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# THINGS IN ROWS

Recent Paintings by Jonathan Chapman

Essay by Michael Paraskos

*Boardroom Gallery, University College Scarborough. 23 Jan-16 Feb '96*

## THINGS IN ROWS

Introduction by Jonathan Chapman

My present involvement with the genre of still life began in 1993 when I decided to make some work which addressed the situation in Bosnia. I stayed in Sarajevo three times between 1988 and 1990 and was still surrounded by the souvenirs of those extremely happy visits. Souvenirs such as front door key, a lock of hair, a coffee pan and some Bosnian pain-relievers. Objects which had been brought back as sentimental keepsakes and were now full of irony and cultural significance. I perhaps had more pain-relievers than Sarajevo's hospitals and a key to a front door which had probably been kicked open.

The Sarajevo Still Life paintings allowed me, through the process of painting, to dedicate an amount of time to the memory of a City that had always made me welcome. I was also aware that each object had become imbued with a multiplicity of narratives. The painted plate bore the images of the targeted Mosques, the enamel Turkish coffee pan had been made in Croatia, the silk handkerchief that I had carried as a token reminded me of the tokens carried into war. Although isolating, magnifying and placing each object on a black background deliberately attempted to encourage a degree of pathos, basically I wished to paint the objects in such a way that would make them as tangible to the viewer as they were to the possessor.

The completion of the Sarajevo Still Life series allowed me to 'lay some ghosts' with regard to Bosnia and my continuing involvement with the still life genre was due to my enjoyment of the objects one collects or is given during one's life and the increasing importance such objects play in defining one's home and documenting one's history. I was also fortunate at about this time to gain a collection of blown glass by Wendy Hooper which feature in many of the post Sarajevo still lifes. I also wished to align myself with, or perhaps test myself against artists such as Zurbaran, Chardin and Morandi in whose still life paintings a jug, bottle or plate could be granted dignity, humanity and gravitas. In London's National Gallery it is Courbet's small painting of bowl of red apples against a dark background that moves me more than any other painting.

Formally the works are all horizontal in format and since early in 1995 have all been painted the same size. The pictures are deliberately perhaps politically domestic in scale and hope that their uniformity allows the viewer to forget the format and concentrate upon the objects and the way in which the objects are painted in relation to that 'stage'. Whether oil painting or watercolour the works deliberately expose the way in which they are made, celebrate

the properties of paint and highlight the flat nature of canvas or paper. Against this they attempt to create convincing illusions as to the materiality of the objects and their existence within a space. The way in which the objects are more often than not placed in rows on a shelf or table, parallel to the picture plane remembers the way in which many of the seventeenth century Spanish still-life painters laid out their compositions. In their pictures the objects often appear as sacred artefacts and the tables are perhaps alters, in mine the tablecloths and dusters announce a domestic secularity but if the objects are not sacred, they are certainly treasured.

Although these are pictures which might appear to be satisfied to end up as cared for objects on the wall of a home, I hope by occupying my conscious mind with the difficulties of matching the colour of a sparkle or the shape of an ellipse I have allowed my subconscious mind the cover to divulge something that might be relevant to a wider audience.

## THE DEPTH OF HISTORY

An essay by Michael Paraskos

Jonathan Chapman is a painter of Still Life. This seemingly obvious statement is of fundamental importance. Through it Chapman is tied immediately into a tradition, something which is necessary for all art, for as every good post-modern artist knows, and every good Modern artist if they are honest, art is about many things, but originality is not one of them.

As well as being necessary, however, being tied into a tradition is also desirable. It allows the work of art to communicate to the viewer through a dialogue with its own past. This is what is meant by 'depth' in a work of art; this is the Depth of History.

In the case of Still Life this history is not so very old. Although Still Life was a valued art form amongst the Ancients, in Modern History it does not make an appearance until the Sixteenth Century, growing up, in tandem with Landscape, from being the incidental detail in figure paintings, into something of 'significance' in its own right.

The names of the great historic Still Life painters are well known - Chardin, Sánchez-Cotán, Zurbarán, Melendez and Velázquez, to name but a few. Yet despite such august names as these, Still Life has from the outset suffered something of an image problem. In the Academies of art, and the subsequent histories, it was pushed to the margins, away from the mainstream and into the regions. In the Eighteenth Century it was disparaged by Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder of the Royal Academy, and placed in a subordinate position to History painting. In the patriarchal art world of the Nineteenth Century it was thought a genre only really suitable for women painters (as opposed to male *artists*).<sup>1</sup>

To call Chapman a Still Life painter, therefore, is to risk tying him into a discourse of 'underdogdom'.

