

Still life: a poetic and photographic reflection,

Maria Adélia Menegazzo ¹

Abstract: Born as a genre of the Dutch painting of the 16th century, still life served to both a merely decorative taste and the need of deep reflections about the ephemerality of the human presence in the world. While *vanitas* had as a function to recollect that pleasures and appearances are ephemeral; while *memento mori* induced to reflection about life and death, reaching in both the forms and the allegorical character. Since the early days of photography, the model is the painting, and the theme of still life appears both in classics like Talbot and Bayard, and in modern Rodchenko and Cartier-Bresson. In the Brazilian modernist poetry, the reading of “Maçã”, by Manuel Bandeira, has already become classical as a cubist still life. Our work aims to investigate settings that the theme finds in the contemporary poetry of Paulo Henriques Brito and Ana Martins Marques, as well as in photographs of Robert Frank and Francesca Woodmann and in a video of Sam Taylor Wood, enhancing its indexical, allegorical and narrative character.

Keywords: photograph, poetry, video, still life, allegory, narrative.

A great concern in the contemporary art lies in the absence of precise limits for its identification towards banal everyday things. The extent of the transformation of mundane things of everyday life can justify its presence as object of art, whether it is an installation, a movie or a novel. In this work, the starting point is the idea that in the aesthetic experience of everyday life, the arts draw their path and through the analysis of still lifes, it is searched to understand the way this experience is perceived, the reflections it can provoke and how it is configured.

According to Jacques Rancière (2005:47)

The aesthetic regime of arts is, at first, the ruin of the representation system, that is, of a system in which the dignity of the themes ruled the hierarchy of the representation genres (tragedy for the nobles, comedy for the plebe, history painting against genre painting, etc).

¹ Professora colaboradora do programa de Pós-graduação em Estudos de Linguagens, Centro de Ciências Humanas e Sociais, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Campo Grande, MS. E-mail: ma.menegazzo@uol.com.

To this extent, it is possible for the author to state that “the banal becomes beautiful as a true trail” (Rancière, 2005: 50). The banal, the ordinary are everyday expressions enhanced by still lifes.

In painting, the still life is an objectively defined genre. The term *stilleven* was first used in Flanders, around 1650, as a reference to the paintings that showed fruits, flowers and fish or food leftovers; it was adopted by Germans as *stilleben* and by English, *still-life*, which is translated as silent life or motionless life. In Spain, the expression to talk about still lifes is *bodegón*, in France, *nature morte*, from which comes the Portuguese language expression. In this way, born as a genre of the 17th century Dutch painting, still life served a merely decorative taste as well as the need of deep reflections about the ephemerality of the human presence in the world. While *vanitas* (vanity) had as a function to recollect that pleasures and appearances are ephemeral; while *memento mori* (“Remember that you will die!”), induced to reflection about life and death, reaching in both, the forms and the allegorical character.

In *Origem do drama barroco alemão*, Benjamin (1984: 184) calls the attention to the fact that the allegory was seen during a long time only as “a conventional relation between an illustrative image and its signification”, but from the Baroque period, it becomes an expression, like language and writing. In the difference between symbol and allegory, there is what the author of *Passages* calls “the decisive category of time”

Therein lies the core of the allegorical vision: the mundane, baroque exposition, of the history as world history of sorrow, meaningful just in the episodes of decline. The bigger the signification, the bigger the subjection to death, because death records more deeply the tortuous line of demarcation between *physis* and the signification. However, if nature has always been subjected to death, it has always been allegorical (Benjamin, 1984: 188).

Thus, Benjamin concludes that allegory is born from a curious combination of nature and history, decisively expressed by German Baroque drama, when it merges the scene as a ruin. “In this way, history is not a process of eternal life, but of inevitable decline. Allegories are in the thought realm what the ruins are in the things realm. Therefore the baroque cult of ruins (Benjamin,

1984: 200)”. The symbol is put as a convention, accepted as a stereotype, while the allegory processes a historicizing of a theme to the extent of its upgrade.

Some studies about Baroque such as Wolfflin’s (1970) and Hauser’s (1980) draw attention to the fact that scenes capture the instant of action; consequently, they can be seen as a fragment. Regarding still lifes, we can reflect equally, considering them a fragment of everyday life. Therefore, the beauty that lasts results from knowledge, it is a detail of its allegorical references. The art historian H.W. Janson (1977: 515) also claims that still life dyes itself of the melancholy feeling of the ephemeral of all pleasures.



