

Still Life: Dolie Thompson and Selections from the Permanent Collection



August 7 – October 31, 2021





Dolie Thompson, *Bread and Brie*, 2010, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

The history of the still life as a genre in the visual arts is long and storied. The everyday subjects of the popular still life genre were sometimes not considered worthy of an artist's attention but the morality of the mundane rose to prominence during the golden age of Dutch still life *vanitas* paintings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Vanitas* still life paintings were designed to remind the viewer of the fragile brevity of life and thus the worthlessness of worldly possessions. Modernist painters in France gave the still life a second revival during the nineteenth century when they declared the simple still life was a perfect formalist foil for exploring

style, color combinations, and compositions celebrating nature's beauty. Indeed, the Impressionist artist Edouard Manet is quoted as calling the still life, "the touchstone of painting." (<https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-still-life-painting-definition/>) The popular use of the term still life was coined in the Netherlands although the earliest examples of the still life as an art form can be traced back to ancient Egypt.

Historically the term we use in English today, still life, comes from the Dutch word *stillevens*. The French used the words *nature morte* to define the still life as an



Dolie Thompson, *Still Life with Grapes*, 2010, Archival pigment print
Sioux City Art Center Permanent Collection; 2012.35

artwork that included an arrangement of inanimate and organic objects, the most recognizable of the genre being flowers, fruit, expensive tableware, extinguished candles, leather-bound books, and ornate textiles. The Post-Impressionists, most notably van Gogh and Cezanne, excelled at painting flowers in vases, apples, lemons and other luscious fruit, musical instruments, wine bottles, and water jugs, all objects easily at hand. The Cubist artists, led by Picasso and Braque, also used everyday objects in their artwork as did the Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. Today many artists put a contemporary lemon twist on the timeless tradition using painting,

photography, printmaking, and even three-dimensional arrangements to create still life artworks.

There are many examples of still life artworks in the Art Center's permanent collection, a small sample of which are represented here along with Sioux City photographer Dolie Thompson's contemporary still life photographs, a theme she has long explored in her creative work examining the haunting universality of memory.

Dolie Thompson's artwork is included in the Art Center's permanent collection. *Still Life with Grapes*, 2010, is a

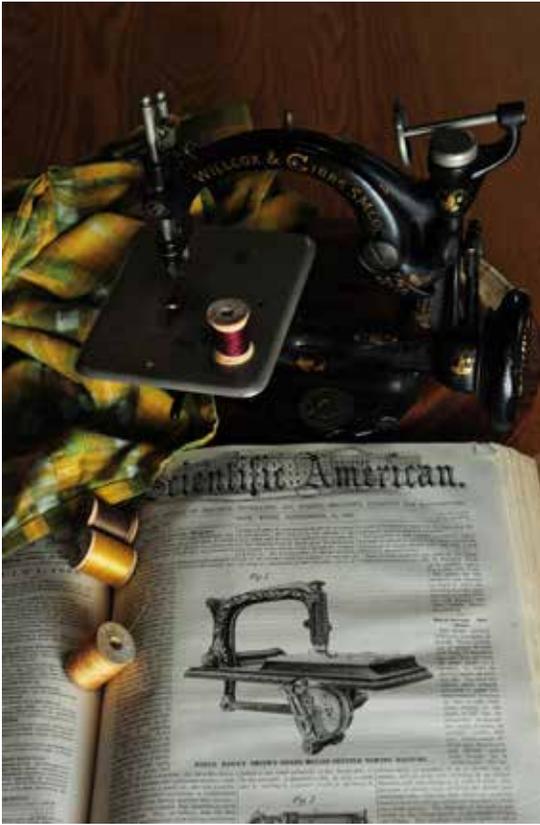


Dolie Thompson, *Apple Peeler*, 2007, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