A look at the 1994 exhibition *Unbound* at London's Hayward Gallery illustrates how this marginal position of Still Life persists even in this theoretically pluralistic and tolerant 'post-modern' present day.<sup>2</sup> Subtitled 'Possibilities in Painting' the show sought to reaffirm a role for painting at a time when the whole practice has been under sustained attack from art's Totalitarian Left for over a decade. The aim of the curator, Adrian Searle, was to show: 'painting is not a patient, it is not ill or dying, or in need of resuscitation'.<sup>3</sup>

Of the sixty works by fourteen artists shown, however, only one

painting, by Paula Rego, was self-consciously within the Still Life tradition. This reaffirmation of painting, it seems, was also a reaffirmation of Still Life's historic position as a subordinate genre, in such a way as would please Sir Joshua.

Part of the problem for a contemporary practitioner such as Chapman in using Still Life lies in its associations. On the face of it these are so divergent as to be worthy of a post-modern paradox, involving as they do Clement Greenberg's elitist and ultimately vacuous notions of 'Pure Art' - that is art without symbolic or narrative content, or connexion with any specific class or other social grouping<sup>4</sup> - as well as the democracy (of sorts) of local amateur art societies. These associations unite to downgrade Still Life, and because of this they need to be taken on board by the viewer as well as the artist, in addition to the enormous history of Still Life, if the genre is to be used successfully.

The Greenberg problem is potentially the most troublesome of these. As the arch-theorist of official Modernism, Greenberg's strictures on the nature of art are tempting rules for the post-modern artist to react against. In this reaction, however, Still Life is the baby thrown out with the bathwater, as it became, in Modernist mythology, the historic starting point of Modernist art.<sup>5</sup> Denied its pre-Modern functions and meanings which included symbolism, used to display Bourgeois wealth and even narrative content, Still Life became the perfect vehicle to carry a Greenbergian notion of 'Pure Art'; after all, Still Lives have no human presence to *force* a question of narrative from the viewer, such as 'What are they doing?'

The other problem for Still life - its populist, or democratic, appeal - is perhaps less obviously a problem given the apparent resurgence of interest in demotic culture since the 1980s. Yet the amateur painters who fill local art society shows each year with Still Lives not only associate it with popular (*albeit Middle Class popular*) culture, but with a non-metropolitan art world which most critics neither understand nor feel comfortable with, even in its professional form. While post-modernity may pay lip-service to notions of regionalism, decentralisation and democracy, Britain is one of the culturally most over-centralised countries in the world and artists are soon compromised by a Metropolitan, urban and urbane art clique if they want critical acclaim.

That Still Life, and indeed that other largely neglected genre Landscape, can increasingly be seen as Pro-Regionalist art forms is shown not only by their exclusion from the Unbound show, but by their inclusion in large numbers in Alan Gussow's study for John Driscoll's Babcock Galleries in New York, *The Artist as Native: Reinventing Regionalism*.<sup>6</sup>



*Still life with three glass bowls*

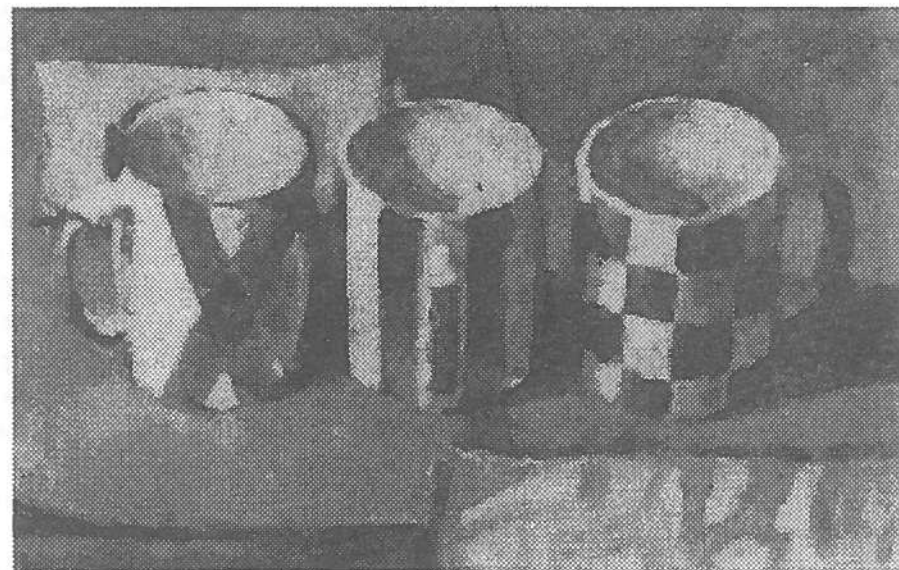
This current selection of Chapman's work at Scarborough shows evidence of an awareness of these issues. In these paintings we see Chapman is consciously within the traditions of Still Life, and as such his paintings engage in a three-way conversation between us, his viewers, the historic Still Lifes of the Old Masters, and themselves. Chapman is clearly also truly a *post-modernist* artist in that the lessons of Modernism are not discarded but taken with him as he tries to say something about our world. Indeed, not so long ago we might have been happy to read these works purely in Modernistic terms. And, finally, Chapman engages with the notion of specific place, not only in the obvious examples of his Sarajevo paintings, but in his use of ordinary and domestic objects within his works. These are the objects of the marginal or regional spaces Still Life has, historically I have argued, been forced to inhabit.

