘sequence’ was preferred as collective noun because it emphasises the sense of an evolving process.

diluting with mineral spirits to an ink-like consistency. This medium was then poured, brushed, and manipulated on coated paper of a consistent size.⁵ As in previous work, the image evolves through selective removal of the graphite liquid to allow the white of the paper to show through.

In my graphite practice I aim to surprise myself with each work produced, to investigate new ideas, and so contribute to new knowledge in the visual field. I am therefore constantly searching for marks, methods, forms and narratives to achieve this, an approach that often leads to frustration, as new contributions are hard-won, and a significant proportion of experiments are rejected. When the first still life work emerged in the studio, there was no plan to create a sequence from the experiment, and I was conscious of a sequence forming only some months later, as it became clear that the studio dynamic had changed, and that my search for new ideas had centred upon a particular genre. Sources were first appropriated from Dutch Golden Age painting, and the appropriation then extended to the online media, introducing quotidian socio-political themes to extend and problematise the relationship between aesthetics and consumerism that Bryson had noted. An important phase to revisit is therefore when these images first emerged, and how and why the appropriation began. The broader online search would in time generate an archive of over three hundred printed images assembled on the studio wall, an extension of imaginative range and reference that prompted a 'collaging' of modern, anachronistic elements into 'composite' tableaux derived from the 17th century. The method demonstrated the potential of the genre to address contemporary issues, a revelation responsible for holding my interest for far longer than anticipated.

Contextual reading explored, among other things, connections between the Golden Age still life genre and early capitalism, which also implicated colonialism, and the image sourcing began to reflect this. Images of events linked to that questionable European legacy were incorporated into the studio archive, and 'sampled'⁶ into the work as required, an approach that suggested connections to the strategies of postmodernism. By bringing them into conversation with Golden

⁵ either 72 x 102 cm in landscape format, or 102 x 72 cm portrait

⁶ sections painted onto the paper from a photograph

Age still life, the inclusion of contemporary material located certain contemporary issues in an iconic moment of the European past. Prioritising aesthetics over distressing human narratives in this manner might seem a cold response to the tragedies unfolding during the years of the sequence, but I was aware of the limited ability of painting to directly influence events, and saw the primary task as giving the images as much potency as I could.

Once the sequence began to grow, images from it featured in exhibitions and publications, resulting in regular documentation and critical reflection. Certain works generated critical frameworks through involvement in academic projects, and academic research methods were intermittently applied to the studio practice, and thereby form part of the reference material. In academic situations I came to discuss the development of the work around the question 'How might the 17th century Dutch still life genre, in light of its connection to the rise of consumerism and capitalism, be reimagined to engage contemporary audiences?' a 'how' question that the sequence has, of course, now answered in a series of exhibitions. An additional task for this reflective text is therefore to consider if other research questions have been addressed by the practice.

From forty-nine works produced, to date thirty-six works have been publicly exhibited, some multiple times, so the text will note the impact of iterative exhibitions and include (in Appendices) introductory essays by critics and curators that injected new theoretical material into the discussion. External influences, when groups of images were produced under certain conditions, will also be reviewed. The sequence was informed by two residencies, at Nicosia Municipal Art Gallery, Cyprus, and at York Art Gallery, the latter involving a radical exhibition format within a major survey exhibition, with works from the sequence displayed among Dutch still lifes, which provided an ideal scenario to assess their efficacy. The York project also included a commission of new works made in response to Dutch paintings in the exhibition, necessitating a methodological shift. The project concluded a week before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, prompting a new direction in my work, hence the York exhibition and catalogue came to represent for me the culminating moment of the sequence.

THE STILL LIFE SEQUENCE

June 2016 – June 2020

49 monochrome paintings
reimagining Dutch Golden Age Still Life
for contemporary contexts

graphite, resin and oil on coated paper

landscape-format: 72x102 centimetres
portrait-format: 102x72 centimetres
(except *Checker* and *Reconnaissance*, 72 x 51cm)

Titles in **bold** are works publicly exhibited



Sq.1 *Untitled* 2016

collection the artist



Sq.2 *Untitled (with helmet)* 2016

collection the artist



Sq.3 *Still Life with Pheasant* 2016

private collection UK



Sq.4 *Still Life with Pheasant and conch* 2016

private collection UK



Sq.5 *Birds are furious* 2016

collection the artist



Sq.6 *Memento mori* 2016

courtesy Chini Gallery Taipei



Sq.7 *Still Life with black glass skull* 2016

private collection, UK



Sq.8 *Still life with platter of birds* 2016

courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery, New York



Sq.9 *Vase of flowers with dead bird* 2016 collection the artist



Sq.10 *Reflected still life* 2016

collection the artist



Sq.11 *Still Life with self-portrait* 2016

courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery, New York



Sq.12 *Forbidden Fruit* 2016

collection the artist



Sq.13 *Furious Birds* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.14 *Three explosions* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.15 *Shadowy* 2017

private collection UK



Sq.16 *Sunflowers with bowl of ink* 2017

courtesy Chini Gallery Taipei



Sq.17 *Razor Wire* 2017

private collection UK



Sq.18 *Under the Table* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.19 *Encampment with oysters* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.20 *Still Life with reaper and bowl of ink* 2017 courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery, New York



Sq.21 *Still Life with dragonfly* 2017

private collection UK



Sq.22 *Encroachment* 2017

courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery New York



Sq.23 *The Thief* 2017

private collection, UK



Sq.24 *Vase of flowers* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.25 *Teetering* 2017

private collection, Germany



Sq.26 *Crossfire* 2017 private collection USA



Sq.27 *Still life with oysters* 2018

collection the artist



Sq.28 *Madonna of the munitions* 2017

courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery USA



Sq.29 *Crossfire ii* 2018

private collection, USA



Sq.30 *Postcard from Nicosia* 2017 Collection NiMAC Cyprus



Sq.31 *Minaret vase with cat* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.33 *Lookout vase* 2017

private collection UK



Sq.34 *No man's flowers* 2017

private collection UK



Sq.35 *DMZ still life* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.36 *Skirmish* 2017

collection the artist



Sq.37 *Preparations* 2017 courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery New York



Sq.32 *Figure 8 wire* 2018 i courtesy Mary Ryan New York



Sq.38 *Eurofighter* 2018

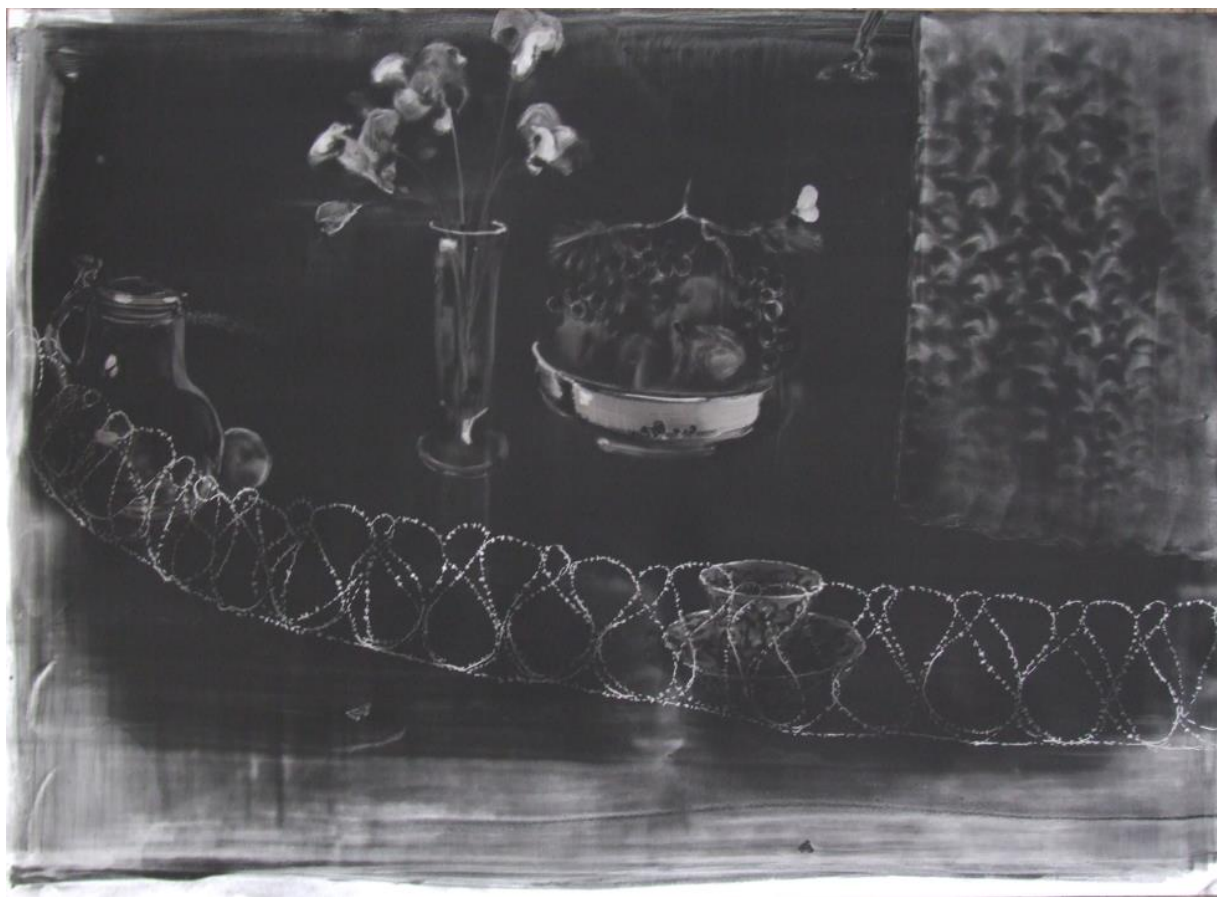
courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery, New York



Sq.39 *Figure 8 wire ii* 2018 private collection USA



Sq.40 *Reaper returns* 2018 courtesy Frestonian Gallery London



Sq.41 *Filigree wire* 2019

collection the artist



Sq.42 *Memento mori* 2019

collection York Art Gallery, UK



Sq.43 **Panopticon** 2019

private collection, Germany



Sq.44 *Top Predator* 2019

collection the artist



Sq.45 *Turvy* 2019

collection University of York



Sq.46 *Global Reach* 2019

collection University of Plymouth



Sq.47 *Checker* 2020

collection the artist



Sq.48 *Reconnaissance* 2020 private collection UK



Sq.49 *Still Life with Pangolin*

2020

collection the artist

Reflective Text

Methodology

As all the works were completed and exhibited, the task at hand for this project was to reflect upon on how the sequence arose in relation to subject and process, to chart the emergence and impact of theoretical research, and of specific circumstances of making, and to identify the contribution to new knowledge of the exhibited works.

The sequence arose from within a continuous studio practice. In a practice-led doctorate, speculative processes would be outlined here, but as the paintings were extant as the writing began, processes are discussed in retrospect, chronologically, beginning with those that pre-existed the still life subject, such as monochrome and improvisation, and moving on to those that evolved in response to the new theme, such as appropriation and anachronism. An 'early works' section is used to capture the emergence of still life images from studio experiments before it became clear a sequence was in progress. Lectures provided over the period of the sequence on aspects of the process have been edited to support this exegesis: the discovery of the graphite medium is recorded in in Appendix 2, whilst the historical significance of monochrome is considered in Appendix 3.

Desk research for this reflective text made use of online and library resources, personal studio notebooks,⁷ the image archive, and four exhibition catalogues.⁸ Dutch Golden Age still life is assessed via theoretical and historical research that occurred as the work progressed, using books read in tandem with the practice. When historical and political resonances of the theme were established and the reading expanded, additional texts such as Hochstrasser's *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, and Petry's *Nature Morte* are drawn into the discussion. As Petry himself points out, still life has a lengthy history, dating back to ancient Egyptian tombs, but as the referencing in the sequence is specific to an epoch generally held to be the heyday of the genre, an extended analysis of other still life traditions is not provided.

⁷ As there was no intention to write a contextual essay until the sequence had been completed, notes available are anecdotal

⁸ listed in the bibliography

The reflection on the circumstances of making begins in the familiarity of the studio, but moves on to assess the impact of external factors, evaluating shifts in approach that occurred during the Nicosia residency, and particularly during the York exhibition, for which images were selected, curated and commissioned in two distinct ways. Key references here were from catalogues to *Layers of Visibility* (Nicosia) and *Golden Age* (York).⁹

Theoretical foundations for analysis of the artworks

Approaches within this reflective text will naturally be influenced by mainstays of critical thinking in academia and the contemporary Fine Arts, especially Postmodernism and Deconstruction. Although a full evaluation of these philosophies is beyond the scope of the text, the thinking of Derrida has previously been influential and has undoubtedly 'rubbed off' on the work, whilst the relevance of postmodernism is distilled down to the example of the painter David Salle.

Certain aspects of those philosophies are presaged in Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in which he suggests that the advent of reproduction techniques such as photography present a threat to the individual character of an artwork in being able to strip away its 'aura', which he viewed as a product of the unique handling of the artist and the contexts of its creation. Whilst Benjamin acknowledges that reproductions have the power to democratize culture, he bemoans the loss of the aura, which for him is an integral feature of its cultural value. His concept resonates intriguingly within the sequence, in which I removed elements from their sources, mixed them back together, and at the same time sought to forge an 'aura' for the new image.

It is not my intention to supply commentaries on each and every work, but it will be useful to point to sources and themes within representative works, and make some comparisons. An

⁹ also re-printed for London and Manchester solo exhibitions.

image is (as Derrida would assert) open to many individual interpretations, and to overload each image with artist intentions would curtail its resonances. A strategy will therefore be adapted from literary theorist Roland Barthes, who in *Camera Lucida*, coined the term 'punctum' to describe a poignant detail in an image capable of 'pricking'¹⁰ a particular viewer. His notion is often misinterpreted as implying a prominent feature, something that catches the viewer's eye, whereas Barthes was interested in a private meaning, one that sits outside established cultural codes. His precise intention is much debated, and there remains critical discomfiture at the degree of subjectivity within his proposition, but the notion of a private 'punctum' is highly functional for an artist reflecting on their own images, as they can identify less obvious qualities that allowed an image to be deemed complete. Although Barthes wished his notion to apply to the viewer rather than the creator, this adaptation suggested itself as purposeful, and will be employed occasionally in considering individual images.

Kristeva's concept of the 'abject'¹¹ involves those features of human experience that are simultaneously repulsive and attractive. Kristeva has in mind viscerally taboo or disgusting subjects such as bodily decay, a focus that has informed certain feminist and transgressive art practices. The *vanitas* subgenre of still life touches lightly upon such properties in (for example) a beetle in a rotting flower, as do some works in the sequence, when modern insertions desecrate the serenity of the still life space. Kristeva's abject presents a challenge to our human sense of order and stability in the way Dutch still lifes might depict objects after a drunken feast or brawl, which would have forced the 17th century viewer to consider the impermanence of life. Notions of the abject were also part of the inception of the sequence when the coloured originals were first converted to imperfect and deadpan monochrome.

The concept of the 'sublime' was formalised in the 18th century philosophy of Burke and Kant¹², and has become a much-used lens for art writing of the 21st century. It involves (among other things) a sense of awe or dread in the face of powerful natural forces, and this quality, along with

¹⁰ hence punctum, from the Latin

¹¹ first presented in 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.' Trans. Roudiez, L. Columbia University Press 1982

¹² Burke, E. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* 1757.

Kant, I. *The Critique of Judgment* 1790.

Burke's central argument, that beauty and the sublime are mutually exclusive, are both relevant to strategies employed in making the sequence. Notions of a contemporary sublime have extended the concept to include realms such as technology, as in the awe experienced when witnessing an atomic blast, or in playing an immersive video game. Julian Bell warns that references to the sublime now "come from so many angles that it is in danger of losing any coherent meaning",¹³ but David Nye's specific example that "the admiration of the natural sublime, as it might be experienced in the Grand Canyon, was replaced by...the sublime of war machinery, and the sublime of the computer"¹⁴ resonates with references used in the sequence.

The still life sequence is illustrated in chronological order and referenced in the text as Sq.1, Sq.2 etc. A chronology of public exhibitions of works from the sequence is provided in Appendix 1.

Appendices also contain historical analyses edited from research presentations during the period, along with critical essays and interviews.

To preserve the fluidity of this condensed text, some citations will be provided in footnotes.

¹³ Bell, J. 'Contemporary Art and the Sublime', in Llewellyn and Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research, January 2013

¹⁴ Nye, D. *American Technological Sublime* 1994 p.20

ii Graphite and monochrome

From student days until 2000, a period of roughly twenty years, my painting practice incorporated high-key colour, but since that time has used a monochromatic graphite medium. This sudden transition from colour to monochrome followed three research visits to India in the 1990s, during which I made two series of improvised sand drawings on the banks of the Ganges river. These drawings were unmistakeably Indian in their references and rhythms, yet the method of making reconnected me with the use of playful, improvisatory practices that had engaged me as a student. The localised intimacy of the process, the 'performed' indexical rhythms in the sand and a connection to Surrealist approaches marked these drawings as significant creative pointers, so on returning to the UK I wanted to translate those qualities into studio painting. During a phase of experimentation in a Cornish studio, I discovered what has remained my graphite method for over twenty years.¹⁵

As material, graphite is one of three stable forms of pure carbon, lying in structural terms halfway between soot and diamond, and offering both soot's elemental quality and a lustre suggestive of its more precious relative. In my process, graphite powder, either grey or black (sometimes both) is first mixed with resin and then with linseed oil, and diluted to an ink-like consistency using mineral spirits (originally turpentine but more recently white spirit). This is then poured, applied with brush or less conventional implements on a sheet of paper laid horizontally on table. The image is usually generated from dark to light by applying the medium, removing some of it to create forms, reapplying the medium etc., in an interplay of addition/subtraction repeated many times on each image. The amount of time spent on an image from start to finish is therefore highly unpredictable, ranging from a single day to many weeks.