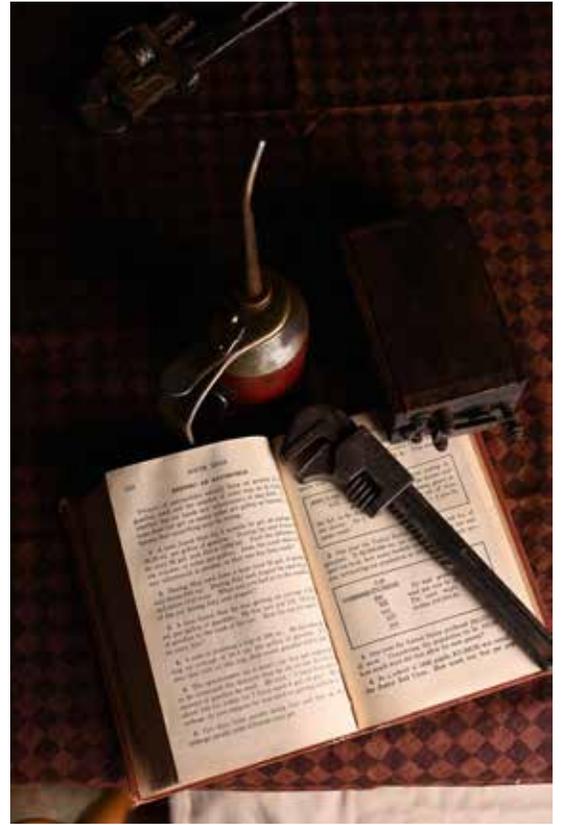
faithful rendition of the genre. Citrus fruit and grapes are beautifully displayed on ornate serving dishes. The sensuous folds of the white linen tablecloth and the seductive twist of a lemon peel suggests the end of a lavish meal, its participants only recently departed to after-dinner delights. Thompson's still life photographs lure the viewer into the imagery with immediately recognizable objects, speckled eggs, pages from schoolchildren's first readers, handwritten notes, the front cover of a newspaper, a child's little lace-collared velveteen dress, wire-framed eyeglasses, eggbeaters, and mother's apron. In the lens of a less accomplished

photographer, these items could simply be nostalgic, the romantic flotsam and jetsam of a "simpler" time. Thompson, however, questions the nuances of memory in her quiet photographs, asking, "Whose memory?" Indeed, is memory really universal? Do objects illicit the same stories from every viewer?

Look more closely at the text Thompson holds up for public scrutiny. Using what's hidden in plain sight, Thompson subtly points to systemic issues this country has long faced – racism, sexism, the role of police in our communities, who is educated and who isn't. Is



Dolie Thompson, *Scientific American, Civil War Era*, 2021, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

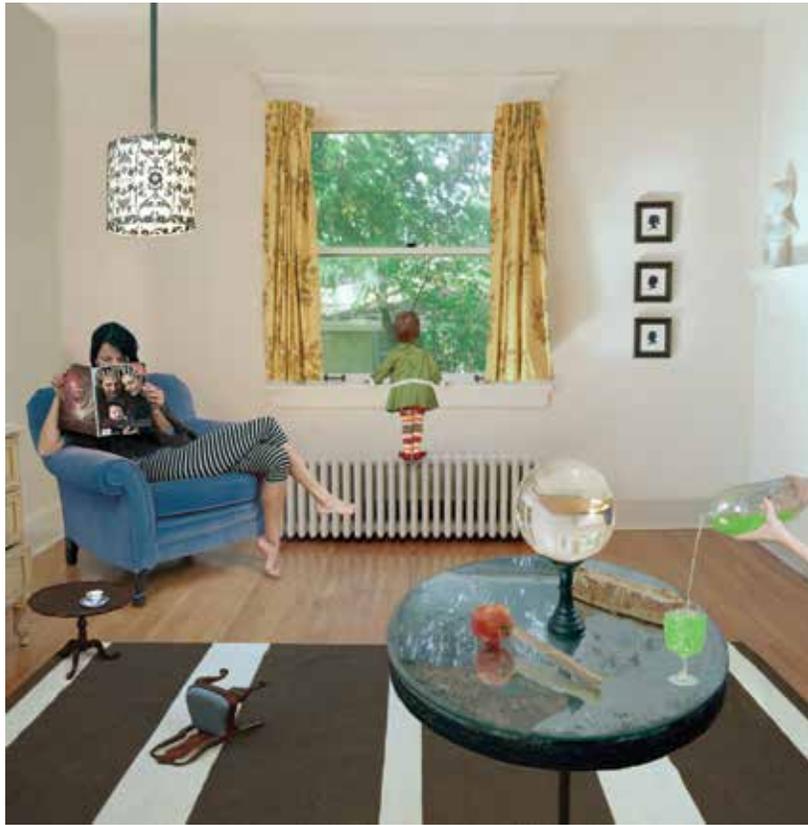


Dolie Thompson, *Keeping an Automobile*, 2021, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

it only men who maintain cars, who go off to war, are wounded and return – or don't? It would seem so from reading the text in the open owner's manual in *Keeping an Automobile*, 2021. What do the gold embossed letters spell out on the spine of that old book from our grandfather's library? Do all grandfathers have libraries full of leather-bound books? Thompson's images are more complicated and nuanced than they first appear; her still life images weave messages for the contemporary viewer; they are ensconced in the on-going genre of cautionary tales. Are we doomed to repeat the past if we don't understand it from multiple perspectives? Whose

stories are included in the twenty-first century narrative that will become part of the historical record?