The exhibition is divisible into two parts, although these are not unconnected halves; rather they are linked by numerous and manifold elements.

On the one hand there are the apparently simple Still Life works. Ordinary objects are placed before us. Although one might claim in a Modernist vein that these works have no narrative significance and are just excuses to paint formal properties, the full frontal severity with which the objects are presented is so like historic Still Lifes, which were self-consciously full of allegorical meanings and texts, that we are forced into asking of his work that 'question of narrative'. The compositions show so clearly direct ties to, and therefore conversations with, the Still Lifes of the past that the viewer is not allowed to ignore the objects *à la Moderniste*.

But, what are these meanings? Chapman is clearly embracing the domestic and democratic sphere in presenting his beer cans, wine glasses, coffee mugs and other elements of the incidental details of life. Yet, he raises these into the inescapably exalted space which is 'the Painting'. Perhaps we might read the real world of these objects as somehow 'demotic', while the painted space is 'privileged', in which case these paintings might represent a clash of democratic objects in an aristocratic sphere, or, to put another way, a storming of the Winter Palace by Boddington beer cans. Certainly that this might be the artist's true agenda is given credence when we learn that he toyed with the idea of calling 'Still Life with Three Coffee Mugs' after one of the most aristocratic subjects imaginable, 'The Three Graces'.

There is a problem with such readings as these, however, in that to-day there is not necessarily a shared symbolic visual language between artist and viewer, which historic Still Life painters depended on - a skull in the



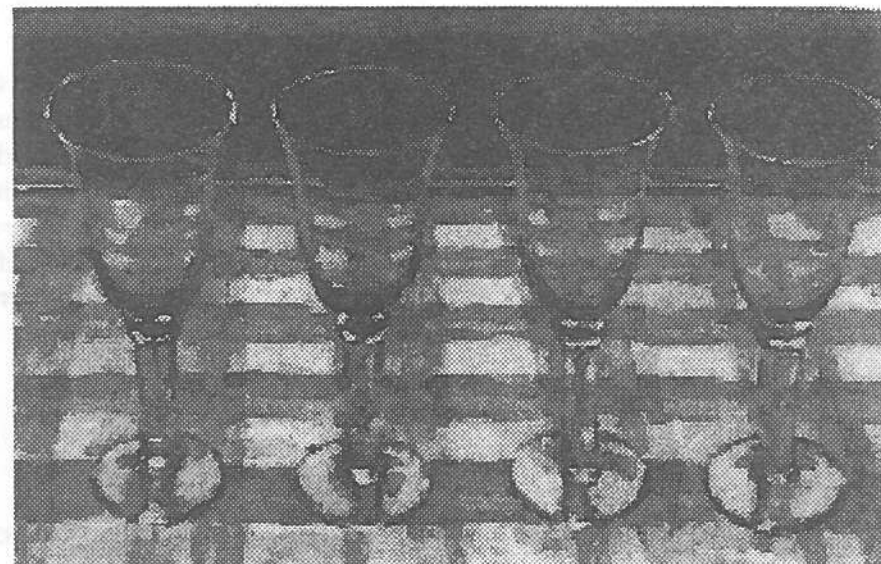
*Still life with three mugs and two dusters*

Seventeenth Century was an accepted *momento mori* for example. So in these paintings we are left with a series of unresolved questions rather than readable answers. We might accept an assertion that these are Modernist statements, or, alternatively, that they are political statements. There may be an attempt to define a contemporary allegorical symbolism through the objects, in which case does the empty Grolsch bottle seek to replace the historic skull as a hieroglyph for mortality?

In fact the paintings move between all of these 'meanings' (and others) as they are involved in an unending and essentially pluralistic conversation or discourse on meaning in art itself. This is not the same as saying the works have no meaning, rather that we need to negotiate meaning. This Pluralism, which allows for the embrace of both notions 'the aristocratic' and 'the democratic', historically has been called the dialectic of 'Classicism' and 'Romanticism' and it is an acceptance of this that distinguishes genuine Regionalism from Metropolitanism.

In some ways the Sarajevo Still Lives in the exhibition seem to work within a slightly different scheme. Although they look not dissimilar to the rest of the exhibition, the very act of calling these the 'Sarajevo Still Lives' seems to close off some of the possible readings. Full Pluralism seems at an end. A Greenbergian notion of these being pure Modernist art is, for example, apparently impossible in these paintings, at least if we accept the artist's claim they are about Yugoslavia. As such they embrace a political, moral, social and personal narrative which, as we have seen, has no place at least in Greenberg's interpretation of Modernism. These paintings have clearly been given narratives which are not wholly to do with Modernist notions of art.