Dutch still life was not chosen for its suitability to this process, indeed given its tendency toward high-key colour, it might be supposed the opposite were true. It was however often created

¹⁵ A full account of this transition is provided in Appendix 2.

against a dark backdrop, which some commentators¹⁶ view as representing the sombre Calvinist backdrop to Dutch society of the time, and the graphite method, in which a liquid grey is laid down and then removed to create highlights, seemed well-suited to this metaphor.

The use of graphite powder entailed a shift to monochrome, and my visual research into the historical occurrences of the technique, and its contemporary usage, expanded accordingly.¹⁷ Works from the sequence have a particular correspondence with the monotypes of Edgar Degas, who became entranced by the technique because it simplified his decision-making, offering a 'rehearsal-like' method (in that areas may be wiped away and reworked) and delivering a monochromatic immediacy that chimed with his interest in early photography, in which imprecise chemistry produced fleeting effects and unpredictable edges to counter their documentary inclination.

Resonances of black and white photography became relevant for the sequence as Golden Age paintings were converted to image sources via a black-and-white printer/photocopier, a procedure alluded to in the thin character of the graphite, especially when I used a paper roller to flatten and slur the image slightly. A reference in this method is to Gerhard Richter, who in the 1970s developed his own monochromatic out-of-focus paintings relating to media photographs of the Bader-Meinhof gang. Richter recreated these in thick grey and white oil paint, then used a wide soft brush pulled across the surface in fine striations both horizontal and vertical, without completely losing the figurative elements. Richter's influence on the sequence is most apparent in areas where the blurring of a section is retained alongside more detailed working, such as in *Still Life with Dragonfly* (Sq. 21).¹⁸

¹⁶ such as Bryson and Schama

¹⁷ During the period of the sequence, I provided lectures on monochrome, and extended contexts are provided in Appendix 3.

¹⁸ Richter also made several still life paintings in the 1980s, including some in which a candle is included to allude to the *vanitas* genre of Dutch still life painting.

iii Improvisation and rehearsal

The effect of monochrome on my work reached beyond the simple exclusion of colour. For an artist using a method in which images evolve as the painting progresses, the shift to black and white was striking. Previously, the selection of individual colours would often prove critical, with certain hues determining by association the objects and scenarios that would develop. Using red, for example, in the generative phase of an image might suggest the eventual presence of fire, or blood, whilst the use of green may infer a landscape setting. The decision to use the colour blue might prove more crucial, in that blue's association with sky might force the imagination into early fixing of a horizon line. Whilst it was not impossible to counter these impulses, for instance by using random colour-selection strategies, nevertheless the overriding sense was of a 'colour determinism' that over time might become limiting or repetitive. When using monochrome, this associative tendency was removed, allowing a longer period of open play, in the manner of Keats' 'negative capability'.¹⁹ This did not simply affect the types of personae or objects that might evolve, but the entire spatial construction of the image,²⁰ and this proved an important characteristic for the sequence once I moved into the unfamiliar territory of appropriation, and needed to suspend judgement for much longer.

Improvisation has been used in painting throughout history, as x-rays of old master oil paintings often reveal. The artist may have planned the composition carefully, and made studies to prepare for it, but during the act of painting another idea asserts itself and leads to unexpected modifications that must be considered on their merits in the moment.²¹ Improvisation was adopted as a method in the 20th century first by the Surrealist group, as a means of unlocking spontaneous forms or gestures that might reveal the workings of the unconscious mind,²² and later by the globally influential Abstract Expressionists.

¹⁹ "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" Letter to brother, 1817

²⁰ In one work, a mid-grey was first poured down, and I recall not knowing whether that mid-grey represented water or sand or sky: all three possibilities were available to the imagination at the same time. The image that developed eventually used the grey if it were air (rather than cloud or sky), allowing the final image to appear as if suspended, and yet also incorporate a pool of water, a tree, and some irrigation infrastructure.

²¹ X-rays of certain canvases of Caravaggio are especially revealing in this regard.

²² as in the drawings of Max Ernst, who systematised improvisatory approaches and coined the terms *frottage*, *grattage* and *collage* as strategies for making impromptu or improvised images

A related Surrealist connection comes via Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* (uncanny) defined as 'something familiar made strangely unfamiliar' in his essay 'Das Unheimliche' of 1919, and the Surrealists ran with his idea as an aesthetic ideal, celebrated for itself in conjunctions of images capable of destabilising meaning, an approach that persists in many aesthetic fields,²³ and an important strategy in the sequence.

The interconnected features of improvisation and rehearsal in the process connect with the world of performance, not least because improvisation is most often associated with the dramatic arts (and music), and rehearsal even more so. Their role within the graphite process stems from its association with the sand drawings, which were site specific and ephemeral, each image only able to be captured when the sun was in a certain position, and erased once the wind got up. The connection with the dramatic arts has remained important because the making of a graphite work depends upon constant application and removal of the medium,²⁴ depending on how the image is evolving, and because the intention for the image is not preconceived, this application and removal is precisely where the most intent visual thinking occurs. A common description within the visual arts for a drawing that precedes the final work would be 'study' or 'sketch', but I prefer the term 'rehearsal' because often the initial drawing is removed completely, remade, removed once again (and again etc.), before the final image is 'clinched', and therefore the 'studies' or 'sketches' become subsumed into the final image. The two processes, improvisation and rehearsal, go hand-in-hand in the sequence, and together they reinforce the illusion of each graphite having been invented in a single session, because despite being guided by the memory or the remnants of previous attempts, only the final layer remains.²⁵ To achieve blending in such sections, the graphite medium may be reactivated by pouring mineral spirit across the paper surface, and this action can lead to unexpected chemical and physical consequences, giving the image stronger connections to the Daguerreotype.²⁶

²³ such as architecture, fashion, advertising and so on

²⁴ my medium produces an extremely thin layer which cannot easily be overcoated but is easily removed, due partly to the resistant coat on the paper used for the sequence

²⁵ Because each image is so dependent on the success of many small parts that arise independently and then come together, individual images are often flawed and need to be completely abandoned, either by complete destruction or a partial wiping away.

²⁶ as noted in several commentaries

As noted in the introduction, the method that eventually characterised the still life process was a hybrid of the improvisatory and the rehearsal, in that the image would begin by 'sampling' references from the image archive on the studio wall, working them together in new formations, which would include anomalies and errors. This initial proposition would then often be 'pushed back' using a light paper roller, to remove some of the definition, but leaving a compositional residue, upon which the next phase of working could be based. Each successive 'pushing back' would therefore reduce the decision-making required to clinch the image. The previously antipathetic inclinations of improvisation and rehearsal thus become interdependent, in that the improvisation allows rapid change and correction in the initial 'collage' phase, sorting out how the elements might recombine, and is then only partially removed (by the rehearsal instinct) thereby providing a guide for future attempts.²⁷

²⁷ this explanation is best viewed in the video of my process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g8gQ4ioQN0>

This first phase of making provides insight into the motives for the sequence, and so it is useful to discuss some early images, where possible recording significant details using the ‘punctum’ approach outlined in the Methodology.

Experimentation and improvisation in the studio involved all the processes so far discussed, namely, graphite, monochrome, improvisation, and rehearsal, most often onto a standard sheet of coated paper. This then was the situation that gave rise to the first still life graphites, and the untitled work that was to become the first in the sequence (Sq. 1) was likely one such improvisation, indeed barely qualifies as a still life. It features a table set in an outdoor space, perhaps suggestive of a ceremony or celebration,²⁸ and on the white tablecloth sits a vase of flowers and three empty oyster shells. The suspended icon of a Madonna (with accompanying angels) is likely a rough estimation of della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto* (which will feature in later images) whilst other estimations, such as the gestural landscape and ‘sky’, suggest no photographic references were used.

The second untitled image (Sq.2,) also has a landscape setting, but recognisable still life objects are now included. As there are no printed references for this work, these were likely invented. There is clear enjoyment of the baroque interplay of elements, described with painterly bravura, and of the different technical demands of the porcelain vase and the grapes in the foreground. It is evident from the surface that a light paper roller²⁹ has been pulled across the surface to slur the image in parts, which has then been overpainted with more considered but still improvised details such as the ornate bowl of fruit with bird perched on rim, and butterfly fluttering above, indicators of *vanitas* inclinations.

²⁸ Such a subject has featured previously in works such as *Dinner for des Esseintes*

²⁹ made from the same paper on which the image was made

These initial works were exploring new territory, as no theory was ‘in play’ in the studio, but as reference images began to be sourced, some contextual information became available online. A clue to the anecdotal way such sources were employed is provided by *Still Life with Pheasant* (Sq.3), in which the first section transposed (the jug on the top left) was taken from Harmen Steenwijck’s *Still-Life of Fruit and Dead Fowl*, whilst the pheasant itself is copied from a modern reworking of a Dutch theme,³⁰ because the position and demeanour of the pheasant appealed. From this it can be deduced that the sequence did not begin as a contemplation of a specifically Dutch genre, and that the use of originals of varied provenance was to invoke a generalised still life atmosphere. What was in the previous image a suspended icon now becomes a postcard pinned behind the tableau. The intention here seems to be to flatten or ‘close in’ the space as with the Dutch genre, but I also recall the ‘world within a world’ of the postcard immediately suggesting new narrative potential.³¹ I have no memory of why exactly I chose for the card Watteau’s beautiful 1719 painting *Pierrot* (later known as *Gilles*), but as it radiates a clown-like bathos it was perhaps meant to signify the playful artifice of the process.

Around this time a first intention for the work is recorded in studio notebook 16, though it is not clear to which image it refers: “How would a bounteous Dutch still life convert to monochrome? (abject)” which tallies with my memory of being excited by how deadpan the monochrome versions appeared in relation to their luxuriant sources, and the irony this produced. The mention of ‘abject’ suggests a further intention (via Kristeva) to create a quality that undermines the polished artifice of the original source paintings, not just through conversion to monochrome, but also by producing unfinished or ‘ugly’ surfaces, with prominent scratches, uneven flows of pigment and uncertain edges.

Still life with platter of birds (Sq.8) takes a straightforward approach to collaging items extracted from various sources, including de Heem and Claesz, into a conventional tableau, the punctum being the platter of dead birds, which was painted directly from a group of artificial birds in the

³⁰ by lesser-known American artist Maureen Hyde, found during an online image search

³¹ The use of postcards in this way relates to the *trompe l’oeil* tradition, and is elaborated upon later.

house (used as Christmas tree decorations) again demonstrating the open approach to ‘collage’ employed. *Still Life with Pheasant and conch* (Sq.4), features a new transposition of a vase of tulips (of which more later) from Bosschaert, which together with conch shell and butterfly, emphasise distinctly *vanitas* motifs. It reuses the jug/pitcher of Steenwjick, the pheasant, and the same *Pierrot* postcard, that again appears in the subsequent image, *Birds are Furious* (Sq.5) in which the introduction of a cage is a significant new element, with the bird fluttering inside as if in distress introducing a darker theme to the tableau.

The repetition of the Watteau postcard operates as a unifying motif for what is at this point likely being viewed as a mini-series, but in the next two works its compositional role is assumed by a curtain in *Memento Mori* (Sq.6) and a curtained picture³² in *Still life with Black Glass Skull* (Sq.7). This latter work marks a key moment in time, in that it was discussed at length with an art historian friend³³ during his visit to the studio, and week later he returned to loan me his copy of Norman Bryson’s *Looking at the Overlooked*, which I started to read the same day, and which was to inform the development of the sequence. In his introduction, Bryson cited Simon Schama, and so I soon began to read Schama’s *An Embarrassment of Riches* in conjunction.

It is worth noting that although the first example of a contemporary object appears in *Highrise Still Life* (Sq.10), in which flowers (provenance unknown) combine with a group of modern tower blocks, the image of the flowers is imagined as a reflection in a window (from one such tower block) and is therefore a formal rather than conceptual device, although it does reflect a desire to bring the still life genre into the modern day.

³² as sometimes used in museums for precious or sensitive works

³³ Nigel Llewellyn, previously Head of Research at TATE

The reference in the sequence to still life painting of the Dutch Golden Age, with its high-key colour, exuberant detail, and layered meaning, was a radical development, seemingly antipathetic to the intrinsic qualities of the graphite medium and the tactile, improvisatory approaches it had engendered. Although still life remained the central motif of the sequence, its function altered as emphasis shifted toward contemporary symbolism. This section reflects on that transition and collates knowledge of the genre gained through contextual reading over the period.

Much of this contextual information was not familiar to me at the outset of the sequence, but I was well-aware of the Dutch genre itself due to its global fame, and also, more personally, from time spent in Holland, either exhibiting or teaching in that country. These trips would include visits to museum collections, and to individual still life works, not least because still life was an identifiable national style, and the experience of it gave a distinctive flavour of being in Holland. As Michael Petry expounds,

Still life came into its own in the mid seventeenth century when the Flemish term *stilleven* first came to be applied to oil paintings characterized by their tight focus on an assortment of objects sitting on a flat surface, depicted not as a subsidiary element in a wider narrative but as a subject in its own right.³⁴

Bryson also views Dutch still life painting as specific to a time and place, reflecting “wealth back to the society which produced it, a reflection that entails the expression of how the phenomenon of plenty is to be viewed and understood.”³⁵ Julie Hochstrasser expands on this approach in her introduction to *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, noting

³⁴ Petry, M. 2013 *Nature Morte* p.6.

³⁵ *Looking at the Overlooked* p.104.

It is striking that the genesis of still life painting as an independent genre coincides in time and place with a key period in the birth of consumer society. In the seventeenth century the Netherlands achieved a position of primacy in global trade that brought unprecedented wealth to Holland. Amsterdam was renowned as an entrepot... of exotic species and luxury items: Indonesian pepper, Venezuelan tobacco, Chinese porcelain, Persian carpets - the list reads like a description of a Dutch Still Life painting.³⁶

Whilst it may be hard to point to exact intentions as the sequence began, what is certain is that this connection between still life painting and an incipient consumer society fuelled my interest in the potential of the genre, just as Hochstrasser claims the overarching aim of her own study is to interrogate “the role of these images within the early history of consumer culture” acknowledging a debt to Marx in that his writings also “treat the Dutch as a textbook case in early market capitalism and colonialist enterprise.”³⁷

Still life has a long history: Petry traces it back to Egyptian tomb painting, where the depicted fruits and objects awaited the dead in the afterlife, whilst Bryson charts its flowering in the frescoed villas of Ancient Rome. In more recent history, initially in the work of Cezanne, then as taken up by Braque and Picasso when the genre became implicated with Cubism, still life became an integral part of the development of contemporary art. It was however in Holland during the Golden Age that the status of still life was elevated to levels not seen before or since, and when its thematic richness was fully explored. Its evolution, underpinned throughout by *vanitas* metaphors, from the breakfast still lifes (*banketjestukken*) through ‘market scenes’ to ornate tableaux (*pronkstilleven*) parallels the steeping trajectory of the Dutch economy, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes in *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*,

³⁶ Hochstrasser, J.B. 2007, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, Yale, Intro.

³⁷ Introduction

Seen as commodities, the rich panoply of food, drinks, and tableware in the painted meals of Dutch Still Life of the 17thC - as on real Dutch tables throughout the land during this, their Golden Age - represent that pride, as material fruits of this most colourful and wildly successful period in the history of Dutch trade.

In *An Embarrassment of Riches* Schama adopts a more subtle position, noting the potential conflict between "the renegade individualist, the arch-capitalist...and the commercial and ecclesiastical codes of decorum that defined Dutch society" suggesting that the Dutch people viewed their wealth as potentially corrupting, their "fear of drowning in destitution and terror exactly counterbalanced by their fear of drowning in luxury and sin", a view that explains the import and persistence of *vanitas* and memento mori themes in the genre. Hochstrasser is more forceful in her sociological insight:

Grim social costs, extracted through exploitation both of European poor and of indigenous populations around the globe, are comfortably absent from these lush tables - a disturbing factor that must weigh in against the notion that these pictures are moralizing, for there was much to moralise about that they conveniently ignore.³⁸

Her point is well made, and a key one for the sequence, for although my paintings tend to adopt a morally neutral tone, the 'unheimlich' contemporary elements are there precisely to cast doubt into the self-congratulatory tableaux.

There are several well-documented reasons for the rise of Golden Age still life: Schama and Chakrabarty both point to wealthy merchants and professionals of the newly independent Dutch Republic being keen to commission and collect art (often to reflect the commodities they traded) whilst at the same time, the Protestant Reformation was rejecting religious art associated with Catholicism, prompting artists to turn to secular themes. Bryson stresses however, that the Calvinist nature of Dutch society continued to provide a sombre backdrop to this new

³⁸ p.240

materialism, being “structured around the same anxious polarity, with vice and pleasure beckoning at one end, virtue and abstention at the other,”³⁹ and this contrast is nicely mimicked in the development of the genre, in which lustrous objects glow from a dark background.

