MODELS AND MATERIALITIES

CONFABULATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY STILL LIFE

EDITED BY FRANCES WOODLEY

'A LIVELY DEATH': CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC CONVERSATIONS WITH THE STILL LIFE TRADITION

ISABEL SELIGMAN

This essay will investigate how numerous elements of the still life tradition are interpreted and re-examined in the work of contemporary British artists Glenn Brown, Sam Taylor-Johnson and Helen Chadwick. Each artist makes use of traditional still life themes and tropes yet, through the different media of drawing, film, and photography, modifies different aspects of these for their own purposes. Through this analysis I will examine the inherent slipperiness of the still life genre, its relationship to other genres and the enduring preoccupations these reveal, the ambivalent nature of spectacles of ripeness, and the implications for contemporary artists attempting to represent the paradox of 'a lively Death'.

Glenn Brown was born in Hexham, Northumberland in 1966, and trained at Norwich School of Art, Bath College of Higher Education and Goldsmiths College. Described by Rochelle Steiner as a 'second generation appropriationist', over the course of his career Brown has imitated both famous paintings and styles of painting from Rembrandt's diffuse luminosity in *Nigger of the World* (2011), to Frank Auerbach's heaped impasto in *Atom Age Vampire* (1991), with the *trompe l'oeil* of a totally flat canvas.[1] Recently the artist shifted his output from painting to drawing and it is one of these drawings, *Drawing 35 (after De Heer)* (2015) (fig. 10), with which I open the essay. Brown has often described his method of appropriating a 'skeleton' from one source (the composition) and the 'skin' from another (its colour palette).[2] However, in Brown's monochrome drawings there is no 'skin' available. We are left with pure form and our attention is focused entirely on the formal manipulation of his source material. In this case it is a painting by the lesser-known Dutch artist Margaretha de Heer (active 1600-1665) (fig. 11), about whom her contemporary Sybille van Griethuysen was moved to write:

> Celebrated Margariet de Heer, whose Paint-Brush transmits your renown as far as the Sun his beams, your praise is flying on the wings of fame. Ay! Paint us a lively Death, and the obsequies of this great Messenger.[3]

While De Heer was notable for her treatment of many different types of paintings, including tavern scenes and allegories, as the phrase 'lively Death' would suggest, the artist was most celebrated for her still lifes. While still life subjects are by definition dead, or in the case of fruit and vegetable, dying, it is De Heer's skill in painting that brings them to life again, rendering them 'lively'. The 'obsequies' to which the poet refers are more ambivalent—are these the rites for the still life elements that have died, or for man himself, whose death is presaged by each smaller passing? In this context Brown's choice of model is perhaps all the more intriguing for its exhaustive and exhausting title,

Fig. 10. **Glenn Brown**
Drawing 35 (after De Heer)
2015, India ink and acrylic on panel, 75x60 cm. © Glenn Brown. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

A red cabbage, a snail, a butterfly, a dragonfly, a bee and a wood louse, in a landscape. While this reflects standard descriptive cataloguing practice for works with no known title, it also reads like a *dramatis personae* and stage set, readied not for a funeral but an eclogue or pastoral comedy.