Figure 1: Willem Claesz Heda - Still-Life. 1632 - Oil on oak panel, 59 x 76 cm. Private collection. Source: Accessed on January 12, 2015, from <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

On analyzing a work of Willem Claesz Heda, from the same series above, Janson describes:

The picture belongs to a very common type, showing the remains of a meal. The food and drink here are less important than luxury items - crystal glasses, silver dishes - carefully juxtaposed by its contrasts of form and texture. (...) Nevertheless, the virtuosity was not the only goal of the artist: his 'story', the human context of grouped objects, is suggested to us through the broken glass, the half peeled lemon, the fallen silver cup: the one who sat at this table was forced to abandon it suddenly. It was as if time had lowered the curtain over the scene, investing the objects of a strange emotional power, the *pathos* of things. (Janson, 1977, 515-16)

Humanization of objects also translates itself as humanized time. This is what can be noticed in the use of the skull as a frequent object in still lifes. Take for example the work of Peter Claesz, entitled *Vanitas*.

The objects that make it up have a sense separately, that is, each is a symbol of something in the order: the skull (*memento mori*); the book (wisdom), the feather pen (maturity), the clock (passage of time), the key (opening of perception to enlightenment), the unlit lamp (extinction of life), the fallen glass (extinction of life), a scepter (power, authority).

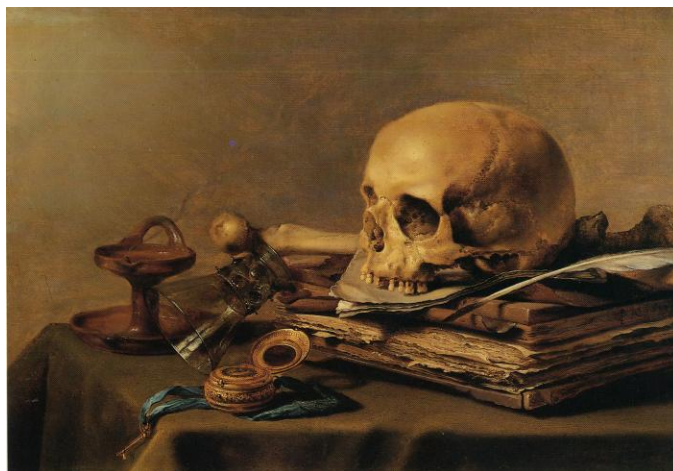


Figure 2: Peter Claesz – Vanitas – 1630. Oil on canvas, 39,5 x 56 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague. Source: Accessed on January 12, 2015, from <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

Added they are to acquire greater meaning: make up the allegory of the Vanities, not forgetting that in Latin, *vanitas* also means "useless". For Benjamin,

the allegory shows the observer the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified protopassage. The history, in everything that in it from the beginning is premature, suffered and ill fated, is expressed in a face - not, in a skull. And because there is in it no symbolic freedom of expression, no classical harmony of form, in short, nothing human, this figure, out of all the most subjected to nature, expresses, not only the human existence in general, but in a highly expressive way, under the form of an enigma, the biographical history of an individual (Benjamin, 1984: 189).

Considering the nineteenth century, still life painters will equate art and science, and at that moment, photography is revealed, what will result in the need to redesign the pictorial language and redefine its essence and purpose opposite the new instrument of mechanical arrest of reality (Argan, 1993: 75). Still lifes can be found in Monet, Cezanne and Matisse, in cubist, expressionist, futurist and surrealist artists, but from here, it will have cooled down its allegorical character putting in the first plan the need to appear as a pictorial

"form". It is, however, a valued theme to painters because it allowed them reflection and research of shapes and colors, as well as questions about the place of art and artist in modern society.

In *A partilha do sensível*, Rancière states that photography has not become an art due to its technical nature. Moreover, it has not turned into art for the appropriation of procedures and themes of painting that assured it the

regulation of photographic art, but the assumption of *anyone*. (...) the technical revolution comes after the aesthetic revolution. However, the aesthetic revolution is above all the glory of *anyone* – that is pictorial and literary, before being photographic and cinematographic” (Rancière, 2005: 48).