Hence there are significant differences between the *pronkstilleven*, depictions of bounty and beauty, and paintings in the *vanitas* tradition, in which those same precious objects and exotic flowers are given a dark counterpoint in the form of a skull, a wilting leaf and so on, to warn of ephemeral earthly pleasures. This subgenre became increasingly important to my sequence, as its darker subtexts were suitable for reflections on geopolitical issues in part attributable to unfettered capitalism, the repeated use of a *Reaper* surveillance drone in place of a skull offering the clearest example. Bryson sagely recognises that every still life is to an extent a *vanitas*, a sermon in ephemerality, a position echoed by Gombrich’s view of still life in general, that “the pleasures it stimulates are not real. The more cunning the illusion the more impressive the sermon on semblance and reality. Any painted still life is *ipso facto* also a *vanitas*.”⁴⁰

In examining the origins of still life, Bryson comes to view still life’s domestic quality as an antidote to grander historical or mythological themes, and this leads him to formulate a key dynamic in the genre between what he terms the ‘rhopographic’, signifying the humble or domestic, and the ‘megalographic’, signifying the grand narrative. In Dutch still life painting, he recognises a coming together of the two forces to produce rich, complex dialogues, and the polarities inform the types of conjunction I intended, certainly for later works, proving especially instructive during the Nicosia residency.

A common position of mainstream art history is to interpret still life tableaux through the symbolism of their objects,⁴¹ and Hochstrasser (who spends much of her book decoding each commodity in turn) asserts that “however limited their knowledge may have been of the full stories of the various commodities, the Dutch who viewed these paintings would have found

³⁹ made all the more pointed by Marx’s observation that “by 1648 the people of Holland were more overworked, poorer and more brutally oppressed than those of all the rest of Europe put together.”

⁴⁰ Gombrich, E. H. 1961, *Tradition and Expression in Western Still Life* The Burlington Magazine 103, pp.174-180

⁴¹ in the case of Vanitas paintings, interpretation is straightforward in that the intention is to caution against whatever beauty is on show.

many associations that escape us today.” There are dissenting voices to this approach: in *The Rhetoric of Perspective* Grootenboen suggests that in the *pronkstilleven*: “the painted objects can be considered commodities rather than as carriers of hidden messages ... and may even point in the direction of an early form of commodity fetishism”⁴² whilst Sharma advises against what he terms “over enthusiastic dedication to unearthing meaning from these compositions”, suggesting the notion that (for example) “cheeses might symbolise the Transubstantiated body of Christ ... or strawberries, the essence of perfect righteousness” are “argued with more earnestness than sense”.⁴³ Schama’s position was one reason why, when appropriating images from the Dutch tradition, I tended to consider objects for formal ‘rhyming’ rather than symbolic reasons, though there are notable exceptions to this tendency, such as the inclusion of Chinese - especially Ming - porcelain, to allude to that very different, distant culture, and maintain an atmosphere of historical colonialist appropriation.⁴⁴ Porcelain was also important for personal reasons, in that I wanted to acknowledge my debt to Chinese ink painting, and this debt was further honoured by sometimes filling the porcelain bowls with what appears to be ink.⁴⁵ Due to his tendency to include Ming porcelain in his paintings, and the high quality of his articulation⁴⁶ I began to reference the work of Willem Kalf more frequently. Kalf produced his much-lauded *pronkstilleven* on his return to Amsterdam from Paris,⁴⁷ setting precious objects⁴⁸ on rich cloths or tapestries, against a dark background. Although his acolytes suggest an interest in the *vanitas* tradition,⁴⁹ his spectacular array of objects indicate that aesthetics (and displays of wealth) were paramount, and this tendency made him a favoured reference once my intentions for the sequence moved toward highlighting consumerist and capitalist themes. I subsequently used extracts from, among others, his *Still Life with Chinese Bowl and Nautilus* (1662), *Still Life with a Silver Jug and a Porcelain Bowl* (1669) and his *Still Life with Fruit, Glassware, and a Wanli Bowl* (1659).

⁴² University of Chicago Press 2005 p15

⁴³ *An Embarrassment of Riches*

⁴⁴ that would eventually spawn its ultimate appropriation in Dutch Delftware

⁴⁵ though it may well be graphite!

⁴⁶ I visited Kalf’s works at the Maurithuis, Den Haag in 2016, and in 2018 saw *Still Life with Nautilus cup* at the Metropolitan Museum, New York

⁴⁷ in 1650

⁴⁸ As an antiques and art dealer as well as painter many of the objects would have been in his possession.

⁴⁹ One of his closest followers was Juriaen van Streek, whose gloomy *Vanitas* provided a major reference point in the York project.

The image archive that expanded on the studio wall evidenced a range of other Golden Age artists however, including Frans Snyders; Harmen Steenwijck; de Heem; van Aelst; Jan Treck; van Streeck; van der Ast; Ferdinand Bol and Willem Claesz to list but a few. Another key reference for the sequence was the vase of flowers in the National Gallery attributed to Rachel Ruysch, as it exhibited a vivacity that played down the need for contemporary insertions (see Sqs.25 and 26) and became a repeated feature over several works. Artists from outside of the Dutch tradition (and Golden Age era) were also occasionally used, such as Coton; Preyer and Boilly, and their inclusion again indicates that the sequence was not intended as a purist contemplation of the Dutch genre. It is also worth restating that the exact provenance of the still life imagery was not an important consideration at this time. The archive eventually began to display a broad selection of contemporary references including military vehicles, aircraft, helicopters, barbed wire fences, toy soldiers, atomic clouds, as well as birds, monkeys and dragonflies.

My research into contemporary practitioners engaged in reinterpreting the genre also expanded at this point, though I had long been aware of the work of Ori Gersht, and his 2007 video work *Big Bang ii*, in which a vase of flowers, based on a 19th century still life by Fantin-Latour, is suddenly destroyed by an explosion, the petals and shattered pieces of vase falling back to earth in slow motion, thereby invoking the contemporary sublime. Gersht's own website⁵⁰ suggests a debt to Benjamin's 'optical unconscious' in that the process is "dependent upon the advanced technology of photography to freeze-frame action, inconceivable to the old masters," but his piece more directly alludes to the shadow of death that hangs over the entire vanitas tradition. His related video work, *Falling Bird* (2008) may have been a subliminal reference point for my vanitas work *Preparations*⁵¹(Sq.37), in which I paint a pheasant dangling over a Chinese bowl filled with what appears to be blood. In Gersht's film the bird is mirrored in black liquid as it falls in slow motion into its own reflection, whilst in shot, to reinforce the still life motif, bunches of grapes are echoed by the form of the splash.

⁵⁰ origersht.com

⁵¹ though in the New York show I will also recognise the influence of Kiefer on this work

Michael Petry's anthology of contemporary reinterpretations of still life, *Nature Morte*⁵² became a useful reference text later in the sequence, and Norman Bryson would be heartened to see the flourishing of the genre he felt was 'overlooked', even if many of the examples are taken not from painting, but from sculpture, installation art, and video art, as with Gersht. The 'glitch' prints of Gordon Cheung were however made after its publication date. Cheung is best known for his complex collaged paintings, but in these prints takes a technological approach to vanitas themes by subjecting digital versions of Dutch still lifes to an open-source code programming glitch,⁵³ which mimics the effect of dragging coloured ink across uneven surfaces, thereby shifting the classical beauty of the flowers into a register of the contemporary sublime that embraces notion of error. Cheung also made short film versions such as *New Order, Jan van Huysum II* (2015) using the image bank of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam,⁵⁴ 'glitching' the reproduction to create thousands of sequential images, giving the illusion that the painting is steadily corrupting, a metaphorical *vanitas*. Cheung has spoken frequently of his engagement with dominant narratives because of their ability to erase counter-narratives, and on both a technical and conceptual level the glitch alludes to modes of production. His digital inkjet prints, such as *Jan Davidsz De Heem II (Small New Order) Glitch* (2014) are conceptually closest to my sequence, in that Cheung wishes to address the conundrum of global capitalism, citing the global economic crisis of 2008 as a motivation for the work.

⁵² *Contemporary artists reinvigorate the Still Life tradition; Revisiting the Still Life* (Thames and Hudson 2013)

⁵³ created by artist Kim Asendorf

⁵⁴ www.gordoncheung.com

The linked strategies of appropriation and adaptation are now inevitably associated with postmodernism, but have been in use since antiquity. The Greeks borrowed widely from Egyptian culture, Roman artists reinterpreted Greek culture to the point of renaming and repurposing Greek gods as they saw fit, whilst arguably the most successful example of adaptation was the Italian Renaissance itself, when Florentine artists turned to those Roman examples as models to induce a rebirth in the painting and sculpture of the *quattrocento*.

Appropriation and adaptation were not common strategies in my practice when the sequence began, though I had intermittently used my own photography as source material. The second still life experiment in the studio (Sq.2) had however suggested a need for more detailed referencing, and so I downloaded a few excerpts of Dutch still life works from various internet sources, printed them off in black-and-white and pinned them to the studio wall. Some of the first references were chosen to make works in *homage*⁵⁵ involving the simple transposition of coloured originals into monochrome, such as *Still Life with Pheasant* (Sq.3) though this homage was not intended as pure celebration of the original, as a degree of irony and of the abject was expected from the removal of colour and the imperfections of process. Julie Sanders notes the complex array of terms available to distinguish the subtlety of such strategies in her Introduction to *Adaptation and Appropriation* noting “the vocabulary of adaptation is highly labile”, and offers a long list of terms assembled by Adrian Poole, “borrowing, stealing, appropriating, inheriting, assimilating, being influenced, inspired, dependent, indebted, haunted, possessed ... homage, mimicry, travesty, echo, allusion, and intertextuality” to which she adds still more.⁵⁶

Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* provided an important model for the development of painterly adaptation, stretching definitions of homage by reinterpreting Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, inflecting the classical theme by sexualising the female nude with a velvet choker and a hair

⁵⁵ the term appears in studio notebook 16

⁵⁶ Sanders, J. 2006, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Routledge, London p.8

flower, thereby scandalising the Paris Salon with the implication that his model was a courtesan. There is often a fine distinction between homage and appropriation, and in the case of Picasso, working half a century after Manet, both terms might be justly applied to his numerous works derived from Velasquez.⁵⁷

With the advent of Postmodernism, appropriation strategies were moved into the intellectual limelight. In 1977 Douglas Crimp curated his trailblazing group show *Pictures* for Artist Space New York,⁵⁸ claiming, “we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture is always another picture.” Crimp believed that irony and critique through re-contextualisation would henceforth become a key method of postmodernist art, and dispense with Benjamin’s notion of the aura: “the fiction of the creating subject gives way to frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence ... are undermined.”

Such issues came into play as an increasing variety of Golden Age sources were printed off, over weeks and months, not because they were significant in themselves, but because they offered fragments for the reassembling of a new still life tableau, into which additional elements could then be added. These elements were at first harmonious with the genre, such as birds and insects, but with time began to include off-kilter, anachronistic elements such as helicopters, drones, and plastic soldiers. As this variety of sources was juxtaposed in the painting process, the effect changed markedly, and at times reminded me of the methods of David Salle.

Crimp’s follow-up text to his exhibition, *Appropriating Appropriation* (1982) included Salle as the only painter. Salle’s work incorporates images in many styles, from abstract and photorealist, sometimes pieced together, sometimes overlayed, in what Schulz-Hoffmann then termed a “combination of utterly dissimilar elements ... which reveal an attitude of mistrust toward all

⁵⁷ in one year alone (1957) over forty canvases were directly inspired by Velázquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas*

⁵⁸ including Sherrie Levine and Robert Longo among others

‘absolute’ truths,”⁵⁹ a viewpoint endorsing Barthes’ ideas on the death of the author⁶⁰ in which the power of signification is ceded to the viewer.⁶¹

The sequence took a different route, however, as despite the anachronistic confrontations, my overriding intention was to re-combine disparate elements into quasi-credible scenarios. This notion of quasi-credibility implies that no devices are employed to make the collage obvious to the viewer (as Salle would with his rectangular compartments, for instance) but that disparate elements are integrated relatively seamlessly. Hence the questioning of Golden Age narratives was not achieved by subversive recombinations of extracts, but by the insertion of subversive elements within a broadly believable whole.⁶² Appropriation remains a method, not a destination, one that invites astute addition and modulation, in order to *signify*, to implicate the viewer in the conversation between a high point of European visual culture, its basis in colonialism and capitalism, and its present-day ramifications.

⁵⁹ in *David Salle* catalogue, La Fundacion, 1988

⁶⁰ in ‘La mort de l’auteur’ Barthes’ 1967 essay

⁶¹ Twenty years later (in 2009) Soutter would note that “appropriation has become the dominant trend in contemporary art practice, and appropriated material no longer need signify anything in particular: not the death of the author, not a critique of mass-media representations, not a comment on consumer capitalism.” Soutter, L. in *Appropriation*, Cambridge/Whitechapel 2009

⁶² Such an approach may belong as much to Surrealism as Postmodernism, in which unfamiliar objects are fused into new relationships, as captured in Breton’s adoption of Lautreamont’s “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table” as motif for his new movement

The 'overlooked' quality that Bryson interrogates prompted me to consider ways that still life works might assert themselves more forcefully to contemporary audiences. His forensic approach to the genre had piqued my interest in its social and political contexts, which were later fleshed out by Schama and Hochstrasser. The sequence was about to move from its tentative early beginnings into a more ambitious phase that would eventually lead to a first solo show of the work in New York, where some reflection on this phase is therefore situated.

The original instance of a contemporary element being 'miniaturised' into the image occurred in (*Furious Birds* Sq.13) and although several works were made between them, it is useful to compare that work with an earlier birdcage image, *Birds are Furious* (Sq.5) to recognise that the fluttering bird of the earlier work has been replaced with the suggestion of a tiny helicopter.⁶³ I read Susan Stewart's *On Longing* when it was first published in 1993,⁶⁴ as at the time I was making shaped panel 'Pleasure Domes'⁶⁵ and Stewart's comments on the allure of the miniature seemed germane to the dome-like spaces I was attempting to evoke. Whilst it could be argued that miniaturisation applies to most narrative painting (in the bland sense that the subjects are usually smaller than their real-world counterparts) *On Longing* took on renewed relevance for the still life sequence because miniaturisation was selectively applied to certain features and objects and not others, and this localised application gave it added importance. Stewart's idea that "the miniature invites the gaze of desire, holding it at the border between the purest contemplation and the most vulgar possession"⁶⁶ resonates with Dutch still life's self-aggrandizement through contemplation of material possessions, at times descending into vulgarity, exactly the quality that the additions of modern elements sought to subvert.

⁶³ the cabbage dangling from the top of the painting was an innovation taken directly from the Spanish artist Coton.

The work also includes the first example of a Chinese bowl filled with ink

⁶⁴ Stewart, S. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. 1993 Duke University Press

⁶⁵ that would prove a trigger for the shift to monochrome - see Appendices on the evolution of the graphite process

⁶⁶ Stewart, S. 1993, p. 27

Forbidden Fruit (Sq.12) was the first image from the sequence to be exhibited publicly, in the *New Light* prize at Bowes Museum, County Durham, in which it won first prize, triggering several exhibition invitations. *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12) captures the progress of the sequence by including both an intimate still life space in the foreground against a landscape with electric pylons in the background. The protagonist of the image, a white lemur monkey, a character that will reappear in later works, is mischievously stealing fruit from an ornate Chinese porcelain bowl, and looks guiltily off-picture. The idea of the monkey originates from Franz Snyders' *Still Life with Fruit and Dead Game* of circa 1625, in which a monkey is stealing fruit, observed by a cat. At the bottom edge of the image is another postcard of della Francesca's *Madonna Del Parto*, this time more faithfully rendered, and the association between the pregnant Madonna and the split ripe fruit is clear.

A more obvious sign of contemporary imagery being referenced appears in *Razor Wire*, of early 2017 (Sq.11), in which an orthodox still life set up of fruit, flowers and vessels is 'ring-fenced' by a loosely laid roll of 'razor' wire, implying that the bounty is under threat.⁶⁷ Another significant work from this time is *Three Explosions* (Sq.14), in which a vase of flowers, a conch shell and a bird are subjected to three detonations in the foreground. This work is clearly a homage to Ori Gersht's previously discussed video work *Blow up* and the violence of the image marks a change of tone, and presages more war-like themes to come. In a sign of a developing agenda, *Shadowy* (Sq.15) also has an explosive theme. The vase of flowers with butterfly (based on a work by de Heem) throws menacing shadows on the wall behind as an impassive drone cruises past, in an oblique reference to the shadows on the wall left by vaporised victims of the first atomic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Three Explosions (Sq.14) and *Shadowy* (Sq.15) were not considered for the New York show as I felt the themes would prove too violent for the subtler subversions that the show would emphasise, such as *Still life with Reaper and bowl of ink* (Sq.20), a fully-fledged example of

⁶⁷ At this point a collector came to the studio to view new work and bought two from the sequence, including *Razor Wire*, at the end of the visit, and a natural reaction as an artist when a significant work is bought is to make more related images, likely a contributing factor to the sudden upsurge of works with contemporary elements inserted

contemporary components fusing with Golden Age references. The harmony of the still life is abruptly severed by a line of pylons (adapted from those of *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12)),⁶⁸ leaving the Chinese bowl of ink (from Kalf) plaintively segregated. The *Reaper* drone that follows the line of the electricity cables was much in the news at the time, and its ghoulish remoteness had long perturbed me, so it was with a sense of gravitas I recognised in its name a clue to how it might feature within a still life, by supplanting the role of the skull. This use of the drone would in time lead me to the writing of Jean Baudrillard and his ideas on remote warfare and simulation.

