

STILL LIFE

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A still is a state of calm, a lull in the action. But it is also the machine hidden in the woods that distills spirits into potency through heat, vapor and condensation.

In painting, a still life is a genre that captures the liveliness of inanimate objects (fruit, flowers, bowls) by suspending their sensory beauty in an intimate scene charged with the textures of paint, experience, and desire.

Hitchcock was a master of the still in film production. A simple pause of the moving camera to focus on a door or a telephone could produce powerful suspense.

Ordinary life, too, draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest. Still lives of pleasure and pain collect like marbles to bear witness to a life: the living room strewn with ribbons and wine glasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great (or not so great) day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dashboard after a hike in the mountains, the old love letters stuffed in a box in the closet, the moments of humiliation or shock that suddenly lurch into view without warning, the odd moments of spacing out when a strange malaise comes over you, the fragments of dream and experience that pull at ordinary awareness but rarely come into full frame.

A still life is a machine that distills events and scenes into a liquid potency. A static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance, it is the intensity born when the urge to react, the progress of a narrative, or the stability of a category is momentarily

suspended in a sink of what Deleuze might call “passion” (Massumi 2002: 26–28).

It gives the ordinary the charge of a suspension and an unfolding. Something happens to give pause. It could be something big and dramatic or a literal stoppage that arrests the flow of the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life. It can prompt the expectation that something might emerge out of the ordinary. Or it can make a fetish of the charged, open disguise of ordinary things.

Fragments

For years now her early childhood has been coming back to her as fragments of trauma and beauty.

She remembers her kindergarten class walking back from Woolworth’s, carrying a box of furry yellow chicks; the look of red tulips standing upright in her mother’s garden married to the taste of found raspberries and tart rhubarb ripped out of the ground when no one is looking and eaten with a spoonful of dirt.

The scene of her mother dressing to go out in a beautiful black dress and red lipstick cuts to the brilliant blood exploding from the face of the boy next door when he falls from a cliff and lands face down on the cement in front of her. Then the scene cuts to the rhythm of shocks, days later, as her father and the other men tear the cliff apart boulder by boulder. Each time one hits the ground, it shakes the glasses in the quiet, shaded pantry with an impact that seems to her transformative.

There is a spectral scene of her little brother



hunched over something in the row of pine trees that hug the house as she passes him on her way to school and then, on her way back for lunch, the sight of the house in flames and the driveway full of fire trucks with flashing red lights. The phrase “playing with matches” seems written across the blue sky in huge, white, cloud letters.

Or there is the day all of her grandparents come to visit and they are floating up the treacherous driveway in a big wide car. Then the wheels are sliding off the icy edge and the big car lurches to the verge of the cliff and hangs suspended. The white heads in the back seat sit very still while she runs, yelling for help.

There are fingers crushed in doors, the screams stifled in a panic to keep the secret of the rabbits we have captured. The rabbits are in the cellar, now running around in their wild confinement.

Sunday drives are ice cream cones dripping down sticky fingers in the back seat and the wordless theft of the baby’s cone, silent tears running down fat cheeks. There is a terrible weight of complicity when no one alerts the front seat.

There are dreamy performances like the one at the VFW hall. Her sister is the “can can” girl covered in clanking cans and she is the “balloon girl” dancing in floating plastic spheres to the lyrics of “the itsy bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka dot bikini” while everyone laughs.

Later, there are Saturday mornings spent fidgeting at her grandmother’s table while her mother and all her aunts tell graphic stories of alcoholism, accidents, violence, and cancers. Stories prompted by the seemingly simple work of remembering kinship ties and married names. And there are the nights walking the streets with her mother, peering into picture windows to catch a dreamy glimpse of scenes at rest or a telltale detail out of place. A lamp by a reading chair or a shelf of knickknacks on the wall, a chair overturned.

So still, like a postcard.

Scenes of Life

Sometimes a scene of a finished life appears like a beautiful figure on the horizon. For a minute, it’s

like a snapshot hangs suspended in the air while we watch, wide-eyed. It becomes something to chase or something to use as a screen. And it’s hard not to look for the telling little detail that will give it all away.

Her mother’s painting class has become a support group. She says it really *is* because there are really interesting people in it, meaning they have interesting lives, meaning they all have their problems.

Mary is the quiet one who never says a word and everything is always fine with her. But one day she lets something slip about a first husband and they are all over it. To make a long story short, she married the guy who helped her get away from her first husband and now they’re so happy they eat low fat, vegetarian food, take all kinds of pills, and measure and weigh everything so they can go on living forever.

Sue’s first husband was cheap; he wouldn’t spend a dime. He took to his bed on their wedding day and never got up again. He finally committed suicide on the day of her second marriage. The others notice that she talks fast and never seems to sit down.