Besides this banalization and the expansion of the field, it is now thought about the indicial nature of photography / or the logic of the index related to the photographic image, which in principle might alienate its allegorical possibilities. Recalling Peirce's lesson, the index is an attribute of the sign that holds a physical connection with the object, different from icon where there is a connection of similarity, and from the symbol that relates to the object by submitting it to a law or general convention of meaning.

Thus, the index gives the sign *singularity*, to the extent that it is mark of a particular object rather than another; *attestation*, inasmuch as it is evidence of a given object; and *designation*, as it points and displays the object of which is the mark (cited in Gil 2012: 211).

Nevertheless one cannot lose sight either cultural factors involved in image production or what Barthes (1984: 27-28) called the essence of photography, the "it was" (Barthes 1984: 141). While the photography is index of something that exists, it is certain that it no longer exists like that. If we take as an object of reflection the photography *The Open Door*, performed in 1838 by William Fox Talbot², we can see that the photographer has exercised the freedom to choose topics of everyday life opened by the Dutch seventeenth-century painting, as he comments in his book *The Pencil of Nature*.

² William Fox Talbot (1800-1877) inventor of the calotype (1841), process of the negative on paper that allowed playback of multiple images by professional and amateur photographers. It offered better resolution than that given by the daguerreotype.



Figure 3: William Fox Talbot – The Open Door – 1838. Salted paper print from paper negative; 14.3 x 19.4 cm. Gilman Collection – Met museum of Art New York. Source: Accessed on January 12, 2015, from <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search?ft=photographs+william+fox+talbot>.

The look of the painter, according to him, can *make remarkable* what is just ordinary. Therefore, he, Talbot, focuses on the old stone frame, on the barn wooden door and on the broom, as well as in harness and flashlight as *objects for an essay* on light and shadow, interior and exterior, shape and texture. However, it is not the indicial nature of photography that will ensure a pre-given meaning and not even will have a certain effect, but the discursive system in which it was part. As John Tagg describes "the indicial nature of photography – the causal link between pre-photographic referential and the sign – is enormously complex, irreversible, and cannot guarantee anything in the meaning context (Tagg, 2005: 9)."

In this way, the distance between the object, its iconic and symbolic meaning and the allegory seems to deepen with the use of photography, because actually it begins an aesthetic revolution brought about by its improvement. The photo also exposes what happens to the subject who frames it and gives it materiality. The idea of modernity implied there cannot be ignored. In this sense, in *Still Life with Leica and a notebook*, the Russian Aleksandr Rodchenko implements the constructivist thinking that guided his production wrapped in the slogan "Our duty is to experiment." Briefly, the Rodchenko method involved the composition diagonally and shortening. Says the photographer:

In order to make people acquainted to see from new points of view, it is essential to photograph familiar object, everyday life, from

completely unexpected perspectives and positions. New topics must be photographed from several points, in a way to represent the topic completely (Rodtchenko, 2011: 60).

The choice of objects, a pen, a notebook and a photography refer to the still life, enhanced by the title.



Figure 4: Aleksandr Rodchenko - Still life with Leica and a notebook. 1930. For the cover of *Jornalist Magazine* - reproduction 30x43cm. Source: exhibition catalog. Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Moreira Sales; São Paulo: State Pinacoteca 2011: 104.

However, in order to update the allegorical sense it is necessary to go beyond the indexical, since the appreciation of photography happens between these two fields. The confrontation is between the referent, the gender and the signification. If we approximate *Still Life* of the Russian photographer to *Vanitas* of Claesz, we can understand its allegorical character. The machine as a substitute of the human eye, symbol of intellectual perception, the same given by the skull, the feather replaced by the pen and the book by the notepad. That is, an updating of the allegory of the knowledge as life story of a subject, now mediated by the machine. Yet, all the objects are singularized by the angle from which they were photographed.

Likewise Cartier-Bresson presents a still life, a photograph to which he gives the title of the place where it was taken – Tivoli, in Italy, in 1933.

Knowing his vision toward the act of photographing the instant, the “decisive moment”, it takes us to interrogate on the meaning of this photography. The close-up tray with spread fruits on sheets of newspaper, photographed from above, still framing the door on the right constituting a screen and a diagonal, leads to another tray balanced on a cylindrical barrel,

where are placed piled pears, lemons inside a platter and watermelon slices arranged so as to form a frame.