Like Dolie Thompson, photographer Julie Blackmon is also inspired by Dutch and Flemish genre painting although her subjects are decidedly secular. In *Crystal Ball*, 2006, all the lines converge on the little girl wearing a green dress, multi-colored striped tights, and ruby slippers as she peers out the window. The innocent child is placed in the center of the composition. Blackmon specially draws attention to art historical references by placing a secondary still life – the highly reflective

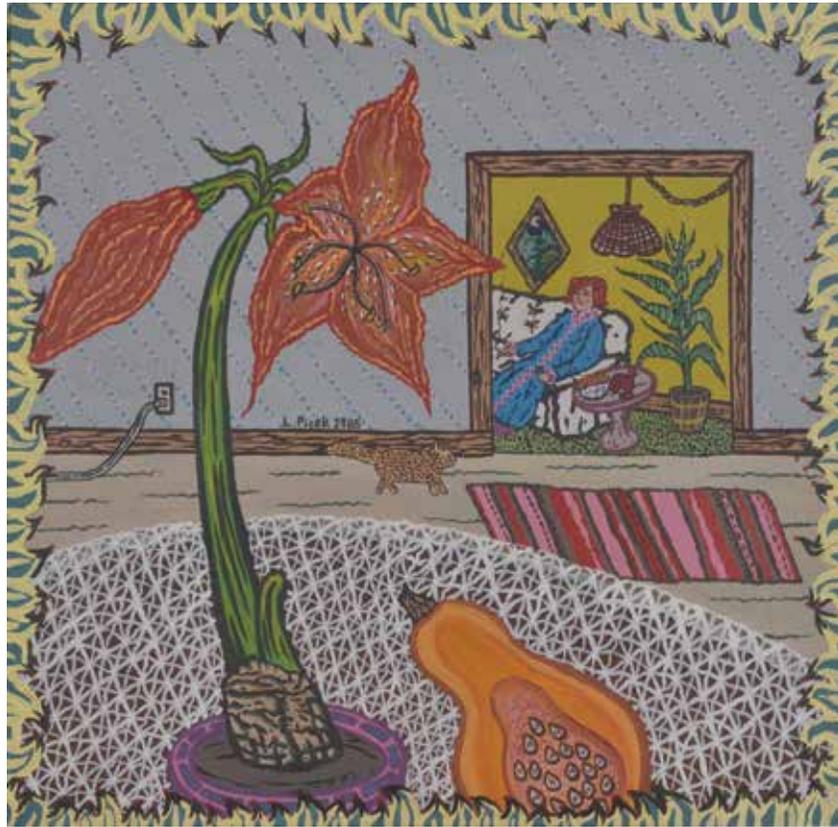


Julie Blackmon, *Crystal Ball*, 2006, Archival pigment print
Sioux City Art Center Permanent Collection; 2012.39

glass-topped table at the edge of her frame complete with a crystal ball, red apple, and goblet of glowing green goo – within her larger artfully arranged domestic still life. *Crystal Ball* manages to reference the Wizard of Oz, Pippi Longstocking, domestic witchcraft, fortunetellers, and the fall from the Garden of Eden all in a single photograph. Louis James Picek's acrylic painting, *An Evening at Home*, 1985, uses the same visual devices, delicately placing a potted flowering plant and halved ripe squash on a circular table; the lines of the colorful rug lead directly into a second domestic still life. Both artworks successfully use color, texture, and line to direct

the viewer's eye. Like Thompson's still life images, the nuanced messages they convey are not quite so linear.

Photographer John Banasiak playfully references the historically religious symbolism of still life painting in the Middle Ages in *#92 Harvey, Illinois*, 1987. A mass-produced statue (Plaster of Paris, plastic?) of the Virgin Mary is enshrined in a porcelain bathtub and lovingly surrounded by flamingos and flowers, decorative rocks and shrubs, all artfully arranged in linear one-point perspective drawing the viewer's eye to the representation of the divine. Religion, kitsch, both? The



Louis James Picek, *An Evening at Home*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas
Sioux City Art Center Permanent Collection; 985.15

photographer's intended take away may be very different than the homeowners'. Viewers will bring their own readings to this image that puts a contemporary spin on the dissemination of religious art.

More traditional still life explorations from the permanent collection can be seen in Neil Christensen's quiet oil painting, *Bowl, Glads, and Oranges*, 1993, James D. Butler's lithograph, *Still Life with Glass and Clay*, 1995, and William Bailey's etching, *Untitled (Still Life)*, 2001, where the objects of admiration are all neatly lined up and presented on a table for the viewer's contemplation. Less

traditional and obviously influenced by Pop Art, Roger Shimomura's 2012 lithograph, *Banana* and Jo Dickman's 1976 screenprint, *Treadle*, feature isolated objects more-or-less suspended in space, elevating every-day things we may take for granted (bananas, sewing machines, spider plants) to items worthy of art making.

Mary Anne Redding
Exhibition Curator



Dolie Thompson, *Irish Fisherman*, 2021, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

cover:
Dolie Thompson, *Anti-Seasick Ship*, 2021, Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist