

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Still Life Lives: Rhode Island Perspectives

by Nancy Whipple Grinnell

The genre of still life painting has not always received great respect in the history of art, and especially not in nineteenth century New England, which boasted a tradition of idealized figure, landscape and marine painting. At the beginning of the twentieth century, still life painting in this region was generally an academic exercise, used to teach students at both the Rhode Island School of Design

and the Art Association of Newport (now the Newport Art Museum) about perspective, masses, volume and shading. The belief that drawing formed the foundation for painting was generally accepted in turn-of-the-century art schools, which employed the French atelier system of studios. With the advent of European modernism, the art of still life was elevated to a much more prestigious position. As noted in a Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, catalogue of still life painting, "With the work of Cezanne

Still Life Lives: Rhode Island Perspectives is on view through September 18, 2016, at the Newport Art Museum, 76 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, Rhode Island, 02840, 401-848-8200, www.newportartmuseum.org. An 8-page brochure accompanies the exhibition.

and then of the Cubists, all painting, whatever its apparent subject, became a form of still life. Forms were painted or were invented, just so the painter could rearrange and recreate them."¹

ABOVE: Kay Ritter, *Cat Bag*, 2014, o/linen on panel, 20 x 34, Mary and Ellicott Wright.

RIGHT: Donna Bruton, *Interior #1*, 1997, mixed media on canvas, 38 x 38, Newport Art Museum, gift from the Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan Collection.

LEFT: Marion Carry, *Still Life with Checkeredboard*, c. 1950, o/c, 20 x 24, collection of the artist.

When John Robinson Frazier (1889-1966) became the chair of the painting department at RISD in 1923, he presided over the transition from old studio methods to a more collegial sharing of modern ideas. In his own still life painting, this legendary teacher and administrator also evolved, gradually relinquishing his academic arrangements and subdued palette for more painterly forms and heightened color. Frazier had studied under Charles Hawthorne at the Art Students League in New York and the Cape Cod School of Art, learning to paint still lifes in the realist tradition of the great masters, whom he revered. They included Velasquez, Goya, Hogarth and later Monet and Cezanne, and like them he often painted in series, continually striving for a perfect blending