Figure 5: Henri Cartier-Bresson. Tivoli. 1933. Photography. Source: Henri Cartier-Bresson. Text of Jean Clair. Translator André Telles. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2011: 15.

In the background, a ladder. The angle from which the picture was taken, instead of playing with the depth of the scene, on the contrary, induces to a flattening of the space, referring to Japanese pictures, the still life of Cezanne and even to the paintings of Morandi. Cartier-Bresson states:

To “give meaning to” the world, we must feel involved in what we cut out through the viewfinder. This attitude demands concentration, sensitivity, geometry sense. It is due to a saving of means, and, above all, a self-forgetfulness that we come to the simplicity of expression. (...) Photographing is at the same instant and in a second fraction, to recognize a fact and the strict organization of the visually perceived forms that express and signify that fact (Cartier-Bresson, 2011:12)

It is to that extent that we can understand the title registered in the first tray, where, moreover, it is possible to visualize images of the newspaper, pages about movies, with pictures of the actors. Appropriately, on associating the fruits to the human pictures already mediated by the photography and the newspaper, Cartier-Bresson refers to still life, the *vanitas*. Furthermore, the flattening also makes the second tray with fruits a picture, a picture of still life.

With a Polaroid of Robert Frank we can recover the allegorical ideal implicated in still life, as well.

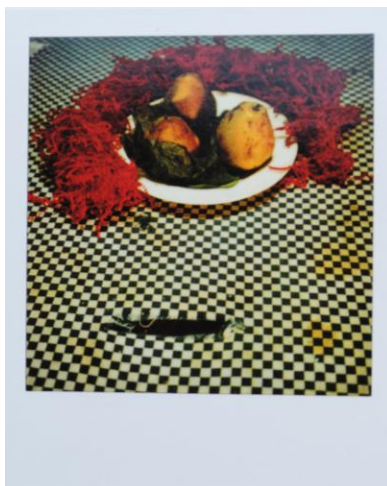


Figure 6: Robert Frank – Still Life – Polaroid, 9x11cm, published in the book *Seven Stories*, 2009. Source: *Zum Revista de fotografia* (1): p.22. Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Moreira Sales.

According to Luc Sante, “The Polaroid empties notions as the perfection and the search of the masterpiece. They are sketches. The mean avoids trespass, encourages spontaneity and refuses conclusions (2011:26)”. It is not possible to deny the arrangement of the fruits on the plate, with a red towel involving them, creating a limit of field on the checked towel. As the fruits translate certain freshness, once they are still involved by the tissue paper retaining them for sale, the towel is the most obvious temporal element. It is supposed the yellowish stains report a duration that will be interrupted by the tear, an unwanted made cut. The Polaroid “expresses the material imperfection gently, sometimes with romanticism”, says Sante (2011: 26). The visual attack of the checked is stopped by the tear at the same time as it introduces a historical route in the household. The warm and familiar colors of the fruits and the towel, are also imposed on the implicit organization of the checked that occupies most of the plan. Consequently, the still life here regains its allegorical capacity, combining nature and history.

The same will happen in the photo of Francesca Woodmann: (2012) from the series *Providence*.



Figure 7: Francesca Woodmann. Series: Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78. Source: Zum Revista de fotografia (3), p. 29.

A large closet keeps stuffed animals behind closed doors, but in the last half open door, below, on the right, we see a female body. Francesca Woodman introduces irony as an essential element for her job, as well as Cindy Scherman, giving legitimacy to the staging and narrative in the photographic art (Lubow, 2012: 39). It is in fashion photography that she gets her model, but the scenario translates rather the limits of interaction with the space and time. A stuffed animal tells its previous history, but freezes the moment when it was killed. Its life is devoted to contemplation until that moment and it is immortalized. Likewise, fashion photography captures its distinctive time of others. For Agamben, the "fashion time is constitutively ahead of itself and, precisely for this, it is always late, always has the form of an elusive verge between a 'not yet' and 'no more' (Agamben, 2013: 67)". When taking pictures of herself, Woodmann deconstructs herself as subject and instead of still life then we will have still frame, like in Cindy Sherman we find the film *still*. On the other hand, it is also an allegory in the fields of *memento mori*. If I have not died yet and I am immortalized by the photography, it is clear that that time will come. Woodmann sets as well, the "it-was" Barthesian, the little story-narrative of a man who committed suicide at age 22.