⁶⁸ Pylons are again used in a later work, *Top Predator* (Sq.44)



Part of the image archive on the studio wall in 2019 – the work in progress is *Reconnaissance* (Sq.48)

Seven works from the sequence were made on the island of Cyprus in late 2017 during a five-week residency⁶⁹ at Nicosia Municipal Art Centre (NiMAC). The residency programme was a collaboration between NiMAC, the preeminent contemporary arts institution in Nicosia, and the Land/Water research group at the University of Plymouth. The programme brief was to provide artists with an opportunity to interrogate the political, social and aesthetic significance of the so-called 'Green Line', a demilitarised zone patrolled by UN peacekeeping troops that divides the island between the nations of Greece and Turkey. The creative responses of participating artists would be collated in a concluding exhibition and publication.

My application in May 2017 proposed that the residency would provide an opportunity to bring my still life theme into direct contact with an example of the political and military tensions the work was alluding to. The underpinning of the genre in the Dutch Golden Age, with its connections to colonialism, was only tangentially relevant. My outline methodology acknowledged the limited time-frame, and proposed systematic walking and photographic documentation, feeding into studio processes similar to those of my home studio. My proposal was accepted, and in late September of 2017 I travelled to the Nicosia apartment and studio owned and managed by NiMAC.

I took eight sheets of the coated paper used for the sequence, along with graphite powders, brushes and other implements. A first priority was to source mineral spirits and linseed oil in Nicosia.⁷⁰ The studio required reorganisation and preparation, so the first week was used for research, and I began to systematically walk the Green Line, initially on the Greek side, later also on the Turkish side. I researched the history of Nicosia⁷¹ using online resources, guidebooks and through conversations with gallery staff and visits to artist studios, gradually building a picture of

⁶⁹ 28 September – 30 October 2017

⁷⁰ as these cannot be transported by plane

⁷¹ called Lefkosia by Greek Cypriots, Lefkoşa by Turkish Cypriots

the current situation in which new questions about the city's future are beginning to be asked. I also made visits to the archaeological museum and the icon museum.

The present city is in two halves, separated by the buffer zone of the Green Line established by the United Nations in 1963, which follows the previous route of the main shopping street, Ermou, and is 'the border between the Greek-majority Republic of Cyprus to the South and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'.⁷² I witnessed how the present Green Line or demilitarised zone (DMZ) prevents unauthorised movement between the two halves through the use of fences, oil drum barricades, sandbags, and more permanent structures on the Turkish side, thus disrupting Nicosia's integrity as a city, with many walking routes running into blind alleys and barricades. Military watchtowers fly the flags of the opposing nations over the buffer zone, which is abandoned and derelict, and so has become a sanctuary for flora and fauna.

Although the residency was conceptualised as a private testing of still life vocabulary in a real-life political circumstance, Nicosia's troubled colonial background and its modern-day consequences provided a telling backdrop, and as in many artist residences, as with Bakhtin's dialogism, there is an understanding that intensive introspective examination will tend to reflect the circumstance in which work was produced. Bryson's concepts of the 'Rhopographic' and 'Megalographic' as oppositional forces within still life painting were apposite, the former term denoting the intimate and domestic, the latter concerned with the grand narrative. The ubiquitous presence of UN peacekeeping forces within my daily domestic routine gave these oppositional forces a stark actuality.

High temperatures were an issue, so I walked within the medieval walls of the city soon after sunrise, charting key sites along the Green Line, the military installations punctuating it, and where possible recording the derelict demilitarised zone. As photography near the Line was discouraged or prohibited, I documented these walks casually on an iPhone, and enlarged, reviewed and printed off relevant material in the studio.

⁷² Google Arts and Culture

When I began the paintings, in a simulation of the home studio, I worked on a table beside which an easel held a board on which I pinned images printed from the documentary photography, added until the board was congested and required re-editing. The first works combined still life tropes familiar to me with elements from the city of Nicosia, such as the stacked oil barrels. Even in night-time temperatures it was problematic to rework imagery due to evaporation of the mineral spirits, and so I attempted to resolve the images in longer intensive sessions, often working through the night.

An immediate question arose as to whether the still life genre would retain its relevance to the residency theme, but as it was the core of my proposal to NiMAC, a sense of obligation ensured still life tableaux featured in the first images. This obligation was rewarded, as once the Golden Age references were collaged into the militarised urban spaces, an unexpected dialogue was generated between the fragility of the domestic realm (left moribund in the DMZ) rubbing up against the political landscape of Nicosia. Due to this inversion of the image/subject relationship, new spatial arrangements began to emerge in the work, although I was not immediately aware of this. Political and military infrastructure, visible in the physical barriers of the Green line, began to take precedence over those of the Golden Age, generating specific landscape detail that in turn dictated which still life objects would be inserted into the tableau and at what scale. One way of generalising the change would be to state that in previous work contemporary elements were 'miniaturised' into a still life scenario, whereas in Nicosia, the still life components were 'enlarged' into a militarised urban landscape. This had the effect of making the still life objects seem 'displaced', whereas previously it was the anachronistic elements that appeared out of place, e.g., the refugee camp in *Encroachment* (Sq.22). Another key distinction was that the contemporary references were to the real-life scenario rather than being extracted from the media.

Although only six works were produced, their significance for the sequence was considerable. The first work to be finished, *Postcard from Nicosia* (Sq.30), contains a still life tuned to the

Cypriot situation through the inclusion of figs, lemons and pomegranates. The black cat in the background is taken from an image in the archaeological museum. There are two signs of contemporaneity, the postcard (of the title) pinned to the wall, which shows the stacked oil barrels and barbed wire of Nicosia, and a helicopter (as used by the UN) damaging the tall blooms in the glass vase.⁷³ *Lookout vase* (Sq.33) uses Kalf's ornate vase⁷⁴ from his *Still Life with Ewer and Basin* of 1660, fenced into the DMZ, along with fruits, conch shell and a plate of oysters (from Osias Beert), set beside a checkpoint cabin.⁷⁵ The presence of the two flags on the pole gives the vase the scale of a building, in which allusions to architectural themes from China, Turkey and Europe are combined. The vase spoke well to a city in which minarets⁷⁶ featured on each side of the divide,⁷⁷ one that contained the Selimiye Mosque, formerly the Cathedral of St Sophia. *Minaret vase* uses a similar minaret form, this time based on an object in the archaeological museum, with a cat interested in the oysters, assuming a role rather like the monkey in *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12). Two oil drums to the right of the image indicate a Nicosia situation, whilst a skull lurking in the shadows taken from *Dead Game* by Adriaen van Utrecht marks the image as a *vanitas*.

The shift in spatial organisation is most notable in the final two works made for the residency. In *Flowers for no man, Nicosia* (Sq.34), the glass vase of blooms is sandwiched between checkpoints, bedecked with barbed wire and flags. The still life issues from the dark no-man's-land, as with the bright objects that shine from the dark backgrounds of Dutch pronkstilleven, whilst the punctum of postcard involving a crucifix adapted from Joannes Bellini's *Head of Christ and cartouche* echoes the military flagpoles. In *DMZ still life* (Sq.35) the abject quality is generated by the grapes atop the checkpoint cabin, entangled with barbed wire. In the foreground is an ironic animal 'stand-off' involving iguana, butterfly and grasshopper. The stacked barrels again locate the scene in Nicosia. In both works the spoils of conquest are out of the reach of either contesting entity, in an untouchable zone.

⁷³ an idea later to prove of use in Taiwan

⁷⁴ the provenance of the vase is debated, but a similar item is in Tehran museum – hence the Turkish or Middle Eastern resonances

⁷⁵ the original situated where Ermou meets Pentadaktylou street

⁷⁶ a tall tower connected to a mosque from which the call to prayer is broadcast five times a day

⁷⁷ the mosque and minaret were also being used as a cultural statement by the Turkish authorities, giving the form additional significance to the stand-off, a feature noted by another resident artist, Simon Standing, in his photo essay *Transitions iv*

The following year,⁷⁸ the work of artists participating the residency programme was included in the exhibition, *Layers of Visibility* curated for NiMAC by Director Yiannis Tousmazaris and photographic historian Liz Wells, and featured all works from the sequence made in Nicosia except for *DMZ still life*(Sq.35).⁷⁹ A publication for the exhibition (also *Layers of Visibility*) had statements from every artist and introductions by the curators. In it I explain that “associations with contemporary conflicts in my work prompted the proposal to NiMAC ... and the residency provided an opportunity to think more deeply into my subject matter in a specific situation, and created a dialogue between the unfamiliar domestic routine, and the political and military tensions in the divided city of Nicosia.”⁸⁰

There was a notable contrast between my works and those of the other artists who had produced more site-specific responses, and in this the exhibition reflected my own nervousness as to how an existing methodology could interrogate an entirely different circumstance. Certainly, the experience had a significant impact upon the sequence, but I was left doubting whether a local audience would understand the inflection, so it was useful to hear from the director that in gallery tours my works had prompted the longest discussions, partly because the relevance to Nicosia was not immediately apparent.

On returning to the UK, I worked on an unfinished piece from Nicosia entitled *Figure 8 Wire* (Sq.32), based on a flower piece by Boilly, and a few weeks later tried an alternative version, the only instance of duplication in the sequence, though I cannot recall what motivated the decision.

⁷⁸ October 2018 to January 2019

⁷⁹ being exhibited in London at that time

⁸⁰ *Layers of Visibility* Catalogue, 2018, ed Wells, E. U. of Plymouth Press. Tousmazaris comments: “these otherworldly, contemporary *Vanitas* remind the modern-day viewer not only of the fragility of earthly life but also its persistent absurdity: the world is faced daily with a multitude of rapid changes. More often than not, reality outruns social consciousness: political, social and economic turmoil on a local and international level, inequalities and corruption, oppression and exploitation, racism and xenophobia, continuous and mainly violent movements of populations and incessant persecution of people.”

This solo exhibition at Ryan Lee Gallery New York, from 11th July - 11th August 2018 represented the first major exhibition of the sequence. It was selected in early 2018 by Ryan Lee Gallery⁸¹ directors Mary Ryan and Jeff Lee. Ten works were chosen, ranging from early experiments to more complex 'mid-phase' works with anachronistic elements and two works relating to the Nicosia residency. The exhibition presented me with the first opportunity to evaluate works from the sequence in dialogue with one another.

I decided upon the title *shadows we run for*, (with lower case 's').⁸² Other titles considered for the exhibition (during its preparatory phase) appear in studio Notebook 17, and throw light on the intended theme: *Golden Age; Borderline; Reap the benefit; The Protectorate; and Beautiful Borders*.

Gill Perry,⁸³ was invited by the gallery to contribute an introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue. Her commentary was the first lengthy reflection on the sequence, and she provided newly mediated observations on my use of the graphite process in relation to Dutch painting:

the darkness of the 17th century interior, shielded by leaded windows and heavy drapes, both envelops and reveals the exotic objects displayed. In Cook's patinated greyscale these qualities are reworked as luminous shifts in tone emphasised sometimes through the depiction of light on cut glass or opulent silver objects.⁸⁴

Before the private view, I was part of a gallery conversation with New York critic David Cohen, who had previously reviewed my work. During the conversation, he asked how I felt the

⁸¹ whom I have worked with since 2005

⁸² a reworking of David Bowie's refrain 'run for the shadows' on the track *Golden Years*

⁸³ then Emeritus Professor of Art History at the Open University UK Perry has written widely on modern and contemporary art..

⁸⁴ she also notes my long-standing connection to Holland: a student exchange at the Rietveld in 1986, three solo shows and visiting lectureships in Rotterdam, Den Haag and Groningen

sequence relates to post-war artists, especially Anselm Kiefer in Germany, who had reimagined the imagery of warfare. My response at the time was:

That is such an important question, as I feel the European aesthetic of conflict that contemporary art inherits from the likes of Kiefer, Boltanski, or even Sally Mann here in the US, who use monochrome to deliver a deadpan gravitas, presents a danger for this work - especially because I appreciate the aesthetic. I'm very aware of this. I hope the bounteousness or beauty of the still lifes give them a more enigmatic emotional tone.⁸⁵

It is an interesting comment to reflect upon, as it was the first occasion when Kiefer (as opposed to Richter) had been raised in relation to the sequence. Kiefer has had a huge influence on painters of my generation and I have great respect for his work, especially pre-2000, before the paintings became monumental. Kiefer makes work as a redemptive act, most often as a German reflecting on the Holocaust, and that certainly makes his imagery of interest to the sequence – because they attempt to avoid a redemptive tone, instead wanting to introduce irony. Perhaps the closest connection comes in the work *Preparations* (Sq. 37), in which a hanging pheasant (extracted from a 1646 work by Ferdinand Bol) drips blood into a large porcelain bowl (sourced from van Aelst) in which a miniaturised submarine patrols. In Kiefer's 1983 work *Operation Sealion*, he restages a World War 2 battle in a bathtub, an image that was likely in my mind when making *Preparations* (Sq. 37). Also miniaturised is a surveillance drone crossing the image from right to left, and though small, these militaristic elements are dominant due to their unlikely positions and sizes. The two bright highlights on the bowl provide a punctum by reflecting sunlight that lies outside of the overwhelmingly sombre image.

Of other key works on show, the early *Self-portrait with bowl of ink* (Sq.11) is the only image in the sequence to incorporate a self-portrait, also a rarity in the Dutch tradition. The gaze of the face is focussed on the bowl of ink, and the ink here is an intended reference to my graphite

⁸⁵ From audio recording July 11th, 2018

medium, but also relates to an earlier group of works,⁸⁶ in which a black mirror suggests a portal to another historical realm. The metal vase contains a variety of flowers, many of them tulips, an important bloom for Golden Age Dutch society, for as Perry notes:

17th century Holland was famously gripped by so-called tulip mania. Fortunes were made and lost in a speculative bubble that surrounded the buying and selling of tulip bulbs, an exotic import into western Europe from Turkey. This highly prized flower soon came to be seen as an emblem of Dutch culture, a symbol of its entrepreneurial pre-eminence, global trade and middle-class affluence. During the seventeenth century, the golden age of Dutch history, tulips appeared regularly in some of the best known still life paintings.

In contrast, the blooms in *Crossfire ii* (Sq.29), enlarged from a work by Ruysch, fill the entire rectangle, across which fast-paced lines intrude from both left and right, made by rolling marbles at pace across the horizontal paper surface, and intended to suggest the crossfire of the title. The idea of a 'no man's land' in which competing forces vie for the precious objects that lie between them, was made soon after the Nicosia residency in response to its demilitarised zone. *Encroachment* (Sq.22) features Kalf's vase later referenced in *Lookout Vase* (Sq.33), here with an encampment of miniaturised tents, extracted from an image of the Calais 'jungle'⁸⁷ suggesting the dispossessed have returned to the bounty extracted from their territories, and implicated in the poverty of their society. The middle section of *Under the Table* (Sq.18) similarly displays the trappings of wealthy society on a linen tablecloth, whilst beneath, an encampment of refugees await crumbs.

Figure 8 wire (Sq.39) was started in Nicosia and completed (in two versions) in Devon. A metallic vase containing flowers (adapted from Boilly) and a decorative Chinese pot are protected (or segregated) by a high barbed wire fence that closes off the left-hand edge of the painting. The wire was sampled from images of a fence built by Hungary on its Serbian and Croatian border in

⁸⁶ entitled *Black Mirror* 2012-14

⁸⁷ where migrants and refugees waited for transit to the United Kingdom

response to the European migrant crisis. Perry observes that: “as the arabesque shapes of the wire echoed those of the tulip flowers, we are caught in a visual conundrum. Tulips and modern internment camps or the policing of national borders might seem at first sight to have a little in common, but rendered in the same black-grey palette their relationship appears genuine.”

In *Still life with Eurofighter* (Sq.38) a composite flower still life is slashed by two fighter jets (representing a European force) taking off from the tabletop, as if scrambled to protect the still life from imminent threat. The punctum here was the rising masculine energy of the vase as it obscures the female, vulva-shaped melon, introducing a gender dynamic to the militaristic atmosphere. Still Life with *Reaper and bowl of ink* (Sq.20) was an early image in which the still life space was modified by miniaturised allusions to the contemporary, the *Reaper* surveillance drone substituting for a *vanitas* skull, both emblematically and through linguistic pun.



Installation shot of Gallery Two, Ryan Lee New York

As the sequence began to form, it became clear that certain images were being used repeatedly, often playfully, to suggest coherence between one image and the next, and also to establish a sequence-specific vocabulary, and these tropes began to dominate the image archive on the studio wall. The New York exhibition was the first opportunity to see them in dialogue with one another, and during the conversation prior to the opening night, some of these tropes were discussed, and are expanded upon here to include tropes from works not shown in New York. Some repetition of material discussed in relation to individual works is inevitable, but included for the sake of comparison.

