

## Christopher Schreck

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### ON THE STILL-LIFE NEW WAVE

Anyone who's been keeping up with art photography the past few years is well aware of the swell of still-life images currently flooding dashboards and gallery walls. It's been a remarkable thing, witnessing how quickly and decisively this most traditional of genres, which for decades had been confined to the realms of advertising and stock photography, has reasserted itself as a viable mode of artistic image making, resulting in some of the most fresh-feeling imagery in recent memory. Some readers, however, may share my sense that this moment of rediscovery has recently begun to show signs of exhaustion – that there are simply too many people repeating the same basic formulas with diminishing results.

Such is the fate of the fad, of course, and like light leaks and camping-themed photos before it, our current interest in still-lives will undoubtedly fade in due course. But my sense is that this recent revival is more than just another visual trend to be enjoyed, endured, and dismissed in short order: it's a timely, entirely logical development, one that reflects both our current cultural condition and photography's place within it. It's part of a larger cycle and deserves our attention.

The trouble is, cycles unfold at accelerated speeds online – what might have developed into a valid movement given an ample incubation period can easily be reduced to a momentary meme instead. So my purpose in writing this piece is to suggest that for those of us who are interested in this facet of art photography, it might be a good time to pause, look at what's been done so far, and consider how we might frame the conversation moving forward.



Rachel De Jooode

In searching for possible new directions, it could be helpful first to identify some of the traits that make the still-life so appealing to this generation of emerging art photographers. Cynics, of course, would argue that the mode's popularity merely reflects how easily its aesthetic is approximated and imitated – in other words, *everyone's* doing it because *anyone* can do it. There could be some truth to this. Perhaps more than any other style, still-life shooting allows the photographer to control both how and when he works; rather than hunting and waiting for decisive moments, he can conceive, construct, and capture his images at his own leisure, his studio setting and inanimate subjects allowing for precise and predictable results. On this basis, one could argue that it's generally easier to take a competent still-life photo than to produce other kinds of imagery - a striking street portrait, for instance. But while this may or may not account for the sheer *amount* of still-life work being produced, the argument does little to explain why the style has returned to popularity at this particular point in time.



*Wynne Veen*

Rather than chalk things up to laziness, I tend to align my view with those of people like Matthew Thompson and Anne Ellegood, who have argued elsewhere that this recent rediscovery of still-lives has everything to do with the predominance of digital technology. The breakdown goes as follows: (a) The transition to digital means of shooting and disseminating images has transformed the medium's relation to materiality; for most people, the physical experience of photography – film, prints, photo albums, etc. – is a thing of the past. (b) The ease and accessibility of digital cameras have ensured that more images are being created now than at any other time in history. (c) Meanwhile, the emergence of the internet as our primary means of storing, sharing, and seeing photographs has ensured our unprecedented access to those images. (d) The experience of viewing images online – an environment which lends itself to decontextualization, purposeful juxtaposition, and viewer intervention (read: alteration) – has also challenged any lingering expectation that a given photograph might ever retain a stable meaning or appearance. Consequently, much of what has traditionally defined the medium simply doesn't apply to contemporary experience. This, in short, is our generation's version of the ever-present but ever-changing "crisis of photography."



Kate Steciw

Photographers have responded to these circumstances in a number of ways. Some have simply sworn their allegiance to analog techniques. Others have openly embraced digital manipulation, celebrating photography's liberation from the fallacy of "believability" by exploring its inherent malleability. For some, the crisis demands a reassertion of the photographic object itself, which bears implications for the manner in which photos are both produced and displayed. For still others, however, the element of materiality otherwise displaced by digital technology has been effectively refocused as content. Adopting tools and techniques typically associated with fine art disciplines, these photographers have taken to physically constructing assemblages and arrangements to serve as their subjects. In doing so, they have, as Thompson asserts in his essay "The Object Lost and Found," embraced a more traditional notion of the artist's studio, recasting the space "as a site of making, not simply a site of production."

Along with this reassessment of materiality, the still-life new wave might also come as a response to the free-for-all nature of the internet. After all, in an environment where notions of an image's intent, context, and authorship are completely unstable, there might be something appealing, even comfortable, about produced images that echo the apparent neutrality of still-life and stock photography. As Kate Sutton wrote in a recent review for *Artforum*: "As Facebook feeds and Tumblr streams send digital images further from their indexical referents with every passing 'post,' the only image whose integrity cannot be eroded is the image that never laid claim to any: the stock photo." Given the internet's capacity to strip every image of its intended context and content, it's easy to understand the appeal of a brand of photography specifically designed to retain viability in a variety of settings.

Taken together, notions like these would suggest - persuasively, I think - that the still-life revival has been neither accidental nor trivial. What remains to be seen, however, is how this flood of activity might retain its vitality and critical edge. Towards that end, I've compiled a very brief list of emerging art photographers, each of whose work ranks among the most compelling still-life imagery being produced at the moment. Though each favors his or her own approach, these five photographers have similarly proven themselves capable of pushing the genre into fresh territory.