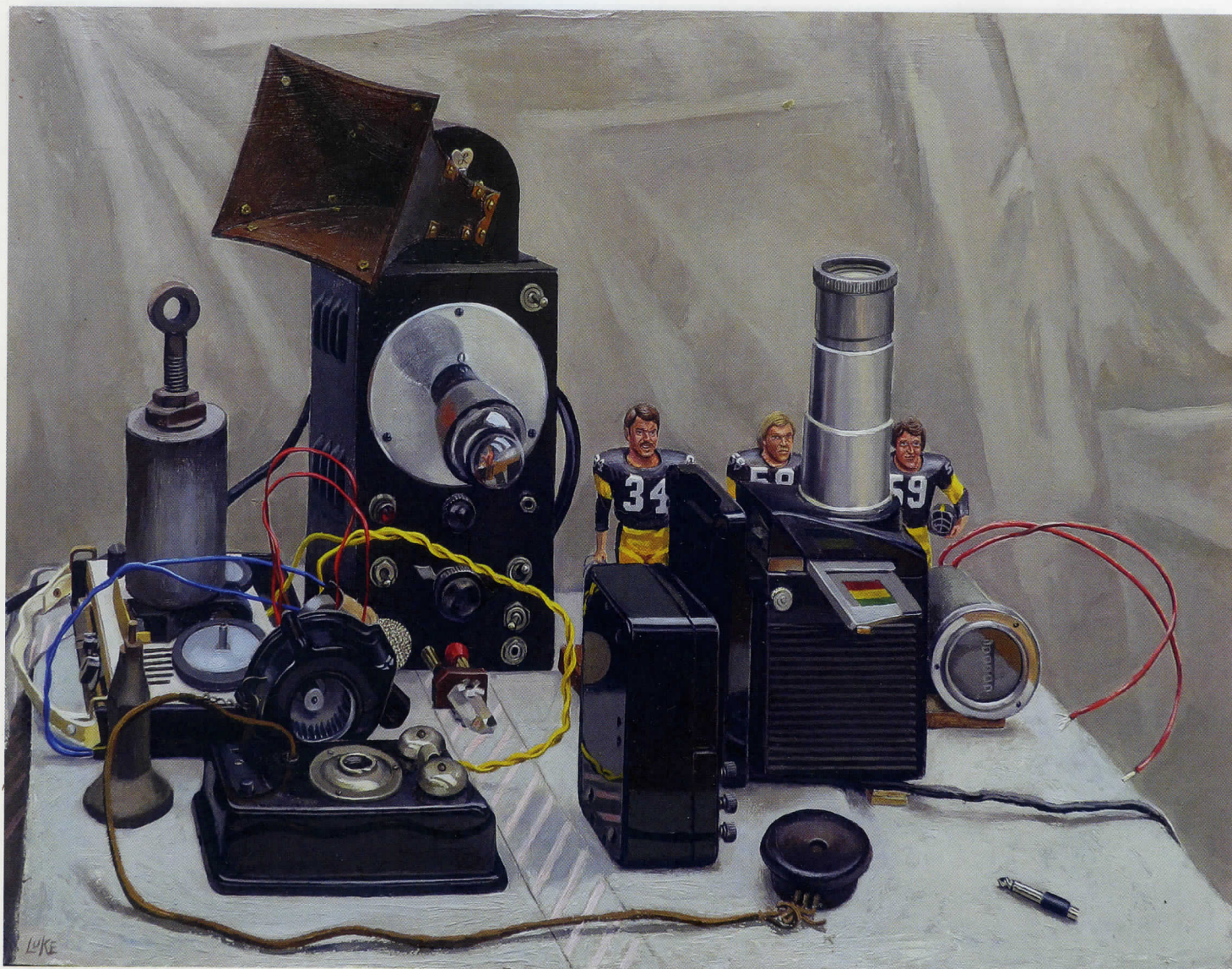


of “tone and color juxtaposed on the picture plane.” He often included references to the masters in his still lifes and his

“Hogarth” paintings dating from the 1940s through the 1960s show Frazier’s gradual embrace of color as form.

Frazier's disciples included Gordon Peers (1909-1988), a longtime RISD painting instructor, department head, and chair of its European honors program, who increasingly brought a Cezanne sensibility to his luscious paintings of flowers and fruits. Peers first encountered Frazier when he came to study at RISD in 1929. He absorbed Frazier's teachings: his belief in free-hand drawing skills, but also the idea that painting was a creative—not imitative—act. Peers followed Frazier to the Provincetown Art Colony, where both artists embraced plein air painting. Like Frazier, Peers' early still lifes were tightly composed and tonal. After traveling to Europe in the 1950s, however, Peers became influenced by post-impressionism and never looked back.

Florence Leif (1913-1968), a 1934



ABOVE: Luke Randall, *Steel Curtain*, 2009, o/panel, 22 x 28, collection of the artist.

RIGHT: Gerry Perrino, *Abduction (Still Life with 3 Toys)*, 2014, o/panel, 137/16 x 10, collection of the artist.

ABOVE LEFT: Gordon Peers, *Still Life with Pears and Wine*, 1980s, o/c, 20 x 24, Ken Carpenter and Paula Martiesian.

LEFT: Helen Sullivan, *Tulip Forms*, 1960s, o/c, 30 x 36, Nina Pfanstiehl.

RISD graduate, married Peers in 1941. Leif's early still-life paintings also showed her debt to the solid forms and realist tradition of Frazier. At the same time, these paintings encompass the definition of the modern still life by introducing objects that symbolize angst and despair. On the eve of America's entry into the Second World War, *Bomber and Rose* juxtaposes a toy



bomber with a flower. In the surrealist Still *Life with Horse's Hoof*, a miniature cowboy on horseback shooting a gun is placed

along side a horse's bones, rocks and sharp pieces of wood. This ominous scenario is set against a partial background of Cape

LEFT: John Robinson Frazier, *Still Life with Tureen*, 1962-1966, o/c, 20 x 24, John Riedel and Ida Schmulowitz.

BELOW LEFT: Jeanne Tangney, *Contemplation*, 2016, pastel on paper, 18 x 18, collection of the artist.

RIGHT: Florence Leif, *Still Life with Horse's Hoof*, 1941, o/c, 16 x 20, the Providence Art Club.