Flowers

Flower painting became and remained a constant theme of the sequence, and in most works there is a flower arrangement, an acknowledgement of the Golden Age obsession with flowers generally and tulips in particular (as articulated by Perry). Flowers were useful from the outset in establishing the intended irony when high colour became monotone, and they also served, as in the originals, as the most extreme emblems of *vanitas* available, in that their gorgeousness was matched by an equal fragility and ephemerality, sometimes signified in the sequence (as in the Golden Age) by falling (or fallen) petals. Assortments of flowers also provoked some of the more demanding and satisfying brush gestures, in which a bloom might be resolved in a single action (even if repeatedly rehearsed), and many of these transpositions were enjoyed for the challenge of rendering the colourful blooms in monochrome without destroying the dynamism of the original. In *Vase of flowers* (Sq. 24), for example, a direct greyscale rendering of Rachel Ruysch's⁸⁸ painting is sufficient, whilst in a subsequent work *Teetering* (Sq.25) it is placed it onto a shelf or sideboard, so as to throw threatening shadows on the wall behind.⁸⁹ Later, in *Cross Fire* (Sq. 29) and *No Man's Flowers* (Sq.34), a more pronounced sense of peril was added, by situating the flowers in a non-space criss-crossed by gunfire, represented by marks produced by skimming

⁸⁸ attributed to

⁸⁹ The addition of a postcard of Goya's *Witches* (1785) was prompted by a similar distribution of whites to the bouquet

glass marbles across the picture surface. This theme (although not the gunfire) was presaged in two images made in Nicosia where flower vases are placed into the demilitarized 'Green Line'. The penultimate work in the sequence, *Reconnaissance*, (Sq.48) repeats the Ruysch arrangement with the sole incursion of the *Reaper* drone and its cross-hair shadow.

Postcards

The postcard was initially a playful addition to acknowledge the appropriative, anachronistic nature of the assemblages, whilst also seeking to flatten the background to allude to a common spatial structure of the Dutch genre. Postcards referenced include della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* of 1460, Watteau's *Pierrot* of 1718, and Redon's *The Eye like a Strange Balloon Mounts toward Infinity* of 1882, as well as a sections of crucifixes, some adapted from Joannes Bellini. Other postcards are invented, such as the atomic blasts, and mountains based on Giotto's landscapes.⁹⁰ The postcards appear to convey cryptic meaning but are mostly selected 'in the moment' for a variety of formal and anecdotal reasons, in relation to their contexts. The *Madonna del Parto* is clearest in intent when read in relation to the title of the second work in which she appears, *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12), in that 'del Parto' in Italian means 'of childbirth', presaging the birth of Christ – a variety of 'forbidden fruit'. In *Skirmish* (Sq.36) the postcard of the atomic explosion invokes the contemporary sublime, and provides a rhyming device for the pineapple, which itself mimics a grenade, adding a semiotic confusion to the scene, as would have been achieved in Dutch still life by having vessels overturned or leaning precariously. In the final work, *Still Life with Pangolin* (Sq.49) the inclusion of the Redon ensures the sequence ends on a surrealist note.

⁹⁰ in the St Francesco cycle in Assisi

Monkeys (or Lemurs)

The image of the lemur monkey played a starring role in the progress of the sequence. The idea was first taken from a Franz Snyders market scene, in which a mischievous monkey is stealing cherries. This led to three key works: *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12); *The Thief* (Sq.23); and *Global Reach* (Sq.46). In each instance the monkey figure embodies the spirit of mischief and of freedom, of rebellion against the privilege on display, and of 'the other', the thief, an unruly element disturbing the smugness of untrammelled consumerism. In a remarkable coincidence, each of these images featuring a monkey was awarded a prize in a national competition⁹¹, with each of those prizes impacting upon where other works from the sequence would eventually be exhibited. The lemur was selected (from broad internet searches for 'monkey') due to its whiteness, which I recognised could be clearly articulated against dark Golden Age backgrounds, and would consequently provide a strong presence. The concept of a mischievous white creature with a black face opens up other complex intercultural readings to ruffle prejudices and expectations. In *Top Predator* (Sq.46) the monkey role is taken up by a mischievous cat, gazing maniacally down on the fish counter it is about to raid, whilst in the penultimate work in the sequence, *Reconnaissance* (Sq. 48), the background postcard features a lemur, probably intended as a tribute to the success of that trope.

The Bowl of Ink

The bowl of ink is a multifaceted symbol in several of the works. The bowl is always decorated Chinese porcelain,⁹² an eloquent symbol of colonialist trade dominated by Holland in the early part of the Golden Age. The porcelain is representative of rarity and high value, a value that Bryson suggests would have rubbed off on the paintings in which it was included. Ink is added to the bowl to reference the Chinese ink painting tradition I have repeatedly acknowledged as an influence on the evolution of the graphite process. A practical part of this influence is visible in

⁹¹ The New Light first prize; The Sunny Art Prize; Jackson's Art Prize (Still Life category)

⁹² as eventually imitated by Dutch Delftware

the medium selected for the sequence, being of ink-like consistency and, in the studio, distributed across several bowls of varying concentrations. The ink and bowl in combination also allude to a previous set of images that consider the concept of the 'dark mirror', in which it represents a rite of passage or moment of transgression, an idea I felt was compatible with the intentions of the sequence.

Drones

The surveillance drone was often in the news during the period and is used several times in the sequence to indicate the presence of high-tech powers, monitoring symbols of prosperity, property, and on the lookout for subversion. It was used throughout as an 'icon' rather than to refer to a particular conflict. The precise model of drone, the General Atomics MQW-9 *Reaper*, was selected for its dark pun on Death, the medieval 'Grim Reaper', sometimes represented in the *vanitas* genre by a skull. Whilst the threat conveyed by the *Reaper* drone is more chilling, skull and drone have in common a remoteness and pale impassivity. In *Critical Reflections on the Reality of Drone Warfare: Thinking with Jean Baudrillard*, Dr Syed Raza and Ghazala Rafi⁹³ "apply and test a set of Baudrillard's concepts to explain this transfigured nature of the drone war", taking their cue from Baudrillard's essay, *The Gulf War: Is It Taking Place?*⁹⁴ Baudrillard's provocative argument highlights asymmetry in relations of force to justify his opinion that war (in its conventional sense) would not happen. His position is echoed by Raza and Rafi's assertion that in drone warfare, "neither soldiers nor their adversaries have faces. The war is more a struggle of dissimulation, distortion, and disfiguration of faces.... purged of any carnal contamination or warrior's passion."⁹⁵

⁹³ IPRI Journal XVI, No.1 (Winter 2016): 1-21

⁹⁴ the second in a series of three published in February 1991 by *Liberation* newspaper

⁹⁵ IPRI Journal XVI, No.1 (Winter 2016): p. 27

Campsites

News reports of migrant and refugee crises around the world, especially within and to Europe, and especially as a consequence of the Syrian war, were a feature of the period over which the sequence was made, beginning with the reckless and insensitive destruction of the so-called 'Calais Jungle' in October 2016. Such crises were reported and theorised as the natural consequences of past actions, returning to the shores of the perpetrators. I began to incorporate tents and campsites, mainly taken from images of Calais, to represent cultures whose wealth had historically been 'appropriated', and was now being reappropriated merely through proximity, giving the images a bathetic quality. Throughout the sequence I viewed the refugee crisis and capitalism as intrinsically linked (via the manner in which global financial networks seek to exclude those without collateral, regardless of historical circumstance). These campsite refugee references represent the counter-image of militaristic imagery, such as in the plastic soldiers of *Skirmish* (Sq.36), in which vested interests compete for ownership of the precious goods. As with other contemporary components, the miniaturisation of the camps into the still life tableau was part of the strategy to reenergise and reposition the genre for the contemporary viewer.

Barbed Wire

Gill Perry notes the decorative aspect of barbed wire in her reflections on *Figure 8 wire ii* (Sq.32) in the New York exhibition. Barbed wire appeared in the earliest image of conflict, *Razor Wire* (Sq. 17), as a defensive boundary protecting the precious tableau, and it reappears later in the sequence in a similar role, particularly in images made in Nicosia, where it is associated with the Green Line defences, and finally takes centre stage in *Filigree Wire* (Sq.41). It is perhaps the most adaptable symbol of division and conflict, the more useful for it delivering an ironic lightness of touch.

This extended project with York Art Gallery (YAG) arose from an invitation from then Director, Reyahn King, following her chairing of the selection panel for the *New Light* exhibition at Bowes Museum⁹⁶ in which an early still life graphite, *Forbidden Fruit* (Sq.12), won first prize. On the preview night King mentioned that York had a good collection of Dutch still life painting and were considering a survey exhibition of Netherlandish art and, based on the iconography of *Forbidden Fruit*, she asked if I might be interested in collaborating on the project. This invitation led to a visit to York's collection some months later, to meet the curator of the collection, look through the Golden Age section, and provisionally select still life works relating to the graphite sequence.

The concept remained in formation for a year until it crystallised around a major Dutch and Flemish survey show, to which the curator, Jeanne Nuechterlein,⁹⁷ was appointed. Her thematic premise was to focus on the artist's studio, and studio practice, using the painting *St Luke drawing in front of the Virgin* by Dieric Bouts (and studio) as the centrepiece image.⁹⁸ This concept would then be used to examine Dutch and Flemish works taken from York's collection, with additional pieces taken on loan, mainly from the National Gallery. The title: *Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond 1450 – 2020* was adopted for the whole project, the 2020 end-date demonstrating YAG's commitment to bringing the tradition completely up to the minute with the inclusion of my work, viewed by the curator as a means to interrogate the Golden Age genre for the contemporary era. In a radical curatorial decision, rather than exhibit these works as a discrete set in their own room, Nuechterlein chose five graphites from the sequence⁹⁹ to be interspersed among the selected Dutch still lifes.

I assisted with the installation of the exhibition, formed of three thematic sections: the central, main gallery showing Flemish portraiture (with the Bouts centrepiece), the south galleries

⁹⁶ In November 2016, in Barnard Castle, County Durham

⁹⁷ Reader in Art History at the University of York

⁹⁸ borrowed from Bowes Museum, coincidentally where the *New Light* Prize exhibition had been held

⁹⁹ *Forbidden Fruit*, *Copter cage*; *Figure 8 wire*; *Helicopter Dragonfly*; and *Reaper returns*

showing a survey of the artist's studio as depicted through the ages, and the north galleries focused on Dutch still life painting, in which my works were interspersed among twelve old masters. The format provided an ideal testing of the sequence's ability to 'reposition' the genre for a contemporary audience. To explore those implications, I held a conversation with Nuechterlein on the afternoon of the private view and, on the first day of the exhibition, was interviewed in front of a public audience.¹⁰⁰ During the run of the exhibition, I spent two weeks in York providing lectures¹⁰¹ and workshops,¹⁰² the highest intensity interaction with audiences.

An integral component of the project outlined by YAG was that during the run of the exhibition I should produce five new works made in direct response to the Golden Age still lifes on show. These commissioned works would replace the initial graphites in a rehang at the mid-point of the exhibition, one of which YAG intended to buy for their permanent collection, whilst another would be offered to the University of York collection. Once I agreed, it was decided to delay the publication of a catalogue documenting my participation in the exhibition until the commissioned work could be included.

In accepting the commission, I imagined that my (by now established) studio method could be applied, but after a few days studying the Golden Age works in the exhibition, I felt a new approach was required. I recognised that instead of high-quality, remotely-sourced, well-known examples of the Dutch genre, I would be referencing lesser-known works with individual (as opposed to generic) qualities, making it less likely they would be apprehended as representative of the genre as a whole. The commissioned works would also be exhibited within the context of their own reference points, a situation I had not encountered or imagined previously, and this brought its own considerations.

A further recognition from spending time in the exhibition was that all subgenres of Golden Age still life were represented in the Golden Age works, including *pronkstilleven*, *vanitas*, and market

¹⁰⁰ The interview was filmed by a camera crew from Sunny Art Centre, as I had recently won the Sunny Art prize

¹⁰¹ to St John's University, the Art History department at the University of York, and to an invited audience of gallery Friends

¹⁰² the first an 'in gallery' session exploring collage, the second introducing surrealist drawing techniques, and the final one exploring image/text relationships

stall paintings,¹⁰³ and that an intellectually engaging way to proceed would be to consider the interfaces and overlaps between these genres, shifting my methodology accordingly. On returning to my studio in Devon I set about this inquiry under considerable time pressure, heightened by catalogue and framing deadlines. After a few experiments, I decided to limit the references in each commissioned work to two of the exhibited old master works, to concentrate on a collision of sub-genres, and I largely adhered to this principle.

The first two works were demanding technically. In *Memento Mori* (Sq.42), the first of the sub-group, I made a relatively faithful transcription of *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers with Bird's Nest on a Marble Ledge*¹⁰⁴ by Jan van Os, achieved over many sessions over several days, through regular removal and reapplication of the graphite medium,¹⁰⁵ eventually altering only the background scene to make it suggestive of destruction or warfare, thereby throwing an unsettling light on the harmonious display. With Abraham Hendriksz van Beyerens' *Banquet Still Life* (c.1650) I intended to record the image faithfully to preserve the simple ironic shift to monochrome with which the sequence began, but late in the process I made a slight modification by replacing the figure with spear atop the tall ornamental glass with a group of guards armed with rifles. The title of that work, *Panopticon*, captures the intention to have the pronkstilleven guarded against retaliatory threats to the legacy of colonialism.

Top Predator synthesises the Adriaenssen *Still life with Fish and Cat* (c.1631), with the image of the war-like plumed helmet extracted from van Streeck's *Vanitas*. In the former, a demonic cat leers in a predatory manner over a selection of fish cuts, whilst the helmet provides a comment on vainglory. Fusing these two predatory instincts prompted me to insert signs of industrialised warfare into the background, and add a postcard of a Eurofighter¹⁰⁶ to the foreground. In *Turvy*, the dead swan from Snyder's *A Game Stall* (a dominant presence in the original) has its neck and head drooped among the precious objects of the van Beyerens. In this reconfiguration the swan gazes mutely upon these astonishing riches in a manner not dissimilar to that of a skull, thus

¹⁰³ by Van Beyerens, Streeck, and Snyders respectively

¹⁰⁴ made between 1772-80

¹⁰⁵ filmed in its making for the art History department at the University of York

¹⁰⁶ used previously in *Eurofighter* to denote the Euro-centric nature of the problem

combining two genres (market stall, and pronkstilleven) to generate a third, *memento mori*, or *vanitas*.¹⁰⁷ Honig identifies a key difference in the genres that *Turvy* addresses: “the market scene provides real information about the economic conditions of the distribution of objects, whereas still life masks the economic function of these same objects.”¹⁰⁸

The most complex commissioned image to make was *Global Reach* (Sq.46), as it involved more than four attempts at the composition, with two sections being partially wiped away several times before reaching a solution. The globe extracted from van Streeck, a symbol of hubris in the original, is here set among a celebratory still life that includes a bowl of cherries, from which a monkey nervously steals fruit. The monkey, a lemur, was an invention harking back to earlier images, breaking the rule I had set myself.¹⁰⁹ The scenario is set against the backdrop of a military airfield (as if through a window) whilst miniaturised fighter aircraft patrol the globe. The title *Global Reach* references Holland’s dominion over much of the Far East in the 17th century, as well as the military tensions of the present day.

The catalogue, published in January 2020 under the title *Golden Age*, was an integral feature of the project because in the first section it documents the initial five works and the original installation, along with the Dutch originals in the exhibition, while in the second half it documents the five replacements that directly referenced those originals, and were eventually hung beside them. The contextual essay provided by Nuechterlein captures the complexities of my methodologies, and the social and political concerns raised: “what Cook’s images do is focus more squarely on the moral problems involved in the desire to accumulate and then protect wealth, problems intertwined with the structures of capitalism – the urge to exclude or destroy any perceived threat to prosperity leads to defensiveness, social conflict, even military intervention”.

¹⁰⁷ though not forgetting Bryson’s assertion that all still life painting is essentially a *vanitas*

¹⁰⁸ Honig, E.A. 1998 ‘On the Motives of Dutch Still Life’ *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No.34, UC Press

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps I tolerated this exception as the monkey is once again a figure of mischief and mayhem

The catalogue was reprinted to accompany two solo exhibitions of the still life works at Saul Hay Gallery Manchester and Sunny Art Centre London. *Memento Mori* (Sq.42) was purchased by York Art Gallery for its permanent collection, whilst *Turvy* (Sq.45) was purchased subsequently by the University of York and *Global Reach* (Sq.46) by the University of Plymouth. *Panopticon* was toured by the *New Light* exhibition to several UK venues.



York Art Gallery during the first iteration of *Making a Masterpiece*, October 2019

By considering aspects of process, subject, and circumstances of making, this reflective text has charted the development of a sequence of work that took as primary reference the still life genre of the Dutch Golden Age. As part of the reflection, certain 'ways of seeing' were employed, together with theories and contexts that accrued as the sequence grew. It was striking just how much context it proved necessary to unpack to capture the confluences and collisions that lead to in-the-moment visual decision-making.

Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked* exerted the initial and strongest influence, bringing the import of the genre to life through insightful analysis. It was first Bryson, then Schama in *The Embarrassment of Riches* and Hochstrasser in *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* that led me to appreciate the undertow of colonialism, capitalism, and commercialism in the genre, and thereby to recognise its potential relevance to our contemporary situation, making it all the more compelling for a contemporary artist. The complexity of subject induced distortions of space, scale and historical time in the work which, when combined with the socio-political themes, distinguished the sequence from previous work. A concept integral to the imagery, and useful for this reflection, was Benjamin's *aura*. From it derived an attentive appreciation of what it means to 'extract' from an original, to sense when the aura of the original is sufficiently deconstructed to recreate a generic (aura-less) still life (rather than a specific one) and, in considering the evolving image, to appreciate when an aura has been regained. This distinction became clearer once the ambition of the sequence permitted the inclusion of anachronistic elements which marked the work as 'new' even when indebted to multiple sources.