(Note: As my focus here is on emerging photographers, I'm not going to look at the work of people like Roe Ethridge, Elad Lassry, Annette Kelm, and Lucas Blalock. Any survey of contemporary still-life art photography would be incomplete without their inclusion, though, so be sure to look into their work if you're not already familiar.)

### 1. David Brandon Geeting

Geeting's images are exciting because they feel spontaneous and informal, as if each click of the shutter recorded a fleeting moment of genuine discovery. His still-lives often call to mind the random arrangements and accidental beauty one encounters walking down a city street: a discarded set of blinds leaning haphazardly against a draped blanket, fallen leaves lying on a sheet of insulation, garbage spilled onto a pile of bricks. In both content and technique, the work is decidedly unprecious, casually combining everyday items and straightforward camerawork to achieve results that are striking, ambiguous, and pleasantly weird. Like many photographers experimenting with still-lives, Geeting's work suggests an interest in product photography. Curiously, however, his interests seem to lie less with the pristine images of glossy catalogs than with the amateur setups one finds in ads on Craigslist and eBay. (His most recent project, a blog called *Sell It Yourself*, collects user-made images culled from such sources.) From the outset, photographers have used their cameras to capture and call our attention to the naked strangeness of our surroundings, and Geeting's work - still-lives and otherwise - stands up as a noteworthy contribution to that tradition.





## 2. Grant Cornett

Where Geeting's work feels unplanned and unconventional, Grant Cornett's approach is far more precise, considered, and faithful to the conventions of still-life painting – particularly those established by Northern European painters in the 17th century. For those artists, still-lives offered the opportunity to show off one's skills, as they worked painstakingly to achieve lifelike textures and subtle light effects. With this in mind, it's easy to see why the style might appeal to a photographer like Cornett: for although his work demonstrates a keen eye for composition and an peculiar taste in subject matter, it's ultimately his technical abilities – particularly his masterful use of lighting – that truly set his images apart. Contrary to many emerging photographers, who seem to find inspiration in the surreal blend of advertising strategies and avant-garde sensibilities achieved by people like Paul Outerbridge, Cornett's references reach much farther back. He frequently alludes to still-life painting styles of the Flemish Baroque and Dutch Golden Age, among them the *ontbijtje*, or

"little breakfast" still-life, popular in 17th-century Netherlands, in which simple combinations of food and drinking vessels are set against neutral backgrounds, and the *pronk*, or "sumptuous" still life, in which lush arrangements of foods, flowers, cutlery, and patterned fabrics were designed to please and even overwhelm the eye. But where these European paintings typically contained symbolic messages – most often regarding mortality and the brevity of life – Cornett's work serves simply as a vehicle for graphic experimentation, as he employs purposeful combinations of shapes, colors, and textures to provide a striking but ultimately enigmatic visual offering.





### 3. Aurélien Arbet & Jérémie Egry

Over the course of the past few years, Aurélien Arbet and Jérémie Egry have established a practice that, although diverse (among other ventures, the two keep busy as the founders of both Hixsept L'oiseau Gris clothing and the JSBJ publishing house), retains a consistent, singular, and refined sensibility. This aesthetic – a highly stylized blend of handmade elements and precise staging, of rough textures and clean presentation – is particularly evident in their collaborative still-life work. Their process adheres to most of the genre's conventions: objects ranging from used painters' tools to fruit to tropical plants are collected, arranged in-studio, and shot against a saturated draped backdrop. What sets the work apart from traditional fare, however, is the duo's distinctive approach to sculpture. Their choices of objects are often surprising, and their constructions demonstrate a sophisticated sense of line, texture, and color interaction. This is the tension that defines their work: though the content feels utterly contemporary, the treatment tends to echo conventional product or stock photography; while there's an experimental tone to the work, the imagery is as exacting as any advertisement. Nothing here is truly spontaneous or left to chance. It's an interesting (and difficult to achieve) gray area, but one which Arbet and Egry seem quite comfortable exploring.





#### 4. Carson Fisk-Vittori

Through playful setups and odd juxtapositions, Carson Fisk-Vittori's work presents everyday objects as items worthy of aesthetic consideration. Stripping these items of context and function, her images allow us to consider them, perhaps for the first time, on purely formal terms, and in doing so, reinforce for us the distinction between looking at something and actually *seeing* it. Often forgoing the studio in favor of plain domestic settings, her images are unassuming, seemingly casual in both content and staging. Informing this apparent informality, however, are any number of subtle but deliberate decisions. In interviews, Fisk-Vittori has expressed an interest in ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. It's a useful point of reference in looking at her work: as in ikebana, Fisk-Vittori eschews conventional means of presentation, instead composing intuitive but calculated arrangements designed to draw our attention to a given object's surface,

contours, and form. As a result, household items like computers, soda bottles, and vases are rendered strange and new, capable of offering even the most casual viewer a revelatory aesthetic experience.





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