Before these examples of still life use, we can say together with Benjamin that one cannot deny the relationship of the allegorical with "the fragmentary, piled and disordered image of a magician room or a laboratory of an alchemist,

in the way the Baroque knew it (Benjamin, 1984: 210).” However, this necessity to conjugate the dispersed will cause new forms of ordination.

In poetry, when Mallarme proposes the poem as a roll of dice, he is indicating that this dispersion can only be combined by the reader, taking into account an element that would not normally be seen as "poetic", the typefaces of varying sizes arranged according to a new logic of the sensible. It is necessary to consider that in the "aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something beyond art. It is always aestheticized, which means that it is always placed as a form of life (Rancière, 2014: 6)".

In the Brazilian modernist poetry, the reading of “Maçã”, by Manuel Bandeira (1975, 248), has already become classical as a cubist still life:

Por um lado te vejo como um seio murcho
pelo outro como um ventre em cujo umbigo pende ainda o
cordão placentário
És vermelha como o amor divino

Dentro de ti em pequenas pevides
palpita a vida prodigiosa
infinitamente

E quedas tão simples
Ao lado de um talher
Num quarto pobre de hotel.

(On one side, I see you as a dried breast
On the other, as a womb in whose navel still hangs the placent cord
You are red as divine love

Inside you in small seeds
Beats the prodigious life
Infinitely

And falls so simple
Beside a tableware

In a poor hotel room)

The use of transparency turns over the internal and external view of the object, it refers to the still lifes of Braque and Picasso, establishing spatial relationships defined by all angles. When intending a descriptive and analytical framework, Manuel Bandeira deposits the object "apple" on a seemingly solid foundation, but absent, any bulkhead of "a poor hotel room".

In this way, he focuses on a single verse, the last, all the surrounding space. In addition, he senses through the apple forms, from the outside to the core of small seeds, feminine traits, resuming the symbolism often attributed to the fruit. The composition gets complete with one tableware placed beside it. Nevertheless, if we think through the *memento mori* perspective, "Maçã" allows the poet to remake the birth route - expressed in "a dried breast," "a womb," a "navel" from where still hangs the "placental cord - waiting death in "a poor hotel room".

In *Mínima Lírica* (2013), Paulo Henriques Brito, contemporary Brazilian poet, presents a poem entitled "Still life" to speak about the end of the loving feeling:

Na penumbra fácil do quarto
entre duas presenças contíguas
(incômodas, desencontradas),
não brota nada de vivo
que o simples contato das peles
não vare de lado a lado,
não nasce nada que – morto
quando se completa o ato –
deixe resíduo mais forte
que um vago cheiro de terra
ou de mato.

(In the easy twilight of the room
between two contiguous presences
(uncomfortable, mismatched)
It does not spring anything

That the simple touch of the skins
does not pass from side to side,
nothing is born - dead
when the act is complete -
let a stronger residue
than a vague smell of earth or bushes.)

Set out by a single phrase, the eleven verses constitute the theme through contrast in images. In this way, in the same easy twilight of the room does not spring anything alive, nothing is born that leaves a stronger residue than a vague smell of earth or bushes. Moreover the figures are given as "contiguous presences (uncomfortable, mismatched); the simple contact of the skins does not pass from side to side, dead when the act is complete". A staggered contiguity in itself reveals the impossibility of the loving act reveals as life. There is, in this sense, a certain literalness of the title, which closes with the last verses: let a stronger residue / than a vague smell of earth / or bushes. It is an allegory in terms of *memento mori*, by considering the semantic field of death as negation of all pronounced actions: it does not spring; does not pass; is not born. In addition, in the deconstruction of what lives no longer, the intensity adverb "nothing" is the proper and sufficient complement of the cancellation of the acts. It still calls, further attention, the durational aspect of what is described, highlighted by the verbs in the present.

We can, in this perspective, analyze the poem *fruteira*, of Ana Martins Marques. It is one of the pictures composing the part of the book *A arte das armadilhas* (2011: 15) called "Interiores". By the side of poems about objects such as sugar, chair, cupboard and clock, among others, the fruit bowl is positioned as a still life.