Though my intention in the studio is to contribute new knowledge with each new work, I have already mentioned that this intention is frequently frustrated. In the making of the sequence the yearning for the novel and unexpected was tempered by an approach in which source material was first deconstructed, often down to its smallest semiotic parts, then sampled and fused together, before being repositioned by selective reworking and additions. What the sequence

offered in terms of imaginative advancement therefore was an extension of appropriation and 'collage' methods, including that of miniaturisation and, with the modern additions to the Golden Age aesthetic, of anachronism. As each work was of the same dimension, I was concerned that one limitation might be that of scale, and yet found that from this restriction emerged a playful compositional inventiveness.¹¹⁰

I experienced a heightening of intellectual debates both within and around the sequence, not least because its sustained focus led to numerous lectures, gallery talks, research presentations, and indeed this research project. Audience responses are notoriously hard to gauge (and to gather), but that gallery directors, critics, competition juries, and curators of collections found the work convincing is an encouraging, if not conclusive, sign of positive reception.

Both the Nicosia residency and the York exhibition had notable impacts upon approaches first formed in the privacy of the home studio. Nicosia forced the sequence into dialogue with the external world, challenging the political undertow of the imagery with the real-life situation of the divided city. Kristeva's notion of the abject, part of the initial urge to 'degrade' the elegance of still life through the use of monochrome and imperfect surfaces, here became a reference point again in relation to the desecration of a city and its no-man's land. Nicosia is an instance where this reflective text addresses geopolitical elements of the imagery directly, whereas elsewhere it is tentative, and mostly notes such references in individual works, even though (prior to the York commission) the sequence appears to arrive at what might be characterised as an anti-colonialist position. Whilst in contemporary society such a position is not controversial, notions of what the legacy of colonialism entails may well be. In this phase, the spoils of empire represented in Golden Age still life are undermined first by deconstruction, then by transposition to monochrome, and finally subverted with anachronistic, often military, intrusions. In the refugee and migrant-themed images, (referencing images on the studio wall of the bombing of Aleppo, the building of the Hungarian migrant fence, and the wanton demolition of the Calais

¹¹⁰ It also led to the recognition that still life painting through the ages has tended to reproduce the subject life-size, with few examples of outsize objects, notable exceptions being Cy Twombly's roses or O'Keefe's flowers. With hindsight I realised I had adopted this principle.

jungle) the dispossessed are camped in close proximity to symbols of wealth appropriated from other cultures by European powers. The theme is complexified by intersections of colonialism and capitalism, overlaps that have recently come into sharp focus with many historic claims for redress and restoration of looted artefacts.

In this text I avoid the proposition that the sequence is engaged in a concerted critique of consumerism or capitalism because that statement would be misleading. During the period I re-read sections of Marx's *Das Kapital* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*,¹¹¹ noting the latter's telling distinction between capitalism and social commerce, and quickly came to recognise the limited ability of the images to address the subtleties of such arguments. It is not that painting itself can no longer have political relevance: the immediate example of Banksy proves that despite a general favouring of more agile technologies, in the right context a political painting can still grasp the attention of a large audience. The sequence however began as speculation in the studio, with no specific agenda, and developed from many competing impulses, from the playful and painterly to the analytic and academic. That it came to raise questions about truth and illusion, and wrestle with Europe's glorious and inglorious past by reimagining the painting of the Golden Age, was driven above all else by the desire to make images that compel the imagination.

In the Methodology I noted that a research question for the sequence arising in academic situations was: how might the 17th century Dutch still life genre, in light of its connection to the development of consumerism and capitalism, be repositioned to engage a contemporary audience?', and at the same time suggested it might not be the only question in play. I now view it as part of a larger question regarding intentionality, and the motivations for making, for what the sequence proposed, through diverse exhibition formats, was a not so much a repositioning, but a *provocation*: a collision of objects, of epochs, styles and attitudes that evoke the layered complexities (and hypocrisies) of the contemporary world, using still life as the discussion arena.

¹¹¹ and J.M. Blaut's *The Colonists Model of the World*

That toward the end of the sequence, still life had become an ‘arena’, rather than a subject (for ‘repositioning’) in itself, was significant, as this allowed still life to be used flexibly, even disrespectfully (a long way from where it began) as backing tableau for images prompted by current affairs. In this it was heavily indebted to the *vanitas* sub-genre, for while I appreciate the position of Gombrich and Bryson that all still life is essentially a *vanitas*, the clearest and most instructive examples are paintings that incorporate a sense of moral peril, as they show us how still life can point to concerns that lie beyond the tableaux. What the sequence was able to do, following their example, was to set the scene using the wealth and hubris of *pronkstilleven*, then insert reminders of our contemporary mortality and in so doing, convert them to *vanitas*.

This understanding proved of benefit for work made on a more recent residency in Taiwan¹¹² work that might be described as an offshoot of the sequence. I photographed a Ming vase in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, due to its similarity to porcelain used in the sequence. Ownership of the vase, as with many treasures in that museum, is disputed, having been removed from China in the past. The vase became a central motif in four consecutive works, emblematic of the current China/Taiwan tensions, in each of which the vase contained chrysanthemums, one of the essential ‘Four Gentlemen’ of traditional Chinese art. When patrolled or protected by attack helicopters, these flowerheads are inadvertently chopped up,¹¹³ producing a layered metaphor for the situation. The desire to engage with such political themes may be attributed to the sequence, and the vase and flowers may not previously have been recognised as potent vehicles for such expression. Rather than a play on the *vanitas* sub-genre however, this mini-series became a localised cultural lament, emphasised by the bathos of my graphite technique honouring the Chinese ink painting tradition (and my indebtedness to it) even as it described the unfolding desecration.

The project at York Art Gallery likely extended the sequence by setting me the challenge of referencing directly from lesser-known paintings, next to which my works would eventually be

¹¹² October 2022 – March 2023

¹¹³ giving certain images an oblique connection to Ori Gersht’s previously cited video, and to *Postcard to Nicosia* (Sq.30)

exhibited. This induced a change in methodology and a refocussing on the Dutch still life genre itself, in which the qualities of specific sub-genres came to the fore, at the expense of contemporary elements. These commissioned works stand out as being made in a different spirit to those that came before, irrespective of their many similarities, as they embraced a greater level of specificity and focus than the mid-phase 'sampled' images. The specificity in turn made me more selective when it came to contemporary components, leading to subtler subversions, such as the tower guards of *Panopticon*, the background of *Memento Mori* or the tiny planes in *Global Reach*. Because York (from first invitation to conclusion) spanned such a large portion of the making of the sequence, and within its two exhibitions displayed the full linguistic range of the sequence, the rehang of *Making a Masterpiece* seemed to signal a summative moment, a signal reinforced by the last days of the exhibition exactly coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19. That a global plague arrived to call time on the sequence would be too melodramatic a narrative to end on, and although Covid's immediate impact was to turn my painting to the serene English landscape of 'lockdown', still life continued to nag at my imagination, and several months later I painted what I now understand as the 'full stop' to the sequence, *Still life with Pangolin* (Sq. 49), by converting the Clara Peeters' painting in the Ashmolean Museum into a wry *vanitas* through the addition of a Chinese bowl and the unfortunate Covid-implicated pangolin.

Bryson argued for still life's rehabilitation into the mainstream, and his argument has gained good traction across a range of visual disciplines. My own still life sequence took me on a far longer and deeper journey than I had anticipated, a journey that demanded theoretical and creative resourcefulness, and one that overturned my assumptions as to still life's ability to engage the imagination and be relevant to contemporary expression. The sequence has demonstrated how innate complexities within Golden Age painting may be drawn out and developed to simultaneously destabilise and reactivate the genre, allowing it to address complex contemporary situations, and the contemporary viewer.

Still life is no longer overlooked, and has life still.

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Appendices

Appendix a) Still life works exhibited publicly.

From forty-nine works produced, thirty-seven works have to date been publicly exhibited, many of them multiple times. Individual works were exhibited a year after initiating the sequence, with *Forbidden Fruit* winning the New Light Prize in an exhibition at Bowes Museum, County Durham. Ten works were selected for a solo show in New York, whilst a further group of four won the Sunny Art Prize, an international competition based in London. Single images were included in various group exhibitions in the UK, and five images were exhibited in NiMAC, Cyprus at the end of a residency project in Nicosia. Two documentary videos were made on the sequence, and three extended essays published in catalogues, and two interviews published online. The concluding project *Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond 1450-2020* at York Art Gallery included an initial five images selected from the sequence by the curator, interspersed among Dutch Golden Age masterworks drawn from York's collection. Five commissioned works then responded directly to these old masterworks and were hung toward the end of the exhibition in place of the loaned graphite works. A catalogue entitled *Golden Age*, featuring all ten works was published by York Art Gallery¹¹⁴, with contextual essay by the curator. All ten works featured in a solo show in Manchester (with two extra works) and all twelve in a solo show at Sunny Art Centre London in 2020. One of the commissioned works was awarded the Jackson's Art Prize (still life category) in 2020, and three entered permanent public collections. A final work to mark Covid 19 was made later in 2020 and exhibited in Manchester and Wales.

Note: Of twelve works not publicly exhibited, three were sold from the studio into private collections in the UK and USA, one was acquired by a private foundation, and one went to a family collection. The remaining seven works include six pieces deemed not suitable for public exhibition and one damaged in transit.

¹¹⁴ with ACE funding

Chronology:

Exhibited at New Light Bowes Museum and Tully House Carlisle; Nov 2017 – Dec 2018

Forbidden Fruit 2017

Furious Birds 2017

Exhibited at Mall Galleries London (Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize shortlist); January 2018

The Thief 2017

Exhibited at Art First Gallery; Art London & Saatchi Gallery London; Jan 2018 and Sept 2018

Still Life with Dragonfly 2017

Birds are Furious 2017

Skirmish 2017

DMZ still life 2017

Exhibited at Ryan Lee Gallery New York; July 2018

Still Life with Eurofighter 2018

Figure 8 Fence 2018

Madonna of the Munitions 2016

Plate of Birds 2016

Preparations 2017

Self Portrait with bowl of ink 2016

No Man's Flowers 2017

Flowers for no man 2017

Encroachment 2017

Under the Table 2017

Reaper with Bowl of Ink 2017

Exhibited in Singulart online exhibition; 2018

Teetering 2017

Still Life with Pheasant 2016

Razor Wire 2016

Still Life with Sunflowers and bowl of ink 2017

Exhibited in *Layers of Visibility*, Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre; October 2018

Figure 8 wire 2018

Postcard from Nicosia 2017

Lookout Vase 2017

Flowers for No man 2017

Minaret Vase 2017

Exhibited at Sunny Art Prize London; October 2019

DMZ still life 2018

The Thief 2017

Skirmish 2017

Shadowy 2019

Exhibited at York Art Gallery; October 2019

Reaper Returns 2019

Figure 8 Wire 2018

Furious Birds 2017

Still Life with Dragonfly 2018

Forbidden Fruit 2017

Exhibited at York Art Gallery; January 2020

Top Predator 2019

Panopticon 2019

Turvy 2019

Memento Mori 2019

Global Reach 2019

Exhibited at Saul Hay Gallery Manchester; February 2020

Reaper Returns 2019

Figure 8 Wire 2018

Furious Birds 2017

Still Life with Dragonfly 2017

Top Predator 2019

Global Reach 2019

Panopticon 2019

Turvy 2019

Checker 2020

Reconnaissance 2020

Exhibited at Sunny Art Centre; August - September 2020

Reaper Returns 2019

Figure 8 Wire 2018

Furious Birds 2017

Top Predator 2019

Turvy 2019

DMZ still life 2018

The Thief 2017

Skirmish 2017

Global Reach 2019

Shadowy 2019

Checker 2020

Reconnaissance 2020

Forbidden Fruit 2017

Exhibited in York Art Gallery; *Works from the Collection*, October 2020

Memento Mori 2019

Exhibited in *New Light*, Scarborough Art Gallery; (and 3 venue tour) November 2020

Panopticon 2019

Exhibited at Sladmore Gallery London; June 2021

The Thief 2017

Forbidden Fruit 2017

Global Reach 2019

Exhibited at Saul Hay Gallery, Manchester; March 2022

Still Life with Pangolin 2020

Exhibited in *Paper after All*, Royal Cambrian Academy, Conwy; May - July 2022
and at PAPER Gallery, Manchester; November - December 2022

Still Life with Pangolin 2020

Exhibited in *Life Still*, Greenhill Arts, Moreton Hampstead, Devon; September – October 2022

Reaper Returns 2019

Forbidden Fruit 2017

Appendix b) Colour to graphite

(from a research presentation at Lancaster University, November 2017)

The transition from colour to graphite in my work can be traced back to two separate groups of sand drawings made on the banks of the Ganges River in India, in 1996 and 1997. I had initially travelled to India in a state of creative consternation, having recently completed a series of works entitled *Pleasure Dome* exhibited in a solo show that toured to four venues around the UK.¹¹⁵ In this series, key ideas and emblems from previous works were encapsulated in the illusion of a three-dimensional ‘souvenir’ dome, an illusion emphasized by being painted onto a custom-made domed-shaped panel with thick edges sanded round to encourage a three-dimensional reading. As I accompanied the exhibition around the country to provide gallery talks and workshops, the works in the exhibition began to strike me as a form of retrospective, as if the exhibition were a conclusive moment, so early in my career. The following year, having been unable to make new work, I took this sense of premature ending with me on my first visit to India, during which time I was invited to teach in Baroda¹¹⁶ and visit the painted temples of Ajanta. India accentuated the foreboding by displaying an unfamiliar colour register that rendered my Western colour palate mute. After some weeks of trying to use locally sourced pigments in largely unconvincing ways, I decided against making work altogether, and instead began to record my experiences in writing. One day I attended a Buddhist address on the far bank of the Ganges opposite the city of Varanasi, the holiest city of the Hindu faith. The river beach sand had an extraordinary fineness to it¹¹⁷ and this fine sand had been wind-combed into a spectacular low-relief pattern. As the address (given by a renowned American speaker) continued, I distractedly began to drag my fingers through the sand around me in a simple act of ‘child’s play’, enjoying contact with the Indian earth and the extraordinary surface of the sand. As afternoon became evening and the sun began to drop towards the skyline, deep shadows fell into the marks I had made, and this high relief gave the drawing a sudden, striking resonance

¹¹⁵ during 1993 and 1994

¹¹⁶ now Vadodara

¹¹⁷ reputedly because it contained the bone ash from bodies cremated on Varanasi’s notorious ‘burning ghats’

with some of the complex Hindu temple architecture in Khajuraho, visited a week earlier. Before taking a boat back across the Ganges I recoded the drawing on a cheap tourist camera, noting in my diary that this was “the first time in India I have felt creatively alive”. The following morning, excited by the memory of this drawing, I took a boat back to the same beach, now empty, and made some further sand drawings, again recording them with the cheap camera.

Back in the UK, the developed images proved to be out of focus and hence underwhelming, and so on my return to India a year later I took a higher-quality camera and travelled to Varanasi with the express intent of making new sand drawings and recording them properly on slide film. This session did not disappoint – the sand was in even better condition and the shadows come afternoon were more defined.¹¹⁸ Notwithstanding the aesthetic merits of the drawings, the experience itself provided a memorable engagement with India in a manner that felt relevant – the forms emerging from the sand were unmistakably Indian in their rhythms and details, and their ephemerality emphasized that connection. They also connected to the work of the Surrealist, Max Ernst, an artist hero of mine from student days, and from whom I learned the value of improvisation. These three factors – the intimacy of sand; the ‘performed’ architectural rhythms; and the connection to Surrealism, marked the drawings as potent creative pointers, and on returning to the UK I wanted to preserve those attributes in new work.

In a studio in Porthleven in Cornwall I made a series of experiments using sand itself, incorporated as part of the oil painting process, but this made the paint intractable, producing a gritty paste unresponsive to the touch. The sand was then exchanged for a graphite powder I already had among my studio materials, but the graphite pigmentation was more powerful than expected, and turning the oil painting very dark. On one occasion I removed excess graphite by applying sheets of coated paper to it and pulling the pigment away from the surface of the canvas (similar to ‘tonking’ as deployed by Henry Tonks, and also by Max Ernst). This paper was then discarded onto the studio floor. The painting remained a stubborn failure, but when I picked up these discarded sheets at the end of the painting session, the graphite had mingled

¹¹⁸ many of these slides were subsequently lost following a lecture

with the turpentine medium, and reacted to gravity (in the placing on the floor) to produce some spectacular, grainy, sedimentary effects, highly reminiscent of the sand drawings. The following day I began working exclusively on this coated paper, by necessity on a table, as the graphite once mixed with turpentine was highly responsive to gravity. The mixture proved sensitive to mark-making using fingers (in nitrile gloves for protection) and offered unusual detail in the graphite particles. I had, by chance, converted the graphite powder to a liquid, reversible, painting method, which was eventually made more stable by the addition of oil and dammar resin to enable the graphite to adhere to the paper. This shift to a liquid graphite process reminded me of where my journey as student artist had begun, with an interest in the spontaneous processes of the Surrealists who wanted to subvert the norms of composition and subject matter in western painting.¹¹⁹

The sand drawing connection went beyond the move to graphite and monochrome, for it encouraged more intimate, haptic ways of manipulating the pigment, including the use of fingers and unusual tools. Working on a horizontal surface, looking down at the image (as opposed to standing back from it, hanging on the wall or easel) had the effect of reducing the need for a horizon line, releasing the composition from western perspectival organisation and encouraging to novel spatial solutions.