It also reveals that the painting is what is often referred to as a 'hybrid genre'—the still life in a landscape. In the hierarchy of genres propounded by the French academy in the seventeenth century (still life, animal painting, landscape, portrait, history painting in ascending order of nobility), the still life in a landscape is a natural child of two already lowborn genres. De Heer was among the first to marry these two elements and, along with her more famous contemporary Jan Bruegel II (in paintings such as *Wooded Landscape with a Game Still Life*), popularised a genre that would be taken up with gusto in the elaborate compositions of Jan Weenix, for example *Still Life with Swan and Game before a Country Estate* (c. 1685) and would later even be sampled by the French Romantic Eugene Delacroix in his *Still Life with Lobsters* (1826-7).[4] Yet already De Heer's work frustrates the conventional connections that were to shore up the hybrid's doubtful legitimacy. In the academic hierarchy, each genre is dignified by its proximity to the arena of human action. Landscape is lent nobility by playing host to illustrious events; if it cannot be historical or mythological, it can at least be human. Brueghel's dead game in a woodland calls to mind the action of the hunt by its setting and its prizes. Weenix's luscious and overabundant piles of fruit and foliage are placed in an idealised classical pleasure garden where they might be enjoyed. De Heer's 'lively Death' is thus missing a key character. Despite the casting call of its title, De Heer's painting evokes no human actors at all, a statement almost obscene in its insolence. The prize is not exotic, it isn't even particularly appetizing. The cabbage is proud, monumental even, yet undeniably vegetable. The viewer has no means of identifying its scale and indeed it seems to tower over the landscape behind it. Shadows intimate that it is possibly on the brink of a precipice, parodying Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), and it casts a long shadow as it surveys the ravages of its insect enemies, powerless to contend. A foreshadowing of Gainsborough's famous trick where broccoli placed in a landscape setting becomes trees: its stalks are branches, its furled leaves a canopy, and on the ground beneath it two felled boughs, deforested by the insect battalions, succumb to their predations.[5]

I have been moved to consider these implications of the painting in light of its manipulation by Brown in *Drawing 35 (after De Heer)* which changes the focus of the composition entirely. The insects are removed completely—all that remains of the butterfly is the arabesque of its outline, the beetle explodes in a spatter of ink—and the cabbage has been manipulated, made squatter and broader. There is an upwardly mobile mingling of genres as the previously elongated stalk, with its arms raised in supplication (an echo of Samuel Beckett's Winnie from *Happy Days* buried to her waist) becomes instead a face, as per the vegetable fantasies of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593), taking advantage of a human tendency to discern faces in random noise, a common example of *pareidolia*. Arcimboldo's portraits of seasons were composed of the flowers, fruits and vegetables particular to them; for example, *Summer* (1572) has a face of peaches with ears of corn, and, perhaps more pertinently, the gnarled tree stump of *Winter* (1573) has as its hair a knotted thicket, its lips of fungus, its beard forked twigs. This transformation is a common trope of Brown's paintings where either still lives or body parts become portraits by virtue of their cropping and composition. In *Architecture and Morality* (2004), the head of a Lucian Freud portrait is replaced with a bunch of Henri Fantin-Latour's flowers emerging from an open collar. In *The Happiness in One's Pocket* (2012), a foot by Adolph Menzel becomes a kind of lumpen bust. The formal considerations of portraiture are thus applied to subjects with no proper claim to them. However, this is easily done. In Robert Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church' (1845), the bishop refers to a precious stone with the most immediately appreciable human

Fig. 11. **Margaretha de Heer**
A Red Cabbage, a Snail, a Butterfly, a Dragonfly, a Bee and a Woodlouse, in a Landscape
circa. 17thC, oil on panel, 39.2x28.5 cm. Private Collection.

measurement as 'Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,/Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape'.[6] In Georges Bataille's essay, 'The Big Toe' (1929), representing all that is base and repulsive, the accompanying photo by Jacques-André Boiffard of a big toe, though revolting, is hard not to read as a portrait by virtue of its presentation. Bataille was intrigued by this oscillation between attraction and repulsion in such subjects, noting that 'every horror conceals a possibility of enticement.'[7] In Brown's work the shifting sands of the drawing's subject is horrific and fascinating in equal measure, and he has recognised this process of transmogrification as a key tenet of his work:

> Transformation itself is a beautiful thing ... I spend months trying to balance the paintings so the viewer is placed at the fulcrum point oscillating endlessly between the two extremes. The beauty of a perfect French curve is contrasted by an awkward, stuttering line, or combinations of colors that have associations with fresh spring flowers while also bringing to mind rotting flesh.[8]

While most of the animal forms in De Heer's work have been removed in Brown's drawing, the snail remains but, without colour to distinguish it, becomes part of the rotting mass on which it feeds, possibly even a protruding tongue. Decay infects everything; all boundaries collapse, the crinkled edge of the leaf on the ground dissolves into the waves of the shadowed earth behind. The lopped stalk becomes a crevasse. The landscape behind disappears into a void with only a few atmospheric disturbances to suggest its previous existence, yet features begin to emerge from this state of flux. What might previously have been pretensions to the human in De Heer's original become distinctly more humanoid, if horrifyingly so.