BELOW RIGHT: John Robinson Frazier, *Still Life with Hogarth*, c. 1962, o/c, 20 x 24, John Riedel and Ida Schmulowitz.

Cod dunes and seascape, along with a green velvet rope curtain. Like her husband, after their trips to Europe in the 1950s Leif became intrigued with color and form. Sadly, Leif died of a brain tumor at the age of fifty-five, cutting short the life of a passionate and talented painter.

Newport's Marion Carry (1905-1987), a friend of Leif, studied with Frazier at RISD, graduating in 1926. For over five decades she taught students at the Art Association of Newport's school. Carry's early teaching years were grounded in social realism, but by the 1950s she had introduced cubism in both her own work and that of her students. She developed legions of devoted followers in Newport, including Helen Sullivan, whose *Tulip Forms* was a very daring work for a Newport flower painter.

Carry also brought the work of RISD graduate Louise Marianetti (1916-2009) to Newport beginning in the 1940s. In the 1930s Marianetti had gone to study at the Art Students League in New York, where she was influenced by the realism of instructors Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Robert Brackman. One critic at the time used the term "magic realism" to describe Marianetti's exquisitely rendered still life objects in gouache and tempera.

The spectrum of artists who work in still life in Rhode Island today reflects the various modern and post-modern trends in art. Some RISD graduates and Frazier disciples revel in the medium of paint. Other contemporary still life painters bring the techniques of masters such as Caravaggio and Vermeer to their thoroughly twenty-first century subject matter. Shawn Kenney often paints food, as in *Fish N Chips*, and Kay Ritter paints everyday objects with a touch of whimsy. *Cat in Bag* captures a modern moment with pure light and Shaker simplicity. Jeanne Tangney's luminous pastel still lifes look like they emerged from

the elegant interior of a late nineteenth century Boston School painting. All three artists say ultimately they are not trying to emulate past masters, but instead to evoke a shared response in their viewers.

Other artists are influenced by everything from trompe l'oeil to Pop Art. As in Leif's 1940s still lifes, today's artists are putting mannekins or toy figures into still life paintings. Both Luke Randall and Gerry Perrino bring toys into their still lifes. In Randall's case it is often a doll or stuffed animal that looks out of place. Perrino says using toys revolutionized his still life technique. While his figures often tote guns or are political icons, Perrino feels that the fact that they are recognizable toys softens the message of murder and mayhem.

Dreams and imagination are some of the sources for the still-life elements in the painting of the late Donna Bruton. Her

ABOVE FAR LEFT: Louise Marianetti, *On the Seashore*, 1946, gouache on paper, 15 x 22, Bert Gallery.

ABOVE: Florence Leif, *Bomber and Rose*, 1940, o/c, 32 x 25, Bert Gallery.

LEFT: Shawn Kenney, *Fish N Chips*, 2011, acrylic on canvas; 20 x 24, collection of the artist.

RIGHT: Kay Ritter, *Cabbage and Cup*, 2016, o/c, 16 x 18, collection of the artist.

BELOW RIGHT: Gerry Perrino, *As Often Happens (Still Life with 3 Toys)*, 2014, o/panel, 16³/₁₆ x 11, collection of the artist.

paintings sometimes referenced “femmage,” a type of art that incorporated paint and collage elements associated with women’s traditional activities. These lace patterns are apparent in *Interior #1*, along with traces of recognizable objects, either real or remembered.

Many of Frazier’s still lifes were shown at the Art Association of Newport in the memorial exhibition *Paintings by John R. Frazier* in 1969. Peers, who had lost both his mentor and his wife within two years, organized the exhibition at Newport,

which had been shown in a smaller configuration at RISD. This still life tradition, which had its origins in Frazier's classes at RISD, arrived in Newport through Carry's art and teaching, as well as the exhibitions of Peers and Leif. It is worthwhile to recall these nurturing relationships among artists in the early days of the Rhode Island School of Design and the Art Association of Newport. Today's artists forge ahead independently, not afraid to be adventurous in their pursuits, and indeed, offer ample evidence that "Still Life Lives."

¹ Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Eric M. Zafran, "Introduction," in Karyn Esielonis, *Still-Life Painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: MFA, 1994), 10.