They suspect Betty comes from money. She’s more of the garden club crowd. But her family isn’t exactly what you’d call good to her and she lost her only son in a car wreck. She paints too fast; she is just happy to get one done and get on to the next one. Her husband makes the little boxes and plaques to keep her busy. She’s nice talking but once in a while she’ll swear – “that son of a bitch.”

Carol’s husband quit working because he couldn’t take the stress. He roamed around the house all day. Then he decided that most of his stress came from her. He started following her around the house, writing down everything she did that stressed him out in a little leather notebook.

Donna’s husband left her and their four kids for a younger woman. She finally found another man but the others are suspicious of him because he told her that she was *soooo* beautiful and he said she was going to turn his life around. (The eyes roll.) She has his ring and he’s moved in with her and right away he’s quit his job and he wants her to sell her house and buy another one because he doesn’t want to have

any reminders of her former husband. And it looks like he drinks. She's counting. It looks like it's four cocktails a night, at least.

Her mother, Claire, is the good listener. She doesn't like to air her problems. So the others think she's the one with the perfect life. When she gave them all a copy of Nicholas Sparks's romantic novel, *The Notebook*, they decided that was what Claire and her husband were like. One day when one of them was talking about a woman who did something daring she said, "Well I would never do that, but I bet Claire would."

Intensities

We carry around shifting impressions of scenes spied and stories overheard. The cultural landscape vibrates with rogue intensities. There are lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of stress, loss, happiness, bitterness, longing, fear, rage, pleasure. There are fragments of experience unframed by the known stories of a life. There are bodies out of place. There are plenty of people in free fall. Resentment simmers up at the least provocation. But then a tiny act of human kindness, or a moment of shared sardonic humor in public, can set things right again as if any sign of human contact releases an unwanted tension.

She's driving onto campus early one morning. The pickup in front of her stops in the middle of the road to let an older, heavy-set woman cross the street. The woman scampers across, too fast. Then she looks back, first at the man and then all around, with a big smile, vaguely waving. Too grateful.

Sunday mornings, homeless men line up for breakfast at the Jehovah's Witness church down the street. Men of all colors, but this is no utopia of racial mixing. They look hot, tired, out of place. They come on buses or walk cross town carrying all their belongings in dirty backpacks.

She's walking in her neighborhood with Ariana. White woman, brown baby. Some teenage boys pass them, scowling. Brown boys, dressed tough, showing attitude. But as they pass, one of them turns to the others, sweetly, "Did you see that *cute* baby?"

She knows a woman in her 40s who lives alone, never married. Her life is full of good work, good

friends and family, all kinds of pleasures, passions and forms of self-knowledge. But it's like there's no frame to announce that her life has begun. She knows this is ridiculous, but she swims against a constant undertow.

It's the 4th of July and the roads are gridlocked after the fireworks. Her friend Danny and his girlfriend are sitting in traffic when they notice that the guy in the car in front of them is starting to lose it. He backs up as far as he can, touching their bumper, and then surges forward to the car in front of him. Then a big space opens in front of him. My friends watch, as if in slow motion, as he pulls his car forward as far as he can and then floors it in reverse, ramming them hard. As he pulls his car forward again, they jump out of their car. This time when he rams their car he rides up over the bumper right onto the hood of their car. His wheels spin and smoke while he dislodges his car and then he just sits there. Danny sees him reach for something on the floor of the car and imagines a gun. A traffic cop is now staring at the guy but he doesn't make a move toward him. Danny goes over and tells the cop about the something reached for on the floor. He points out that there are all kinds of people on the sidewalk. Then Danny goes over and pulls the guy out of the car and brings him over to the cop. The cop arrests him.

She pulls up to a tollbooth in New Hampshire. The attendant says the guy in the car in front of her has paid for the next car in line. It takes her a minute to process what she's hearing. Oh! They both gaze at the car ahead pulling into traffic.

She gets called to jury duty. A young African American man is facing five years minimum sentence for breaking and entering. At the jury selection, the lawyers ask a room of four hundred people if anyone has a problem with that. She says she does. She tells hypothetical stories of injustice. The lawyers are bored. They focus their attention on the only four black people in the room, all women. They are dismissed for the day. She walks back to her car behind the four black women. They are saying that they have no problem with punishment. If this man did what they say he did, he should be punished. But it isn't their place to judge. That's the Lord's place. The

next morning, the four women go up to the judge. He dismisses them. The man's lawyers immediately enter a guilty plea. The man gets 25 years because it's a repeat offense. She is amazed at the whole thing.

One day in Walgreens she sees a young, handsome, tan man waiting in line. He wears a mechanic's uniform with his name stenciled on the pocket. When he talks or smiles he holds his hand up over his mouth but everyone stares anyway. His teeth are grossly misshapen. A few stick straight out of his mouth. There is a double row on one side. Like he has never been to a dentist – not as a child, not now.