Brown has claimed putrefaction, the decay of matter without the presence of oxygen, to be a good metaphor for painting—the subject trapped in a world without air, movement or time.[9] In Sam Taylor-Johnson's's video work *Still Life* (2001), we are presented with a filmic treatment of this theme. It opens with a towering pile of fruit, luscious and perfectly ripe, almost glowing. It is balanced on a wicker plate, a plastic ballpoint pen directing the eye towards them both with the force of a microscope's pointer. The film starts off slowly with ominous spreading shadows. The fruit droops imperceptibly, as if the whole were sighing, surrendering before the first visible signs of decay. Suddenly a peach begins to shrink before our eyes and disappears in a cloud of filaments—mould blooms as if someone were applying it with an airbrush. Then begins a rapid campaign of undermining, as putrefaction spreads from the inside out. A pear rots from the centre to its two ends, with a shrinking of unspoiled flesh. Things fall apart, all boundaries become blurred. There is a new rhythm to this volcanic landscape of shifting valleys and precipices. Glitchy flies appear like visual static, mimicking a degradation of the film itself. Colonies of mould spread over the raffia plate and table in tidal patterns. It advances, consolidates, dominates, overreaches, shrinks, disappears. Then blackness. Through it all the immobile pen, as if indicating a particular organelle in an amoeba, remains impassive in the face of death's exigency. It provides a contrast to the constant movement of life feeding on death, impervious to every attempt on it, and reminds us of our own presence, suggesting its own depiction, and our role in viewing it.

In another work by Taylor-Johnson, *A Little Death* (2002), the miracle is repeated, this time with a hare hung on a wall reminiscent of Chardin's painting *Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag* (1728-1730) (fig.12). At first there is a rumbling under the skin before all erupts into maggots, a self-consuming avalanche of flesh. 'It eats itself from within' notes Taylor-Johnson.[10] The duration of nine weeks is telescoped into four minutes in a way that converts horror into absurdity. An even more vigorous example of life after death, the hare stretches, yawns, shudders, convulses, dances a merry jig while sacs inflate and burst. A fetid darkness on the wall grows, envelops and shrinks, all with

painterly strokes. The last few stragglers and then shrivelled leather is all that's left. In Taylor-Johnson's words, 'It's a slasher version of *Still Life* ... the still life of fruit is very graceful in its disintegration whereas with *A Little Death* it's the most violent. I wasn't prepared for the horror of it'.[11] Like De Heer's *dramatis personae* and Brown's portraits, the rotting hare becomes not just a narrative, but a theatrical action, complete with heroes, villains and melodrama. All the while a peach remains untouched by the destruction, this according to Taylor-Johnson because it was genetically modified—an unexpected counterpoint to the animal's dissolution. The peach's persistence recalls that Cézanne often used plaster fruit in his still lives to avoid their rotting over the extended period it would take to complete his paintings. The theme of decaying still life elements has previously been treated in contemporary works such as Anya Gallaccio's *Preserve 'Beauty* (1991) a wall covered in 1,800 red 'Beauty' gerberas left to rot, and Marc Quinn's *Eternal Spring (Sunflower) I* (1998) which uses refrigerated silicone gel to halt the process of decomposition. Like *Self* (1991), Quinn's self-portrait frozen from his own blood, if the refrigeration equipment is turned off, the figure melts, the flowers rot; the march of time is postponed but not evaded. Yet it is the oscillation between these two states that fascinates Taylor-Johnson. In animating the process, the sense of life is augmented. Taylor-Johnson acknowledged the grace of the process: 'For me,' she said, 'as you look at this bowl of fruit, I feel that it becomes even more beautiful as it decays'.[12] The theatricality of this transformation and its implications for the spectator is also acknowledged by Brown, this time illustrated in the telescopic nature not of film, but paint:

