

**Brian Sayers:**

In the Archaeological Museum of Naples, you will find a vast table-top model of Pompeii that replicates in miniature the excavated city, reproducing in train-set detail the devastated villas and shops within the perfectly preserved street plan grid. A visit to the actual remains of the city destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius is nowadays usually undertaken in the glare of Mediterranean sunlight, in the company of several hundred other eager, chatty visitors, as happy as a coach-outing to a retail park. In contrast, the shades are never disturbed in the crypt-cool of the Museum where the model somehow preserves an aftertaste of desolation quite absent from the actual site.

You view the things depicted in a painting by Brian Sayers from a somewhat similar viewpoint, looking down from above on boxes, jugs, cones and funnels, standing shoulder to shoulder on a dark ground. Though perspective is occasionally employed in the sense that lower items sometimes, almost reluctantly overlap higher ones, they mostly hold to their own rectangular cells. The objects do not recede; indeed seem larger, and more crowded towards the top of the painting. A slight gradient to one side suggests that a degree or too more tilt and the whole lot would go sliding out of the frame.

Some of the objects are clearly part of the painter's paraphernalia — turps canisters, tins for linseed oil, primitive sprays, pumps and vials — while others may be the sort of half-useful stuff lurking at the back of many kitchen cupboards. A third category may be borrowed from the traditional repertoire of symbols of mortality, sanctity and passing time: extinguished candles, empty white plates and discarded clay pipes.

But it appears that any considerations of use are remote from the artist's concerns: this is certainly no hearth-warmed domestic scene, with fresh produce spilling across the surface, dew upon the peach skin etc. In *Pour Down like Silver* a single seashell and bowl of inedible looking berries are the sole representatives of the natural world.

It is the distribution of the objects across their field that first engages: the interplay of solids against flatness, light and dark and the variations of shape and size against the implied grid upon which they seem to be laid out. It is tempting to reach for the off-the-peg analogy of a chessboard, but the relation between the objects and that grid is complex, not literal. It is as if the foundations of the painting carry within them the frail ghost of modernism, of Malevich, Mondrian and Ryman. Sayers uses his objects like a hiker in an unfavourable wind, selecting heavy stones to pin down his map. There is an endlessly enjoyable pairing of, and modulation between round and square objects, gathered subtly closer to the top right, then allowed to drift apart towards the opposite corner.

Sayers spurns a whole branch of still-life tradition by demonstrating scant interest in conveying the surface or material qualities of depicted objects. Even the smaller paintings, such as *Figure* or *Enclosure*, are an investigation, or rather a sensuous enjoyment of how two or three forms approach each other, how space divides, rather than offering any further resolution of detail. What is recorded instead in the surface of the paint is the layering and revisions of the shapes and the crisscrossing of brush strokes.

Though the up-tilted space is familiar from Cezanne's still-life compositions, there is not even the pretence of studied casualness that is that artist's opening conceit. If we need a narrative for Sayers' arrangements, the closest might be the bric-a-brac stall at a holiday village, with ancient utensils and vessels of dubious use, sorted and paraded for selection, by the browsers, for their personal cabinet of curios.

In *The Singing Butler* some scissors form a blunt X off to the bottom left, suggesting a pirate's treasure map or danger sign. It is possible to divine a much larger diagonal X spanning the whole composition, the centre of which would be a void between a beaker, upturned funnel, box and whisk-like shape: two objects described in the round with shadows and modelling, one painted flat to the picture surface like a trapdoor flap, the last incised into the paint surface, probably with the wrong end of the brush. The empty centre of the painting is designed to disguise its compositional artifice, inviting us instead to scan the field of objects as we would the market stall.

Light appears to fall consistently but undramatically, lending paler objects the luminosity of bone by moonlight. As we search for the diminutive figures that occasionally creep around the edges of the paintings (00-scale burglars sneaking in?) we are the watchmen of the necropolis.