Sometimes she shops at a poor people's supermarket called Foodland. Everyone calls it "food stamps land". Homeless people walk up from the river for cheap beer and bread. People live in the parking lot in cars and vans. She begins to notice one woman who lives with her two kids in a truck. She notices her, especially, because she has long, black, dyed hair but there is always a big circle of white hair on the crown of her head. One night there is a jumpy, red-faced man with her. He runs up to her, excited by his discovery that they have six-packs for two dollars. She gives him a hard stare. He says "What? Coke! I'm talking about coke! I found a good deal on coke for the kids!" He tries to act outraged, as if he thinks he's an unsung hero, but it's like he's not quite up for it.

A few days later, she sees the jumpy, red-faced man on campus. He is on foot, crossing the street at the entrance to campus with three other men – two Latinos, one African American. They are carrying big yellow street signs and the red-faced guy is saying "Isn't this great? What did I tell you? MAN!" They are moving fast, nervous and excited. But the minute they hit the campus sidewalk they hesitate, gathering in a loose circle. The black man says something about security... the cops. "What the fuck! Oh, SHIT!" A cop car pulls up to the curb in front of them. The black man bravely goes over and sticks his head in the window. Then the red-faced guy slowly sidles up to the car. They haven't been on campus more than 60 seconds.

A stranger shows up at her door in the middle of the afternoon. She and her husband are thinking of buying the big house across the street. She wants to

know if anyone in the neighborhood uses chemicals on their lawns, or drier sheets. At first, she has to ask the woman what a drier sheet *is*. But then images pop into her head: the sweet smell of drier sheets coming in with the breeze on a cloudless day, the bright blue sky and the flowers in the yards, the little orange flags sticking up out of the grass at the schoolyard, warning that chemicals have been sprayed, the ChemLawn trucks parked up on widows' hill in front of the places with the big lawns.

She mutters a short-hand version of all these things to the woman standing at her door, but really all it takes is a look and the woman is gone, leaving little seeds of anxiety to bloom.

Public Specters

Public specters have grown intimate. There are all those bodies lined up on the talk shows, outing their loved ones for this or that monstrous act. Or the reality TV shows where the camera busts in on intimate dramas of whole families addicted to sniffing paint right out of the can. We zoom in to linger, almost lovingly, on the gallon-sized lids of paint cans scattered around on the living room carpet. Then the camera pans out to focus on the faces of the parents, and even the little kids, with rings of white paint encircling cheeks and chins like some kind of self-inflicted stigmata.

The ordinary can at any moment morph into shock or a dragging undertow. It can feel strange and unwelcoming, full of unpracticed habits and unknown knowledge. Little details out of place can feel like a tell-tale sign charged with meaning.

Day Tripping

There was a time when the two women would go on day trips, traipsing around small Texas towns in various states of preservation and faded beauty. There were town squares rimmed with ornate, stone-cut German buildings from the nineteenth century that now host antique shops or a local campaign headquarters. There were serendipitous scenes like the café that featured pies piled high with whipped cream and butter icing where the waitress described every ingredient in each of the pies in supple, loving

detail. Or the auction house where a woman with big hair and a big accent described last night's auction. People came from all around and left with ancient armoires and gilded doll carriages. Or the little police station where the two women went to find a public bathroom. A group of men in uniform talking about fishing stopped and stared at them for a long minute before a woman kindly took them behind the desk. There was the weeping icon in a monastery on a dusty hill where the women had to choose wrap-around skirts and head-scarves from a big box by the door before they could be ushered into the chapel. And the time they saw two teenage girls ride bareback into town, leaving their horses untethered behind the dry goods store while they got ice cream.

The day tripping had struck other people's fancy too. There was a day trips column in the weekly entertainment paper. There were local travel books you could carry with you to make sure you didn't forget the name of the fabulous barbeque place with the great pork chops or the authentic Mexican cantina tucked away on a side street. The New York Times had started a weekly section of the paper called "escapes".

But the two women's traipsing seemed like an intensely private thing, and special. They could rest their eyes on the scenes they happened into. They would pick up little tidbits to bring home: Czech

pastries, some peanut brittle, a butter dish in the shape of a sleeping cat. They would imagine themselves inhabiting a town where cabins covered in creeping vines took on the solid ephemerality of an inhabited place and local characters flickered in and out of view like dream figures. They would drift into a free-floating state feeling of possibility and rest. It was not small town values or clean living they were after but the way the synesthetic web of fabricated sights and tastes made objects resonant. It was as if they could dwell in the ongoing vibrance of the ordinary.

The imaginary still lives they carried home from their forays held the promise of contact. Their charged particularity framed an active process of desire. This can become a simple and basic pleasure – a way of making implicit things matter.

The practice of day-tripping keeps the dream of a private life alive by way of its pleasures and compulsion, its rhythms, its timing, its stopping to contemplate still lives.

Reference

Massumi, Brian 2002: *Parables for the Virtual*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press.