> The pleasure of making a painting over a period of months or years is that it starts to condense experience. An array of often contradictory emotions gets wrapped up into a single work, often containing a single object. That object becomes the personification of time, and over time things grow and things decay. An ancient oak tree is generally doing both. As some branches grow, others rot away ... You see these things, but you are at best a voyeur.[13]

Both artists are thus focused on the delicate equilibrium of growth and decay, and view the personification, the anthropomorphism of time, as an aesthetic end in itself. Crucially Brown offers the image of an oak tree, something rotting yet still very much alive, thriving even, whereas the growth of Sam Taylor-Johnson's work is an endgame, a 'lively death' which can exist only for a brief moment before it flares out.

In its celebration of ephemerality, Taylor-Johnson's work finds an affinity with that of Helen Chadwick. Chadwick's visually astounding series *Wreaths to Pleasure* (1992-3) (fig.13) were first exhibited in her exhibition *Effluvia* (1994), designed to hang around a central bubbling molten chocolate fountain. Already the mourning note of the title indicates a past tense—something that is lost even at the moment it is enjoyed. The luminous cibachrome prints—a photographic process selected for its unique image clarity and purity of colour—hang in circular frames of powder-coated steel; powerful, finely-honed essays on carnality. A cast list of materials in the manner of De Heer's *Cabbage* gives an intoxicating array of characters: white narcissi; soap suds; sweet peas and Ariel; chrysanthemum and Angel Delight; delphiniums; blackberries; pink roses and Germolene; carnations; Fairy Liquid; orchids; chocolate. Chadwick's use of soap bubbles, traditional still life elements symbolising the fragility and brevity of mortal existence, recalls her notes on the inside cover of Alberto Veca's *Vanitas: Il simbolismo del tempo* (1981): 'a unique conversation poised between love / death fixed at a precise moment in this representation, from a timeless flux of changes. [...] Homo Bulla man the soap bubble' (fig. 13).[14] But it is not just traditional iconography that evokes the fleeting nature of pleasure: the very construction of the means by which each tableau is viewed renders its very appreciation instantaneous. Over a metre in diameter, the still life elements were painstakingly arranged in tanks and photographed

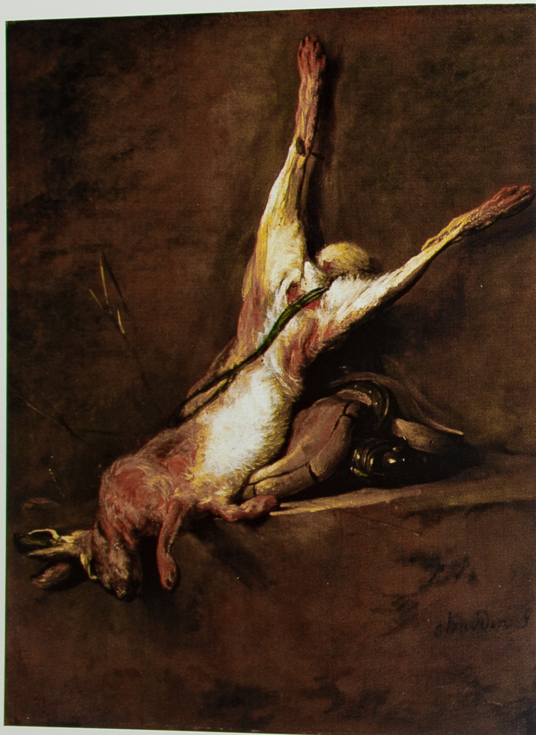

Fig. 12 **Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin**
Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag
1728-1730, oil on canvas, 98x76 cm. Musée du Louvre.