¹¹⁹ and Western, especially French, poetry

Appendix c) Monochrome

(extract from a lecture given at University of York, November 2019)

Monochrome appeared in painting from the very first, indeed it could be argued that it was, as in the case of my own sand drawings, a quality that resulted from scarcity or rarity of pigments, as in the red or brown earth colours of prehistoric cave paintings, such as those in Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet, or the hand stencils of Australian aboriginal tribes. The geologically specific pigment used for hand stencilling, or depicting basic animal forms, give these examples added indexical potency.

Painting would move to polychrome once lifestyle allowed for more time-consuming artistic production, and once a range of pigments could be sourced from rock, plant, and animal. This is spectacularly evidenced in the Buddhist caves at Ajanta, India,¹²⁰ made around 400 BCE, and three centuries later, on a different continent, in the frescoes of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii, in which a remarkable range of earth colours are used to evoke the splendour and elegance of Roman life of the period. From this era onward the decision to deploy monochrome tended to be a result of aesthetic rather than practical demands.

The Renaissance was so termed because it represented a return to the aesthetic values of ancient Rome, for which Pompeian paintings provide a key example. Nevertheless, within the great polychrome frescoes of the Italian Renaissance there are to be found many notable monochromatic sections. A good example is within Giotto's early quattrocento masterwork, the fresco cycle of the Scrovegni Chapel, Padova, where monochrome is used on his arresting *Seven Virtues and Seven Vices* (1303-06) to suggest forms cast in stone, to emphasise archetypal status of the figures. The use of this technique became known as *grisaille*, and arguably the best example is found within the Northern Renaissance tradition, Pieter Bruegel's *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*,¹²¹ in which Jesus encounters an adulteress. Here the spare colouring

¹²⁰ ironically visited just before my sand drawing initiation into monochrome

¹²¹ representing a biblical episode from John 7-8

holds the viewer's mind to the narrative of the encounter. Nearby in Holland, immediately prior to the high key colour of Golden Age *pronkstilleven*, subdued tonalities were employed in still life painting to emphasise a humble, Calvinistic way of life. As Hanneke Grootenboen notes,¹²² "in composing their breakfast paintings, Claesz and Heda deploy a strategy of extreme reduction ... even colour has been drained from the canvas" and this ethical use of monochrome is echoed in *vanitas* skulls of the period.

The connection of *grisaille* both to sculpture (as an illusion) and to drawing (as schematic outline) is a potent one, and a reminder that the use of monochrome in painting, especially black and white, relates to drawing as an activity (in that drawing infers a closer connection to the artist's thought processes), and also to printmaking, in that from the 15th century onwards, black and white prints were made from coloured paintings as a new means of image dissemination, although because a monochrome process remained a standard for printmaking, it not pertinent to this discussion. The same argument would appear to apply to photography - it is not painting, and its monochrome character, as perfected by Daguerre and Niepce around 1830, was a limitation of that early technology. It is important to note, however, that those early photographs exerted a considerable influence on the development of the graphite works, due in part to painterly qualities caused by early darkroom chemistry, and more importantly due to their ambiguity: being at once the first mechanical representations of reality and abstracted from that reality by often being in black and white, and partially out of focus.

The influence of early photography on the work of the French painter Edgar Degas is well documented. Degas was born in the same year as the first photographs began to emerge, and trained as a painter, mainly in the classical Dutch style. The influence first of Impressionism, and then the photography of the 1870s, encouraged him to become a painter of snapshots of modern life: at the racecourse, in the street, at the theatre. At the same time, he was introduced to the monotype process, effectively a painting in printing ink onto a metal plate, run through a press to produce a single good print, (and perhaps a second time to obtain a paler 'ghost' print).

¹²² in *The Rhetoric of Perspective* University of Chicago Press 2005 p.22

Degas became entranced by the monotype's potential and explored a range of subjects using the medium, which emphasized his spontaneous mark-making, radical revisions and wipings, and the luminous, translucent effects resulting from the thin layer of ink. These qualities make Degas' monotypes essential reference points for my own painting process, as they exhibit the qualities of painting in terms of direct application of marks, and also employ a 'rehearsal-like' method in that areas may be wiped away and reworked.

Any broad introduction to the use of monochrome, even if focused on developments in Western art, is duty-bound to mention the ink painting tradition that emerged in China in the Tang dynasty around the 7th century BCE. This uninterrupted tradition, still healthy in the modern day, used black ink to generate a range of poetic landscapes, in which calligraphic text also performs a key role. The tradition survived assorted polychromatic threats,¹²³ and the persistence of the simple black on white paper method is intrinsically bound to the philosophies prevalent in the region, especially Buddhism and Taoism, which have throughout their history tended to privilege simplicity and harmony over splendour and complexity. The scholar Xu Shen (58 – 147 ACE) discusses the natural origins of Chinese inks in his renowned *Shuowen Jiezi*, explaining that the Chinese character for ink is composed of the characters for black and soil.¹²⁴ Taoism considered colour a distraction and so the poet-painters of the Chinese literati were encouraged to eschew it, in the belief that truth lies in the spirit, and that it was unnecessary to depict objects in their external colours. In Chinese ink painting there is, of course, another colour, that of white paper, or emptiness, also a key concern for my own work in which all the light sources in the imagery are made by removal of graphite.

I visited *Monochrome: Painting in Black and White* at The National Gallery London in late 2017, whilst the sequence was in progress. The exhibition brought together fifty objects painted across 700 years, including old master works from Holland by Jan van Eyck and Rembrandt, and according to curators Packer and Sliwka,¹²⁵ was "a radical new look at what happens when artists

¹²³ such as the reoccurring blue-green *shanshui* (landscape) tradition

¹²⁴ this earthy, element quality of image-making has also underpinned my own use of graphite,

¹²⁵ Lelia Packer, Curator of Paintings at the Wallace Collection, and Jennifer Sliwka, then Senior Research Fellow at King's College London

cast aside the colour spectrum and focus on the visual power of black, white, and everything in between". Gabriele Finaldi, Director of the National Gallery, suggests: "artists choose to use black and white for aesthetic, emotional, and sometimes even for moral reasons. The historical continuity and diversity of monochrome from the Middle Ages to today demonstrate how crucial a theme it is in Western art." The exhibition premise appeared to be undermined by concluding with an immersive yellow light installation *Room for One Colour* (1997) by Olafur Eliasson, the only example of the use of single colour, as opposed to black and white.¹²⁶ The curatorial position remained of interest however, especially with the suggestion that "painters reduce their colour palette ... mainly as a way of focusing the viewer's attention on a particular subject, concept, or technique. Without the complexities of working in colour, you can experiment with form, texture, mark making, and symbolic meaning." (ibid) The inclusion of Gerhard Richter was apposite, for as the catalogue points out, the grey palette for him was 'the ideal colour for indifference'¹²⁷ a crucial tone the artist wished to strike in many of his paintings, especially the Bader-Meinhof group previously discussed. The exhibition also spoke well to how, from the 15th century onward, artists made painted studies in black and white to work through challenges in their compositions: "eliminating colour allows artists to concentrate on the way light and shadow fall across the surface of a figure."

An odd footnote to this discussion on monochrome is provided by David Batchelor, in his influential book *Chromophobia*,¹²⁸ in which he suggests a prejudice against colour exists in the Western world, arguing that colour has been

systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished, and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed.

¹²⁶ Many examples of single colour monochrome exist, such as paintings by Brice Marden and Kazimir Malevich

¹²⁷ Richter G. 2004 interview

¹²⁸ Batchelor, D. 2000 *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books p.5

I find myself disagreeing with Bachelor's introductory premise, but it strikes a particularly odd note in relation to the graphite works when he begins to apportion blame: "colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological" as these are precisely the qualities I discovered in India that I felt greyscale was capable of embodying. "Colour is anarchic. Colour is wild. Colour cannot easily be made to stay within the limits of proper order" Bachelor goes on, whereas my own assertion is that for the imagination (in the making of an image), colour was constraining and deterministic.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Bachelor's concerns do appear to chime with the example of Odilon Redon, whose high key coloured flower paintings are in marked contrast to his emotionally darker, often surrealist, prints, yet who declared: "one must respect black, nothing prostitutes it. It does not please the eye and it awakens no sensuality. It is the agent of the mind far more than the most beautiful colour of the palette or prism". I have cited Redon's remark in several lectures and interviews.

Seventeenth century Holland was famously gripped by so-called tulip mania. Fortunes were made and lost in a speculative bubble that surrounded the buying and selling of tulip bulbs, then an exotic import into Western Europe from Turkey, first introduced in the sixteenth century.¹³⁰ This highly prized flower soon came to be seen as an emblem of Dutch culture, a symbol of its entrepreneurial pre-eminence, global trade and middle-class affluence. During the seventeenth century, the 'Golden Age' of Dutch history, tulips appeared regularly in some of the best known still life paintings. Dutch artists catered to the tastes of an increasingly wealthy merchant class who commissioned works of accessible and appealing subjects such as flowers and everyday domestic objects. When depicted in still life painting those household furnishings included evidence of the wealth and status of the patron. Porcelain from the east, silver tableware, expensive glassware, an abundance of fresh food and fruit, rare flowers and the ubiquitous tulip, could all signify a luxurious domestic life. As Norman Bryson has written: 'Dutch still life painting is a dialogue between this newly affluent society and its material possessions'.¹³¹

British artist Christopher Cook is fascinated by the Dutch still life genre, both as aesthetic inspiration and as evocative evidence of early colonialist expansion and emerging global capitalism. During a long association with the Netherlands, which included a student exchange at the Rietveld Academy in 1986, three solo shows and visiting lectureship in Rotterdam and Groningen, he regularly encountered still life collections in Dutch Museums, but only in the last three years began to view them as important source material. Using his now well-established monochrome technique he initially made playful transpositions of the work of Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder and Willem van Aelst. These triggered a large ongoing series of monochrome works that offer a meditation on the potential sensuality of inanimate objects and commodities, and what they might signify in a wider political economy. Tulips, flowers and ripe

¹³⁰ Holland was then known as the Northern Netherlands. For information on 'tulipmania' see A. Goldgar, *Tulipmania: Money, Honor and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

¹³¹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), p.104

fruit lurk in the shadows of this series. They involve a painterly process that combines graphite powder, resin and other solvents; they invite the spectator to explore complex surfaces and odd juxtapositions. Spectacular flowers, devoid of their original rich colour, are often combined with motifs from modern geo-politics, such as drones, refugee camps, pylons, fighter planes and plastic soldiers. Cook has drawn on his accumulated knowledge of these historic still life paintings as viable material to be appropriated and combined with evocative symbols of modern conflict.

As we scour his busy, shadowy surfaces, seeking visual clues, all is not what it seems. In *Eurofighter*, for example, ripe fruit, including a half-peeled lemon, a vase of flowers and a butterfly are painted in a precarious horizontal band across the canvas surface. Minutely observed details, scavenged and re-imagined from Dutch still life paintings, are evident in the use of varying shades of grey, sometimes merging into ominous, darker tones. The absence of rich colour, which helped to define the sensuality and affluence of the seventeenth century works, can provoke surprise. Even stranger is the effect of two fighter jets, taking off across the foreground picture plane. Any hint of the 'Golden Age' is quickly undermined. Similarly, the exotic tulips arranged in a crowded vase of cultivated flowers in *Figure 8 Wire*, are positioned next to an encroaching fence of barbed wire. As the arabesque shapes of the wire echo those of the tulip flowers, we are caught in a visual conundrum. What is the relationship between the various motifs, rendered in the same black-grey palette? Tulips and modern internment camps, or the policing of national borders, might seem at first sight to have little in common. As Cook has written: 'I wanted to maintain a balance between reverence for the original works and a destabilising tendency. Using the graphite greyscale makes this merging of historical and contemporary less jarring.'¹³²

The flowers, fruit and domestic objects that appear to flourish in Dutch still life paintings are also rich with symbolic meanings, some of which resonate with Cook's ominous modern references and dark palette. The early seventeenth century Dutch *vanitas* tradition had evolved from

¹³² All quotes in this essay are from email exchanges or interviews with the artist during 2018

paintings of skulls, candles and other obvious symbols of death to a wider range of symbolic objects such as flowers, fruit and so on, that could represent transience and inevitable mortality. Moreover, canvases teeming with seemingly disorganised objects, falling bowls and vases spilling over with flowers could also be read as representing the imminent chaos of death. Although Cook makes no direct reference to specific Dutch works on this theme, there is much in this series which might suggest an association. Wilting flowers, ripe fruit and busy, crowded compositions (as in *No Man's Flowers*, *Plate of Birds* or *Eurofighter*) evoke a sense of disarray reminiscent of some Dutch *vanitas* still life painting.

The bright colour range of the flowers, food and expensive china that adorn the bourgeois tables and marble slabs of Dutch still life painting usually merges into the darker chiaroscuro of the background. The darkness of the seventeenth century interior, shielded by leaded windows and heavy drapes, both envelops and reveals the exotic, everyday objects displayed. In Cook's patinated greyscale these contrasts are reworked as luminous shifts in detail and tone, sometimes emphasised through the depiction of light on cut glass or opulent silver objects (as in for example, *Encroachment* or *Plate of Birds*). Cook soon sought out a wider range of plants and objects, rich in historical symbolism and aesthetic potential: 'I soon tired of Bosschaert; I found his obsession with tulips a bit light for the tone I needed, so turned to Van Aelst, who has a darker range with an interest in complex, writhing leaf formations. And I used Willem Kalf regularly for his depiction of obscure glass, identified by points of light.' Van Aelst's famous game pictures (he painted over 60 of them between 1652 and 1681) which displayed the prizes and tools of hunting, form a distinctive sub-genre of Dutch still life painting. They provide evidence not only of the masculine skills of 'hunting and shooting' (with all its symbolic potential), but also of the gastronomic range of the affluent Dutch home. Game birds ready for plucking and cooking (by women in the kitchen) dominate many of these still life paintings and are echoed in Cook's *Preparations*. A pile of small dead birds in his *Plate of Birds*, also seems to reference this tradition, but provides another layer of ambiguity. There are no visible motifs of modern warfare here, but the pile of stiff, awkward-looking small birds appears strangely modern, unlike the relatively glamorous game birds of Dutch antecedents. In fact, Cook's image is based on artificial

birds removed from a Xmas tree, adding yet another layer of artifice to the composition. This composite still life reminds that all images are mediated by art, historical context, technique and artistic ambition. There are no mirror images.

Cook's painterly effects are enhanced by his distinctive use of liquid graphite, producing unexpectedly detailed surfaces. Some objects appear rapidly conceived while the minutely painted surfaces of others glisten in the refracted light. As his medium dries quite quickly, he has limited time to revise the forms and details of his crowded vases and plates of fruit. These are painted onto a powder-coated paper, which is smooth white, and resistant to oil, allowing him to add pigment in solution and then quickly remove it if necessary, sometimes taking it back to the base, and then start again. The whites in the images derive from the surface coating gleaming through the layer of graphite, and this effect of light appearing from the shadows nicely mimics the chiaroscuro of the Dutch originals in which flowers and glass vases emerge from dark interiors. His process involves a series of 'rehearsals', avoiding preparatory drawings, which he says, 'only exist as ghosts beneath the final version'. It is easy to overlook the fact that most of the images have been improvised from no particular starting point, picking up references from a multitude of photocopies pinned across his studio wall.

Consequently, Cook's surfaces appear to combine the hyper-realism of seventeenth century Dutch still life painting with more abstract, seemingly scratched surfaces that can evoke the effects of the early Daguerreotype. Many objects seem to hover uneasily, close to an ill-defined tablecloth or table edge – or drift into a shadowy background. His choice of motifs, unlikely juxtapositions, odd perspective and carefully worked, colourless monochrome surfaces are rich in irony and ambiguity. The viewer is invited to work hard to interpret the motifs and read the surface – to chase the shadows.

When the possibility arose of including Christopher Cook's work in *Making a Masterpiece: Bouts and Beyond, 1450-2020* I immediately could envisage how his images would enhance the exhibition's themes. Taking its inspiration from the fifteenth-century painting *St Luke Drawing the Virgin and Child* by the workshop of Dieric Bouts, the exhibition explores the creation of artistic imagery, especially the processes that intervene between whatever source material artists look at in the world and the final artworks that emerge at the end. Even the most 'naturalistic'-looking images are never straightforward transcriptions from reality; artists transform what they see around them, in combination with other concepts, so that their artworks will be visually powerful and effectively communicate certain ideas.

The exhibition's different sections explore this idea through artworks of various kinds: early Netherlandish paintings, drawings and prints; depictions of artists working in the studio; and the genres of 'Golden Age' Dutch and Flemish paintings—landscape, portraiture, interior genre scenes, and still life. In some cases, the transformation between real world models and painted image is visually obvious, for instance in Etty's mythological subjects, or some of the more abstract religious icons painted by Bouts and his followers. In other cases—including most of the Golden Age artworks—paintings are designed to look like casual snapshots of real-life scenes, even though they have actually been carefully constructed from disparate pieces of imagery. Cook's current work fits perfectly into the exhibition, since it embodies a highly distinctive transformation from source material to artistic image: he looks at the meticulously painted, brightly coloured still life paintings from the past and turns them into experimental black-and-white analogues, infused with signs of contemporary malaise.