In his book *Looking at the Overlooked*<sup>1</sup> Norman Bryson makes lucid distinctions between different traditions of still life painting. There is that exemplified in many Dutch still lives, of staged glimpses into the domestic routines of kitchen and parlour. Half-eaten food, utensils and opened bottles: all the leavings of conviviality or of kitchen work signal the vicinity of people and their lives. Another, opposing tradition is that embodied most strikingly in the paintings of Juan Sánchez Cotán. By the device of depicting specimens of vegetable and fruit isolated, hanging by threads in a framed dark void, the artist effectively removed the penumbra of human activity. This was, apparently, an actual practice — of preserving produce by suspension in a *cantarero*, a cooling chamber — rather than simply an artistic device, but to our eyes the fruit and veg appeared have been not merely preserved but entombed in a vacuum as dark and empty as outer space. In the still lives of another Spaniard, Zurbarán, fruit, flowers and vessels are also paraded in splendid isolation, available for forensic optical inspection, but about as convivial as altar-ware.

A third, more recent still-life exponent is useful in mapping the genealogy of Sayers' work. In Morandi's small triumphs, regiments of jars and bottles are mustered and clustered, not as signifiers of the kitchen or dining table, but in the service of art, as testified by the vast library of containers, collected, and some specially repainted by the artist, lining the shelves his preserved studio in Bologna. If they ever carried any narrative of human activity, it would seem to be a trope for mid-twentieth century paranoia: huddled groups of dissenters closing ranks against hostile authoritarianism. This is perhaps lost to many of Morandi's modern admirers: the compositions are now tastefully mimicked in monochrome window displays at Habitat or John Lewis.

Do Sayers' paintings fit onto the end of this austere tradition, perhaps alongside the cake-stands and regimented pastries of another 'still-lifer' discussed in back issues of this periodical, Wayne Thiebaud?<sup>2</sup> Sayers' work could almost be the outcome of an experiment to kidnap Thiebaud and bring him north, locking him away from all that Californian sunshine and high-sugar-content food.

In comparison to other recent experiments in extending the still life genre — William Daniels' photo-realist, foil-wrapped tableaux, for example — Sayers' dun palette of browns, whites and greys (reminiscent of William Scott's epigrammatic arrangements), and his refusal to be distracted by surface or detail, would seem to hanker for a less garish, black-and-white-TV era, were it not that, in their fundamental structure, they link with a widely shared facet of contemporary experience, and seem to comment, dolefully, on all our attempts to organise our little worlds. As I tap out these words, I can see, behind and around the open window of this document, the ranked 'icons' and folders of the *computer desktop*. The 'icons' — mostly variations of little off-cut boxes or book shapes — each label another job to finish, another stash of pictures to look at, another application waiting to spring open on the screen. A remarkably wide range of people — scientists, writers, policemen, doctors, artists, call-centre operatives — will spend a good slice of every day gazing at a similar arrangement, occasionally clicking or

rearranging the little elements. You may attempt to disguise the backdrop with a gaudy Hawaiian beach scene or some fluffy kittens, but it always spells Work. As an indexical sign of labour and the daily routine, the computer desktop screen is now as universally understood as (and more widely applicable than) once were the images of endless rows of typists or men streaming through factory gates.

The 'graphical user interface' of computers is a clever attempt to allow us to imagine the inside of our computer by making it look like a picture, with things in it that we can open or move, or, as is implied in the term 'desktop', a table with things on it. Although painters have worked enthusiastically to make their medium be informed by, mimic and refer to film, television and photography, very few have addressed the mundane fiction of the computer desktop. Perhaps they are daunted by the risk of mere illustration, or maybe they feel outmanoeuvred by the continuously mutating and evolving world of Windows.

But consider Sayers' serried objects as the mysteriously transformed icons of a computer desktop — like a skyscraper dreamt of and constructed by Tudor wood-carvers, or a spaceship drawn by Incas — and they take on the potential for a subtle lament for lost hours, as melancholy as the slow ticking of the clock for the Victorian clerk on his high stool. Their maze-like grids speak of trapped time and the unlabelled objects of un-indexed archives that will never be retrieved, of memories wiped. In this respect Sayers' paintings replenish the most deadly weapon of the still-life armoury of significance: the *memento mori*.

Jeffrey Dennis

<sup>1</sup> *Looking at the Overlooked - Four essays on Still Life Painting* Norman Bryson 1990  
ISBN 0-948462-07-8 Reaktion Books Ltd, London

<sup>2</sup> Colin Smith's interview with Wayne Thiebaud, and Wayne Thiebaud's discussion of Giorgio Morandi's work appeared in *Turps Banana* Issue Three

Brian Sayers' solo exhibition was at Long & Ryle, London, 11<sup>th</sup> October – 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2007

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