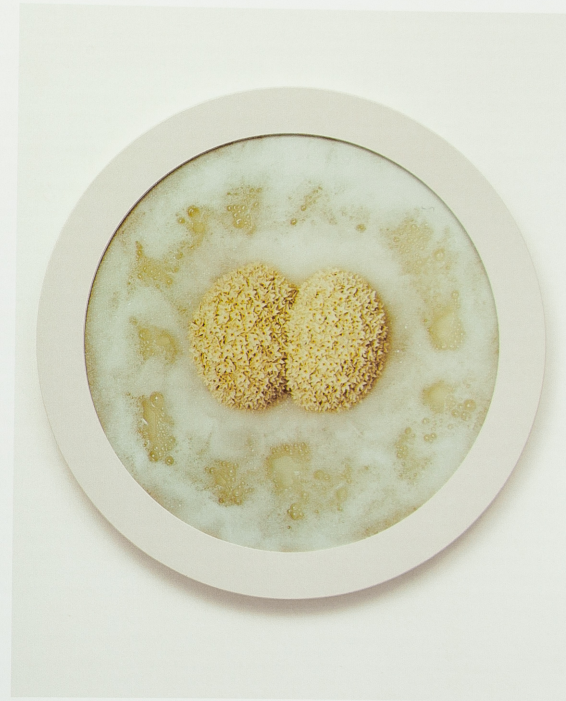

Fig. 13 **Helen Chadwick**
Wreath to Pleasure No.4
1992-1993, 110(diameter)x5 cm, cibachrome print on aluminium faced MDF in a glazed powder coated steel frame.
Photo © The Helen Chadwick Estate.

from above with a camera tripod. This results in a kaleidoscopic flattening; Chadwick's notebooks state that there should be 'no perspectival space; no vanishing point / Intimate - confrontational to the gaze'.[15] Tellingly, this disorientating perspective should not allow the 'distancing strategies of landscape view—scenery—pictorial space / but biological space / plane'.[16] The familiar household liquids and extravagant hothouse flowers immediately conjure a sense of taste and smell, and petals, fruit and fur bespeak myriad luxuriant textures. In one, white fur fringed with arum lilies is soused in molten lard, bordered by pale pink gerberas. While the boundaries are indefinite and permeable, the arrangements evoke both male and female sex organs and her notes mention 'indifferent sex organs - point of splitting into distinction',[17] referring to the biological point at which embryos develop external sexual characteristics. The growth and splitting of cells is another reference, revealed by Chadwick's reference to 'cultures' in her notes, like Petri dishes viewed from above. Her notes underscore that the limits of both the cell, and the self, are permeable: 'paradox—the cell + the self are continua + not discrete objects with clear boundaries'.[18]

Through these arresting techniques Chadwick hoped the interaction 'might start with excited curiosity, involve a thrill of recognition and end in a recoil of pleasurable disgust'.[19] It was not only the sometimes toxic substances that Chadwick believed should instigate this revulsion, but the ambivalence of flowers in their own right. The height of a flower's beauty is the very moment at which it begins to decay. They are the 'obscenely sexual component of [plants]',[20] and Chadwick drew a comparison between flowers and meat, calling both 'dying organs'.[21] Yet while one is viewed as a symbol of life and beauty, the other is repulsive. This was an inconsistency Chadwick had previously underscored in her *Meat Abstracts* series of 1989 where the formal properties of meat, including lurid colour and reflective surfaces, are activated by fluorescent bulbs among artful arrangements of organs. Chadwick draws on a long tradition of still life paintings of disembowelled meat and fish, including Annibale Carraci's, *Butcher's Shop* (c. 1583), Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox* (1655), Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag* (1728-1730) (fig. 12), and *The Ham* (1880) by Édouard Manet. But by divesting herself of the trappings of genre scene or still life and literally playing with her food, Chadwick asks us to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the meat in a direct and unabashed way, similar to the presentation of the *Wreaths* that she referred to as her 'bad blooms'. The moment of transformation in Brown's work, the erupting and deflating masses in Sam Taylor-Johnson's, are once more distilled into a single instant, the point of blossoming and decay, mourning a pleasure that is all too fleeting.

These artists' conversations with the still life tradition thus both reveal and revise various aspects of the genre's workings. Brown's exercise in the transformation of a 'lively Death' gives it a new lease of life as a kind of portrait, while revealing the complex pretensions and connotations of an already slippery genre, as well as the underlying blend of attraction and repulsion that he enacts through each of his works. His belief in transformation and decay as both aesthetic means and end is also reflected in Sam Taylor-Johnson's meditative pieces, which reveal either the slow grace, or the 'lively' action and absurdity inherent in that process of decay. Meanwhile Chadwick's work hopes to reveal the 'pleasurable disgust' of an invisible decay—one which is known rather than seen, but which underlies the enjoyment of all 'lively' mortal pleasures.

