



Creating Art while observing the “Stay at Home” directive, during the current Covid-19 Crisis

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March 26, 2020

1. Introduction

Like so many of you reading this, I am observing the directive to stay at home during the current Covid-19 pandemic. For an artist, it is vital to continue making work, but being house bound, what do I work on?

Before answering that question, I first need to reflect on how I feel in this moment: I’ve never experienced anything like this. The last pandemic on this scale was the Spanish Flu of 1918. In the midst of all the progress in technology, medicine and science we have made in the 21st century, comes an uninvited guest to the table of our global community. Aside from social distancing, we are utterly defenseless and vulnerable to COVID-19. Now I understand how the people of Europe and Asia must have felt as the Bubonic plague decimated them during the middle ages and the Renaissance. In some ways we have come so far, but in other ways not. And that really hits home in this crisis. To be alive is as fragile, fleeting and beautiful as it ever was.

Having to work at home until the contagion passes, what kind of art form can I put the feelings that I have right now into? The first possibility that comes to mind is to create a still life. Still life as a category of painting has had a rich and varied history over the last 2000 years. Depending on the collection of objects assembled, a still life can communicate just about any idea.

Assignment/Exercise:

Set up a still life in your own home to draw or paint that reflects your thoughts and feelings at this time. Before you start, take some time to become aware of how you feel right now.

Write a short paragraph or two about it. Then, read through the rest of this handout. It will give you an awareness of the different expressive possibilities of still life and it will also point out design principles and technical concepts that will help you compose and execute your still life in the form of a drawing or painting.

2. Some Expressive Possibilities of Still Life

During the 17th century, Dutch and Flemish painters like [Pieter Claesz](#) were very famous for their still life paintings. Many of the still lives that they created were called “[Vanitas](#).” This type of still life featured moral commentaries on social behavior and excess (like eating, drinking, sex,) and on the transient nature of life in general. Hence the presence of the skull in so many vanitas still lives.

Although disquieting, a meditation on the fleeting nature of life might seem apropos of our current situation. If you were to do a “Vanitas” still life, given the time you live in, the culture you come from and the crisis we are facing, what would it look like?



For me, it might look something like this: Personal Protective Equipment (a face mask, disinfectant, rubber gloves, and a pair of goggles,) and a clock.

Or like me, if you are having an extremely hard time tearing yourself away from the news on the radio, or TV, you might compose a still life around a TV screen, with a newscast in progress. (You could photograph the TV screen at any given moment.)

That said, better to draw or paint the still life from life, and get the specific content of the TV screen from your reference photo.



Perhaps in spite of all this apocalyptic news you would want to make a more affirmative statement with your still life, celebrating the eternal cycle of life, transformation and rebirth. The Italians use the term “*natura morta*,” (dead nature) for still life. But the term really refers to “inanimate objects,” in the sense that the objects don’t move. Many of the most famous still lives contain stationary objects that, if only for a short time, are alive; fruit, vegetables and flowers. Check out Caravaggio’s *Basket of Fruit* c. 1599, below.



As mouthwatering as the fruit looks (like it was picked yesterday,) Death is never far off; note the blemishes on the apple and pear and some of the withered leaves. And that's the beauty of painting real fruit, vegetables and flowers (as opposed to fake ones): Their beauty is all the more precious because they are alive, and they don't last forever. When you paint them, you describe not only what they look like, but you put your finger on their lifeforce!

Also, check out the paintings of [Jean Baptiste Chardin](#), who celebrated the simple daily rituals of eating, drinking and cooking in his own home through his many wonderful and beloved still lives.



If you were to set up such a still life in your home, what would be similar, and what would be different than what you see in Chardin? Many years ago, when I was a graduate student in art at UCLA, I painted the still life to the left, inspired by my daily habit of making a cup of tea in the afternoon.