Fruteira
Quem se lembrou de por sobre a mesa
essas doces evidências
da morte?

(Fruit bowl

Who remembered of placing on the table
These sweet evidences
Of death?)

Composed of the title and three verses, the poem refers to *vanitas*. In fact, the three verses are a single interrogative sentence. A sentence whose verbal aspect condenses its inchoate (initial), cursive (development) and conclusive meanings. By using the verb remember in the past, what we call perfective aspect, the action is presented in its totality. However, we must also punctuate the use of contrastive expressions: "Sweet evidence" / "death" as well as the objects *in absentia*, the fruits, reduced to the space of derivation of the title "fruit bowl", treated as "sweet evidence of death".

On the other hand, in *A vida submarina* (2009), by the same author, in a collection of poems organized under the title "Interior Architecture", is the poem "pantry" in which the form of organization of everyday life data leads to the creation of a still life:

a luz do domingo acende o espelho vazio
flores baratas bebem da jarra
num instante sem malícia
enquanto na fruteira maçãs apodrecem sem gritar
e me olham das fotografias
os antepassados de alguém.

(the light of Sunday illuminates the empty mirror
cheap flowers drink from the jar
in an instant without malice
while in the fruit bowl apples rot without shouting
and at me from the photographs look
the ancestors of someone.)

Compared to the previous poem, the composition is more comprehensive leading to the supposition that the same fruit bowl with rotten apples or fruits getting rotten is the element that proposes reflection about the passage of time, establishing the *memento mori*. Everything points to a life that declines - the

empty mirror, the cheap flowers that survive an instant and without malice, the apples that rot without shouting and the unknown ancestors who contemplate, but are only photos. If in the previous poem the poetic voice questions itself about an unknown subject, in "pantry" all objects contribute to accentuate her anonymity and indifference. The "light of Sunday illuminates the empty mirror" and produces nothing only the absence of the image of a subject who reified in the objects, does not rebel, has no malice and does not scream. Again, the symbols of life and death are displayed to the allegory. Through the mirror there is a search of an identity that is annihilated in the eternal present discursive.

This is what we call, from Rancière (2014: 12), creation of the new sensorium, a new ethos. In other words, only in the poem we find the reality created by the poem, although it is constituted of recognizable everyday elements. At this point the ordinary becomes beautiful as trail of the true (Rancière, 2005: 50). This is where the allegory takes up its space turning itself into history and nature at the same time. If we want to enlarge the allegorical sense, we can join all other poems dedicated to the various objects that are part of "Interiores". In them we find the same marks of banal and beautiful associated, as in "Cômoda", where we read: "And of hers / what has left / but / on the dresser / a pair of earrings / which may not be hers? (Marques, 2011: 17) " in a clear cyclical and questioning poem of life and identity.

The transformation given by the poetic-literary language suggests to the reader to seek in his/her repertoire references on the topics in order to be able to seize them to the greatest extent possible. Knowing the history of painting and in it the history of still life as a genre enables our understanding of the passage of its indexical condition for the iconic, symbolic and, finally, the allegorical one, whether it is painting, photography or poem. Therefore, perhaps the use of the them in video art is more striking. Sam Taylor Wood, recognized for her work in videos filmed in real time, uses the theme of still life - *Still life* (2001), creating a dizzying *memento mori*.

Fruits, taken by fungi, are quickly rotting and turning into a mold heap. The fruit bowl of natural fiber is also covered by fungi. A different note is given

by a *Bic* pen, carelessly placed next to the fruit bowl. The presence of this pen turns the video into an allegorical piece; it is again the expression of everyday life associated to wisdom.



Figure 8: Sam Taylor-Wood. Still life. Video. Source: Accessed on January 12, 2015, from <http://youtu.be/pXPP8eUIEtK>.

Although it is not necessary, or even desirable, to conclude on the impossibility of dissociating, dissolving or hiding the allegorical character linked to the theme of still lifes, it necessarily points to the permanence of the question proposed by the *vanitas* and *memento mori*, because they add up to the human universals. Spectacular as it may seem in the present world, being contemporary requires that we can look at it under other lights, maybe those of shadows explained by Agamben (2009: 64), giving a deeper meaning and, perhaps for that reason, more human, more delicate, of our presence in this world. The still lifes do not let us forget that.

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