In so doing, Cook's work emphasises qualities that are already present (but usually more sublimated) in the original works. Even as classic still life celebrates the accumulation of material goods enabled by international trade and the growth of capital, it hints at the darker sides of this

drive, most often with signs of transience: everything we temporarily possess in this life will decay and disappear, as will we ourselves. Some still life images, those in the *vanitas* (vanity) or *memento mori* ('remember death') tradition, highlight such meanings through well-known symbols like skulls, hourglasses or recently extinguished candles. Others hint at transience more subtly through their focus on substances that cannot endure: flowers in full bloom, just-peeled fruit, freshly carved meat and fish, short-lived insects. Occasionally a living animal intrudes mischievously on the scene, or the goods are so precariously piled that a toppling seems immanent. Such works leave viewers to decide how far to admire the rendered objects, or meditate on the inevitability of their disappearance. What Cook's images do is focus more squarely on the moral problems involved in the drive to accumulate and then protect wealth, problems that many people today see as intertwined with the structures of capitalism. The urge to exclude or destroy any perceived threat to prosperity leads to deep social conflict, even military intervention.

The presence of ten of Cook's graphite paintings at York Art Gallery have allowed direct comparison between his striking black-and-white images and the colourful paintings of traditional Dutch and Flemish still life. Initially, five of Cook's works made between 2017 and 2019, inspired by paintings scattered across various European collections, were hung alongside other examples of Golden Age still life from York Art Gallery's collection. While these five were on the walls, Cook back in his studio created five new works that respond directly to paintings at York Art Gallery, and the new works have been switched into the installation for the final weeks of the exhibition. These images respond in various creative ways to Frans Snyders's *A Game Stall*, c. 1625-30; Abraham Hendriksz van Beyerens's *Banquet Still Life*, c. 1650-1655; Alexander Adriaenssen *Still Life with Fish and Cat*, 1631; Juriaan van Streek's *Vanitas*, c. 1665-75; and Jan van Os's *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers with Bird's Nest on a Marble Ledge*, c. 1772-80.

The immediate visual contrasts seen through the hang have brought out in full force three complementary ways that Cook's images transform traditional imagery: through their subject

matter, their black-and-white aesthetic, and their experimental materiality. With each of these aspects, the comparison has heightened insights into the older works as much as the new ones.

Almost all of Cook's paintings shown in the exhibition include still life's most prevalent subject matter of luscious fruit and/or flowers, usually presented in expensive porcelain, silver or glass vessels. It is clear that for Cook these substances best convey the preciousness and human ingenuity at the heart of seventeenth-century Dutch (and modern) capitalism: they require sophisticated craft skills for their manufacture, and/or well-developed cultivation techniques and transportation networks to bring them together on a European domestic table (although many Dutch works play on the viability of such compilations, for instance in flower paintings of diverse specimens that could not in reality bloom at the same time). Another sub-genre of still life, represented in York's collection by Snyder's *A Game Stall* and Adriaenssen study of dead fish and birds, presents humanity's power to control and consume other animals, ideas that Cook develops in *Top Predator* and *Turvy*. Sometimes a living animal intrudes into such scenes to disrupt the hierarchy or visualize our animal-like urge to consume, like the cats in Snyder and Adriaenssen (the latter appearing in a slightly more sinister incarnation in Cook's *Top Predator*) and the monkeys helping themselves to the fruit in Cook's *Global Reach* and *Forbidden Fruit*.

Many traditional still lifes use striking juxtapositions to set objects in visual and thematic dialogue with one another, but they do so within well-established parameters. Adriaenssen juxtaposes the products of sea and air, Van Beyeren piles up exotic tableware and foodstuffs in a precarious composition, and Van Streek invites viewers to wonder how a globe, a helmet, a violin and images of dead political leaders might be connected. All such objects relate to human social life, and they are depicted in an internally consistent scale, usually fairly close to life-size, in paintings whose absolute size varies considerably (for instance the Snyder is a massive work at 254 centimetres in width, while the Adriaenssen is only 65 centimetres wide). Cook's paintings are all in a consistent size of 72 by 102 centimetres, but he creates more radical internal juxtapositions by interposing signs of violence and military power in the midst of the wealth, and he often does so in varying scales to accentuate the jarring contrasts. Hence the distant pylons in

Forbidden Fruit and *Top Predator*; the miniature planes, helicopters and drones in *Copter Cage*, *Reaper Returns*, *Still Life with Dragonfly* and *Global Reach*; the small snipers defending the tall cup in *Panopticon*; the burning building and explosions in the backgrounds of *Memento Mori*, *Top Predator* and *Reaper Returns*; and, this time on a more comparable scale, the barbed wire impinging on the bowl of flowers in *Figure 8 Wire*. Cook also sometimes inserts postcard images seemingly hanging on a back wall or lying on a foreground ledge to provide visual or thematic commentary, like the *Madonna del Parto* (pregnant Madonna) image in *Forbidden Fruit*, the distant mountain in *Panopticon* and the Eurofighter in *Top Predator*.

Another striking point of comparison between traditional still life and Cook's works—this time a more emphatic contrast—lies in their use of colour. Classic still life uses varied pigments suspended in oil to render the distinctive colour variations and textures of the attractive depicted materials. Cook's unique graphite technique (powdered graphite dissolved in a mixture of oil and resin) eliminates differences of colour, so that his depicted materials can only be distinguished by form and, to some extent, texture. This choice has a number of consequences. One is to emphasise, in a literal way, the metaphorical darkness of the greed and violence that so often accompanies the extraction of wealth. The luscious substances retain a kind of shiny attraction, but their reduction to greyscale encourages viewers to beware the dangers of falling prey to their seduction. Another effect of Cook's black-and-white aesthetic is to heighten the impact of absolute composition: the arrangement of light and dark across the surface becomes paramount, whereas with the older paintings it can sometimes be easy to mentally wander into their imaginary worlds and overlook the care with which they have been formally composed.

The role of the ground, or the setting, is another crucial feature of Cook's black-and-white aesthetic. Most Golden Age still life paintings—like those by Adriaenssen, Van Beyeren and Van Streek—use a dark, indistinct background to highlight by contrast the specificity of the foreground objects. Snyder offers a vague architectural setting for his dead game, and Van Os creates a hazy garden behind his fruit and flowers, but still there remains an obvious contrast with the bright, clear forms of the main subject matter. Cook's images, however, create a more

profound obscurity of ground/setting. While the foreground objects do typically emerge most forcefully, it is usually difficult to judge exactly where they might be located and how space extends behind or around them. In *Reaper Returns* we seem to be looking into a clear dark nothingness stretching to the distant smoke clouds, but the transition into distance is harder to decipher in works like *Top Predator*, and the setting is particularly obscured in images like *Copter Cage*, *Forbidden Fruit* and *Still Life with Dragonfly*. The works often enhance this deliberate obscurity with vertical and horizontal streaks which, rather than representing any particular substance or form, enliven the space with a sense of vibration. Sometimes they set off the depicted objects, but at times they threaten to meld into them, leaving one wondering where exactly each form begins and ends. The juxtaposition of objects against the partly-indecipherable grounds can be eerie, like the tall cup in *Panopticon* shimmering against its surrounding darkness, or the silver and glass vessels in *Reaper Returns* and *Turvy* half-dissolving into the ground.

These visual effects closely connect to the experimental nature of Cook's works. He works on these images while they are laid horizontally, first applying broad strokes of liquid graphite across the bright white heavy paper. He renders the forms by pushing graphite strokes away to expose parts of the ground, as much as by adding or shaping the graphite. In other words, where the Golden Age paintings carefully build up oil paint across the surface of the canvas—usually in a meticulous, relatively slow technique—Cook subtracts as much as he adds, and he repeatedly changes his mind as he works, pouring white spirit over a well-developed composition and wiping across much or all of it to start again. Where oil paint is comparatively thick and viscous, Cook's graphite is highly liquid and mobile, so that he can work quickly and instinctively. Some parts of an image are worked up in greater detail, while other elements are sketched more roughly, though when viewed up close, even the most seemingly detailed elements (like the flower petals in *Memento Mori*) are soon revealed as well-judged brush or finger strokes. Once Cook is finally satisfied with the composition, the materials dry quickly, leaving the most recently-worked elements sharply defined, while earlier forms might remain half-washed out

(for instance the cloudy mid-ground fruit in *Still Life with Dragonfly*). Seen in person, the dried graphite subtly sparkles in the light, drawing attention to the works' unusual materiality.

Cook's self-invented technique profoundly shapes the effects and meanings of his works, in contrast with the earlier paintings. In many Dutch and Flemish still lifes, individual brushstrokes become apparent if you move close enough to the picture surface, but you don't have to step back very far before they meld into a seductive illusion of reality. Materially as well as thematically, these oil paintings carefully build up a persuasive world of abundant objects, just at the edge of tangible reach. Their makers assert proud authorship through signatures, and viewers are invited to admire their pictorial analogue to the worldly wealth collected in the Netherlands. Cook's works, in contrast, overtly undermine this illusionary world. He invites us to question whether indeed we are living in another Golden Age, and if so, whose. He experiments and improvises, creates and dissolves, pushes disparate ideas together and pulls them apart again. His pictures are clearly the product of a distinctive artistic imagination, but he does not lay claim to them with signatures: the only legible word within the ten works is *Memento Mori's* 'Mori'—death—occupying the place of Van Os's signature in the lower right corner.

The changeover from the first five paintings to the second set of five was a particularly intriguing moment in the exhibition. The first group, originally made in dialogue with disparate sources and hung alongside York's still life paintings, invited categorical comparison of subjects, materials, techniques, attitudes: we could see what Cook aims to achieve, vs. the ambitions of the Dutch and Flemish works. Few viewers could be expected to recognise any of the specific quotations in Cook's images, though that hardly matters, since the works are designed to stand on their own. The second set of five created a very different opportunity. They too will stand on their own, and no doubt Cook would not want viewers to obsess too closely over comparing their details with those of the York Art Gallery paintings, but the brief opportunity to do so only enhances their interest, given the insights they offer into his varying decisions about how to use (and transform) his chosen source material.

Memento Mori and *Panopticon* reflect the overall composition of their source images most closely (Van Os and Van Beyeren respectively); they are far from exact copies but preserve most of the central material with various pictorial modifications and subtle additions: in *Memento Mori*, the substitution of a Death's-Head Hawkmoth for the butterfly at the lower edge, and the replacement of the background garden with the burning building; in *Panopticon*, the addition of the mountain image, the replacement of the background column and niche with what appears to be a picture frame surrounding mysterious ghostly forms, and the armed men taking position at the summit of the cup. Seeing these works adjacent to their source paintings is like re-seeing the originals through a transforming lens, or a semi-transparent overlay.

Top Predator goes a step further in retaining much of Adriaenssen composition but replacing the basket of songbirds with the helmet and feathers from Van Streek's *Vanitas*, inserting at front left the Eurofighter picture (which reaches towards our space like the fish on the platter) and adding the pylons and explosions in the distant background. The most radical interventions appear in the other two works. In *Turvy*'s startling composition, fruit and tableware from Van Beyeren have been pulled apart to make way for Snyder's dead swan, thus inviting the two sub-genres into an uncomfortable visual conversation. *Global Reach* retains only the trumpet and globe from Van Streek, flanked by a hanging curtain (as seen in some other Dutch paintings) and a monkey helping itself to a scattered collection of fruit. Cook's globe is imprinted and shadowed by tiny Eurofighter planes, who presumably have taken off from the airbase in the background to begin their (defensive or offensive?) patrol. The monkey, cousin to the one in *Forbidden Fruit*, looks over its shoulder at this alarming activity. As each of the five images interprets their sources in such varying ways, they underscore how the creative process is never identical from one work to the next: Cook waits to see where each image will take him, experimenting to find the most vibrant combination of visual and thematic ideas.

The opportunity to study Cook's most recent works alongside the paintings that inspired them was a rare one, but when these works move onto new venues, they will continue to provoke their viewers into questioning what kind of world, material, moral, ethical, we currently inhabit.

Works in the exhibition:

Frans Snyders, *A Game Stall*, c. 1625-30, oil on canvas, York Art Gallery

Alexander Adriaenssen, *Still Life with Fish and Cat*, 1631, oil on oak, York Art Gallery

Abraham Hendriksz van Beyeren, *Banquet Still Life*, c. 1650-1655, oil on canvas, York Art Gallery

Juriaan van Streek, *Vanitas*, c. 1665-75, oil on canvas, York Art Gallery

Jan van Os, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers with Bird's Nest on a Marble Ledge*, c. 1772-80, oil on wood, York Art Gallery

2019

Christopher Cook, *Copter Cage*, 2017, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Forbidden Fruit*, 2017, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Figure 8 Wire*, 2018, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Still Life with Dragonfly*, 2018, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Reaper Returns*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

2020

Christopher Cook, *Global Reach*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Memento mori*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Panopticon*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Top Predator*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

Christopher Cook, *Turvy*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper

CM: Where does a painting begin for you? Can you take us through your process?

CC: I see painting more as a means of inquiry and discovery than a vehicle for self-expression. An image will often begin in an open manner that allows for plenty of change and evolution to occur. In discovering what works for the image something is learnt about the physical world, or about the internal world of the self. The precise process will depend on what has been developing in the studio – there are very speculative, amorphous sessions which are all about seeing what is possible, then at other times the work can become quite focused around an idea, and also become quite detailed.

Can you tell us about how you developed the graphite powder combined with resin and oil?

The use of graphite powder relates back to two sequences of sand drawings I made on the banks of the Ganges river in India in the mid 90s. They were the only creative things that made sense in that extraordinary context, so on returning to the UK I wanted to retain some of their intimacy, direct gesture and granular quality. There then occurred a series of experiments that led me to my current process, which essentially involved adapting graphite powder to a very liquid, reversible, oil painting method. Once I'd achieved that, it completely removed my need for colour, and I've now used broadly the same approach for two decades.

How do these materials inform the subject matter of your work?

That is a far-reaching question. One reason the process has been compelling is the way in which new subjects and ideas have emerged from being alert to the way the liquid graphite behaves or performs. There are maybe three main factors in this behaviour. The first is monochrome. Having to recognise an emergent idea tonally removed colour-associations that previously would tend to lead my imagination in habitual directions. Using monochrome delays that moment

when an idea consolidates, allowing more contemplation, more potential, formal and narrative, to stay in play for longer. Monochrome also provided associations with black and white photography that I make use of from time to time - its shifting focus and apparent documentary quality. Secondly, the liquid nature of the medium demands I work horizontally - as with the India sand drawings - and this completely changed the way I create space in the images – the need for perspective or a horizon was removed, releasing unfamiliar configurations. The third feature of the medium is its granularity, the way the pigment is deposited on the surfaces when affected by solvents or gravity. An image will usually shift from the very painterly to something more like a drawing when it begins to dry out. The range of mark and gesture that encourages has expanded the range of possibilities significantly.

These characteristics of the process are central to the series of works that I've concentrated on for the past four years, from which *Global Reach* came. They are based on Dutch 17th century still life and related genres, such as *Vanitas* or *memento mori*. Because I work from dark to light, removing rather than adding pigment, I was drawn to the way these genres involve luminous, precious objects set against dark backgrounds. My initial idea was that rendering these sumptuous, colourful tableaux into deadpan monochrome would deliver a delicious irony, perhaps allowing me to comment on the aesthetics of consumerism. As the sequence progressed, and I began to read more into Dutch history of the period, I began to use a painterly collaging of objects, employing shifting scales and perspectives, and eventually introduced contemporary elements. In this way the sequence slowly began to take on metaphorical quality – the dark background, or context, for the bright objects I began to view as one involving colonialism, the exploitation of resources, the emergence of western capitalism, which in our age has led to social and ethnic division, military stand-offs, migrant crises and so on.

Can you tell us about your paper and aluminium surfaces? What types have you found are suitable for the graphite/resin?

Both the industrially coated paper and aluminium are surfaces highly resistant to oil, which means that when the medium is brushed or poured on, it can be manipulated freely for long periods of time, without leaving a permanent mark. This allows for repeated improvised drawings, during which I discover useful forms and spaces. These fluid drawings can then be erased and remade, so that my process often feels as if it is derived from a performance method: a long series of rehearsals leading to an intense couple of days of making the final image.

What are your most important artist's tools? Do you have any favourites?

I use a range of unusual implements as well as conventional brushes. I particularly like using pieces of the same type of paper I work on, cut into shapes or rolled, and used like soft palette knives. I also have a variety of printmaking tools which work well with the graphite medium.

How has the lockdown of the last few months affected your practice?

The first effect of the lockdown was to make working in the studio difficult, because my concentration would wander to thinking of what was happening, and those the virus was affecting. Studio artists are generally very good in their own company, and can make the most of silence and isolation, so this was unexpected. Gradually the beauty of the English landscape, without people, traffic or amenities, charmed me out of the difficulty, and I began to make works in the spirit of Samuel Palmer, one of the first artists to inspire me as a young student.

What are your art influences? Who are your favourite contemporary or historical artists and why?

Others within the Samuel Palmer landscape tradition, particularly William Blake and later, Paul Nash, have always held a special place for me, but della Francesca has to come first. I like experimental Surrealists such as Ernst and Klee. In terms of contemporary artists, there are many. Mamma Andersson and Neo Rauch are current favourites.