1. Steiner, Rochelle and Alison Gingeras. 'Glenn Brown: A careful concoction of "push" and "pull"' *Tate Etc*. Issue 15: Spring 2009. http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/careful-concoction-push-and-pull, accessed 17 July 2016.
2. The terms are Brown's own, quoted from interview with the artist by Sabine Folie in Alison M. Gingeras, ed. *'Dear Painter, paint me...': Painting the Figure since late Picabia*, exh. cat. Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou; Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien; Frankfurst: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2002. 88, cited *Glenn Brown*, exh. cat. London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004. 13.

3. Sybille van Griethuysen. *Klioos Kraam* [Clio's Stall] (1656). Cited and trans. Katlijne van der Stighelen, 'Margaretha de Heer'. *Dictionary of Women Artists*. Ed. Delia Gaze. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997. 657.
4. Jan Brueghel the Younger and Lucas van Uden, *Wooded Landscape with a Game Still Life*, Lempertz Sale 1067, lot 1274, https://www.lempertz.com/en/catalogues/lot/1067-1/1274-jan-brueghel-the-youngerlucas-van-uden.html, accessed 17 July 2017.
5. For Gainsborough's use of broccoli, see Perkins, Diane, Catalogue entry for Tate no. N00310, Thomas Gainsborough, *Sunset: Carthorses Drinking at a Stream*, c.1760, Tate, July 2001, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gainsborough-sunset-carthorses-drinking-at-a-stream-n00310/text-summary, accessed 17 July 2016.
6. Browning, Robert, 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church', *Robert Browning: The Poems*, vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. 414, lines 42-43.
7. Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*. New York: Zone Books, 1991. 96.
8. Matijcio, Stephen. 'Interview with Glenn Brown'. *Glenn Brown*, exh. cat. Demoines Art Centre, Iowa, 21 May – 28 August, 2016; and the Contemporary Arts Centre, Cincinati, Ohio, 9 September 2016 – 15 January 2017. Des Moines, Iowa: Des Moines Art Center, 2016. 92.
9. Matijcio, *op. cit.*. 95.
10. Shani, Annushka. 'Sam Taylor-Johnson in conversation with Annushka Shani'. *Sam Taylor-Wood: Still Lives*, exh. cat. BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 17 May-3 September, 2006. Gottingen: Steidl, BALTIC, 2006. 133.
11. Shani, *op. cit.*. 134.
12. Wendt, Selene. 'Interview with Sam Taylor-Wood, Breaking the Medium of Painting Down'. *ARTPULSE*, April 2011, http://artpulsemagazine.com/breaking-the-medium-of-painting-down, accessed 12 July 2016.
13. Matijcio, *op. cit.*. 95.
14. Written by Chadwick inside the back cover of Alberto Veca's *Vanitas: Il simbolismo del tempo*. Cited by Stephen Walker. *Helen Chadwick: Constructing identities between art and architecture*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013. 83-4.
15. Chadwick, Helen. *Notebook 1987-1996. 100*, http://hmi.onlineculture.co.uk/ttp/ttp.html, accessed 16 July 2016.
16. Ibid.
17. Chadwick, *op. cit.*. 77.
18. Chadwick, *op. cit.*. 59.
19. Chadwick, Helen and Judith Collins. 'An Opera for Milly Mudd: Artist Helen Chadwick in Conversation with Judith Collins'. Cited by Sophie Raikes. 'Unravelling the Wreaths'. *Helen Chadwick: Wreaths to Pleasure*. London: Ridinghouse, 2014, p. 16.
20. Ibid.
21. Chadwick and Collins, p.158, cited Raikes, op. cit..14.

Isabel Seligman is the Bridget Riley Art Foundation Exhibition Curator at the British Museum.