

# ARUSHA

## GALLERY

### *Vanitas*

Stemming from the Latin for vanity, vanitas is a kind of still life painting which depicts earthly objects of symbolic significance. Skulls, extinguished candles, flowers and fruit at the cusp of withering serve as confrontational reminders of the fragility of life and, ultimately, of death. Morwenna Morrison is fascinated by vanitas of the 17th century, particularly of the Dutch variety. She invents her own vanitas, imbued with a prevailing sense of nostalgia, for subtle political ends in a contemporary context. Some of the items in Morrison's paintings might strike the viewer as peculiar subjects for still lifes; for instance, a novelty glass ornament in the shape of a bear or a single toilet roll. Concerned with the psychology of ageing, many of Morrison's existential paintings are anchored in the most mundane aspects of the everyday: these are the physical objects and the waste we leave behind when we die.

Moving between a baroque intricacy to post-impressionist brushstrokes, Morrison uniquely creates collages which are not forged by mixing media, but instead combining just two source materials. *Vanitas I*, *Vanitas II*, *Vanitas III*, and *Vanitas IV* (2022) are comprised of portraits juxtaposed with stunning still lifes. This method of bringing together two unexpected and disparate fragments marks an evolution of Morrison's explorations with collage. In her early days of collage experiments, she found the technique overly complex and too busy (perhaps reminiscent of the kind of text and image collage adopted by the Dadaists in the early twentieth century). Since, the artist has found a kinship and political leverage in the dichotomous juxtaposition, seeking to simultaneously 'construct and deconstruct the phenomena of life cycles'.

In anticipation of her next oil collage, Morrison spends hours in the dark depths of eBay to find the right face and in the right context, preferring to work from a vintage photograph than from life. She considers these sepia photographic portraits precious acquisitions. In this grouping of four collages, she carefully paints a young Japanese woman from the 1920s, as well a Ukrainian man from the 1940s. All four sitters in this series are contemplative, with their eyes downcast or shielded, as if peeking at the fragment below. Their mouths, the primary signifiers of emotion, are cut off by flowers, fruit and game. At first glance, it might seem as if the still life component of the collages is a high quality print of an original Rachel Ruysch, Jan Davidsz de Heem or Willem van Aelst, but at closer look, these are Morrison's dexterous recreations of the old masterpieces in oil.

Drawn to instantly recognisable, quotidian objects, Morrison pushes her paintings beyond materialism in the quad of coupled oil paintings, *vanitas i*, *vanitas ii*, *vanitas iii*, and *vanitas iv* (2022 and 2023). Paired together, the paintings are antithetical windows into 21st century and 17th century cultural practices surrounding the mortal body, particularly consumption. In *vanitas i*, the artist creates visual synergies between the natural shape of a small plastic bag of prescription drugs and the bloom of De Heem's scarlet and pale pink tulip. The empty pill packs are a contemporary memento mori (or, a reminder of mortality), pointing to the widespread cultural practice of using medication to prolong life, or to make life easier before death. Morrison is concerned with climate change, and the impact of single-use plastics on

future generations, prompting the viewer to consider the empty milk bottle in *vanitas vii* in dialogue with the empty pill packets.

From the inexpensive McDonalds meal to the luxurious lobster, this grouping of paintings also creates antitheses about indulgent eating habits and its intersection with social class. Sickly yellow French fries collapse in on themselves, a stern indicator that the inexpensive fast food lacks nutrition, while the prehistoric lobster is an unmistakable *memento mori*, representing wealth, gluttony and temptation, as well as the transience of wealth.

Utilising a suggestive trope often found in 17th century still lifes, the extinguished candle, *vanitas v* and *vanitas vi* (both 2023) make an unusual pairing in which the artist plays with temporal logic. In the first painting of a lonely slice of birthday cake, the candle is lit and ready to be extinguished, yet a bite is missing from its centre: something is not right. In the second painting, the cake slice is restored to its natural whole, yet the flame has recently been blown out. This strange pairing is not celebratory; rather, it encapsulates the beholder's uncertainty about aging and the reluctant passing of time. Comparatively, *vanitas x* and *vanitas xi* (both 2023) are compositionally similar in that the paintings depict a singular subject matter across two panels: a dead crow, the starkest of all *vanitas* symbols, contorted like the mythological Icarus.

From a bank of powerful motifs, deathly parallels can be forged across Morrison's collages, coupled and single paintings. There is an existential ache which stretches across the exhibition, despite its painterly beauty.

- Rachel Ashenden

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