Some of you might be afraid that real vegetables, fruit or flowers won't last long enough to paint. Not exactly true: any of the fruits or vegetables you see in the still life to the left can last for weeks, often more than a month, especially if you refrigerate them when you are not working from them. (This is also true for butternut, acorn and kabocha squash, peppers of all kinds and even tomatoes and eggplants.)

Manny Cosentino, Tea Still Life,
Oil on Masonite, 18" X 24", 1983.
(Private Collection)



Although generally speaking, flowers are shorter lived, orchids are an exception. I often rescue abandoned orchids. Here is one that I rescued some years ago. This is the second year it has bloomed for me, and it has looked pretty much this way for over a month. How beautiful and symbolic that something taken for dead or spent reblooms when properly cared for. Are there any signs of rebirth or renewal around your house that you could incorporate into a still life?



PS, flowers or plants can be very complicated. If you want to make them more simple to work from, choose only a small part or piece of them to draw or paint (below, to the left.) The smaller the part, or the more you crop in, the more simple. If you are a beginner, start with one or two flowers only.



You could also compose a still life about a parent, grandparent or loved one in your house who is at high risk for the virus, using some of their personal belongings. This semester, I had a very brilliant student in my Ryman painting class who proposed setting up a still life for her final project using objects that were symbolic of her life; her interests, her passions and even her childhood. (Due to the pandemic however, we ended the semester before getting to the final project.) As I mentioned in the introduction to the assignment, depending on what objects you choose, a still life can communicate just about any idea or feeling you want it to.

3. Some Principles of Organization (for setting up and rendering your still life).

Above and beyond the ideas and feelings you bring to your still life, it should take the form of a visually interesting and good composition when you make a drawing or a painting of it. Keep the following factors in mind:

- **Balance:** Will you use symmetrical balance or asymmetrical balance? With symmetry, balance is attained by having both halves of the composition (whether you cut the composition down the middle vertically or horizontally,) be basically the same and mirror one another. With asymmetry, balance is created intuitively and the different halves of the composition (top and bottom, or right and left,) do not mirror one another. For this assignment, I recommend using asymmetrical balance. Avoid placing objects smack in the middle of the format. Contrast vertical to horizontal, near to far, front to back, intense color with more neutral color, light with dark, big with small, rough and smooth, etc. Also, think not only of the objects, but also of the negative shapes/spaces as part of your composition.
- **Open or Closed composition:** Open composition means that objects go off or hit the edges of the format/picture plane. This creates a casual, random, matter of fact feeling, as in candid photography. A closed composition is one in which all the main objects are totally within the composition and none of them touches the edges of the picture plane. This creates a more deliberate, formal or planned feeling.

Go back and study the still lives of [Chardin](#) again. What kind of balance do you see (mostly?) Do you see more open compositions, or closed compositions in his work? How does he juggle the elements mentioned in the last part of the section on **Balance**?

If you intend to create a still life that has the formal or even religious tone of say an altarpiece, you could use symmetrical balance and a closed composition. Check out Francisco de Zurbaran's [Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose](#) in the Norton Simon museum to see what that looks like. (This is approximate symmetry, as the right and left sides of the composition are not exactly alike.)

Some other issues to ponder:

- **How many objects?** I can't tell you exactly, but three or five seem to work well. (Odd numbers are usually easier to compose with than even numbers.) You also have the table plane (whatever the objects rest on,) and the wall plane (whatever is in the background.) Remember, that short of depriving the viewer of what's necessary for your idea, and short of creating a pictorially sound composition, it's better to keep things simple.
- **Your Eye level and the angle you view the still life from:** Most of the time, when we happen upon a still life in our everyday environment, say on a kitchen counter or table, we view it from any number angles and our eye level is above the objects (more so if we are standing as opposed to sitting.) Check this out in the still lives of [Cezanne](#) and [Diego Rivera](#). But, when we set up a still life, we choose what height and what angle we want to see it from. In many of Chardin's still lives, the eye level is slightly above the ledge he places the objects on. In Caravaggio's [Basket of Fruit](#), the eye level is at the bottom of the composition, in line with the ledge below the basket. More than that, the ledges in Chardin's still lives and the one in Caravaggio's [Basket of Fruit](#) are all parallel to the bottom edge of the picture plane. That means that the artist or spectator is directly in front of the ledge or shelf that the still life rests on. All of this has been deliberately planned and set up by the artists, and it gives the feeling that the objects are on stage. That, plus the style in which the objects are rendered and the dramatic lighting, suggests that the objects exist in an ideal, rather than everyday reality. If you choose to place your still life closer to eye level, think about setting it up on furniture (a chest of drawers or a cabinet,) or a shelf, that is higher off the ground than a table or counter.

- **Lighting:** How you light your still life depends on the content and mood you are trying to suggest. Daylight is natural and beautiful, but it can change with the weather, and you will need to work within a specific range of hours (usually the same three or four,) every day. The most constant and stable source of daylight comes in from a north-facing window. The direction of sunlight from a south-facing window can change rapidly unless you cover the window with a sheer white fabric to diffuse the light. If you are working at night, pay attention to the kind of light you are working in. Colors are not very beautiful in fluorescent light. For better color, consider daylight bulbs or “soft white.” For powerful effect and dramatic shadows, use a warm spotlight. If you do light with a spot, make sure you have enough fill light (preferably cooler in temperature than the spot,) to see your drawing or painting and palette as well.
- **Scale:** How large do you draw and paint your objects? That’s really up to you, but if you are working on a sustained drawing or painting that is somewhere between 11” X 14” and 18” X 24,” I suggest rendering the objects life-size or a little smaller. Remember, that at whatever size you render them, the objects should fill out the composition the way you originally intended. So, if they are supposed to go off the edges of the composition, and you make them too small, they will be stuck in the middle of the composition with a lot of empty space around them. Conversely, if you make the objects too big, you will not be able to fit them all into the composition the way you had originally planned. That said, as long the drawing of your composition comes close to your initial conception of it, that’s fine; it doesn’t have to be perfect.
- **Marking your still life in case you can’t leave it set up:** Before you begin to set up your still life, make sure that whatever spot you pick, you will have enough space and enough light to draw or paint in (consider room for your easel, and whatever you will be setting up your palette on.) Also consider whether or not you will need to move the still life or refrigerate any perishable items when you are not working on it. If this is the case, you will need to mark your objects on whatever surface they rest on. If you have set up a table to put your still life on, you might also have to mark the position of the table on the floor. Mark your own position relative to the still life on the floor as well (your feet or the legs of your easel.) You can use tape, chalk, water soluble crayons or pencils. Just be sure it can be removed later and clear it with your parents first.
- **Some final thoughts about setting up a still life:** Sometimes, setting up a still life can be just as difficult, if not more difficult than drawing or painting it, as there are so many choices to make. That said, having an idea of which objects to use, where you will set them and how you will light them, makes your job easier. Once you start placing the objects into the still life, take your time, get comfortable and don’t rush. Give yourself an hour or forty-five minutes to experiment: move the objects around and walk around the still life to see it from different angles. If you are using a spot, try lighting from different angles. Above is the same still life seen from two different angles. After you have spent some time experimenting and tweaking, use your instincts and your knowledge of composition and balance and go with whatever options feel right to you. Once you begin to paint or draw, any little kinks you encounter will often fade away as you continue to work on successive days. (If something does continue to bother you, you can tweak it later on anyway.)



4. Conclusion

This has been an assignment that addresses some of the expressive possibilities and technical aspects of the often-overlooked genre of still life. I hope I have provided you with an inspiring but practical means to continue making art in the context of the “Stay At Home” directive during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Stay safe, enjoy your work and keep on creating!

Sincerely,

Manny Cosentino, MFA Artist, Ryman Arts Instructor