Chapman had personal association with old Sarajevo and these paintings grow from this. Depicted are the memories of pre-war times spent there, and in more peaceful circumstances his souvenir objects might have had no more significance than the clichéd donkey from Spain or even the kiss-me-quick hats of Scarborough. This is perhaps the most poignant tragedy of war, that banal, domestic, every day, and as I have called them, democratic objects take on almost unbearable symbolic value during conflict. The scene on a plate (of a city now ruined), a Turkish coffee-pot (ironically made in Croatia) or a hundred Dinar note (now worthless), all have symbolic values in their own right. The painful irony of the symbolism in an empty aspirin bubble-pack is, perhaps, most powerful of all. Brought back from Yugoslavia before the war, no doubt without a second thought, it gained a new symbolic power when the artist learned that the war ravaged country did not have even aspirins for its



*Still life with four glasses on Bessie's tablecloth 1995*



hospitals. This form of symbolism, acting as it does in life, we might term sentimental symbolism.

Sentimental symbolism may be similar and parallel to the symbolic values of painting and such objects would gain symbolic value in the painted space without political factors coming in to play, as we have seen. It differs, however, in that once painted the objects must also take on the history of painting, which includes readings that may even seem offensive at a time when the Yugoslavian wars are still being fought. For example these works *might well* be read as simple excuses to paint Modernistic formal properties. The objects may work symbolically in the same way as those of a Still Life by Chardin or Zurbaran, but those symbolic references may or may not have anything to do with the theme 'War'.

In fact we see again how the paintings force a Pluralistic discourse. Once again they are engaged in a complex polylogue, comprising many voices that are constantly debating meaning, rather like a Mediæval *Disputa*, in order to ascertain Truth. One of those voices is Chapman's in his wish to bare witness to the Sarajevo he loved and is lost, but as this is an exhibition of art, we need to acknowledge the possibility of other readings. This pluralism is the unifying factor in the exhibition and as such we can no longer see these or any other Still Life works as silent or indeed still.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gillett, P., *The Victorian Painter's World*, Gloucester, 1990, p. 167.

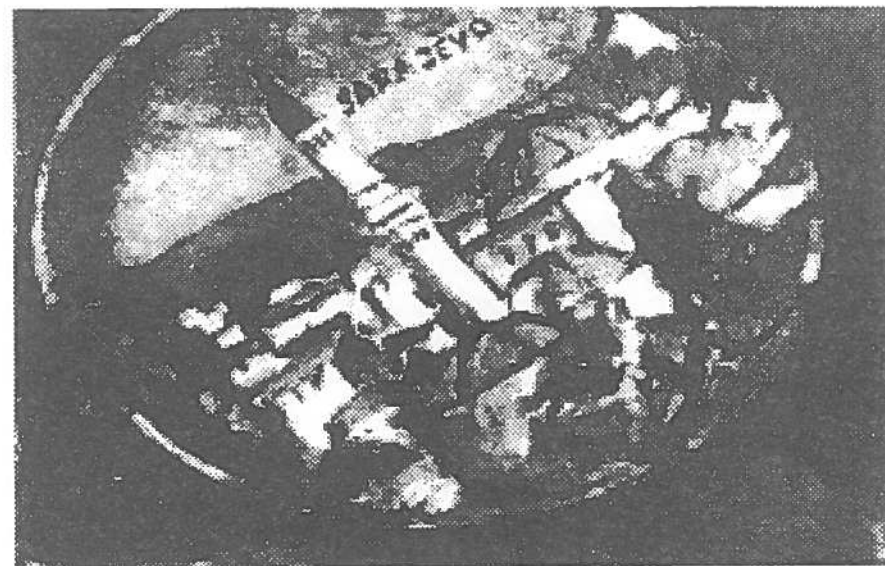
<sup>2</sup> See Harrison, C., and Orton, F., *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, London, 1982, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Searle, A., *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, London, 1994, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, C., *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. IV, edited by O'Brian, J, Chicago, 1993, p.86.

<sup>5</sup> Levey, M., *A History of Western Art*, London, 1968, p. 250: Levey shows how Modernist historians tended to view Still Life in this way. As he states, Still Life liberated art from 'the tyranny of subject matter'.

<sup>6</sup> Gussow, A., *The Artist as Native: Reinventing Regionalism*, New York, 1993.



*Painted Plate (from Sarajevo Still Lifes I 1993)*



## THINGS IN ROWS

### List of Works

#### Sarajevo Still Lifes I

Painted plate	<i>watercolour, 18x12cm, 1993</i>
Silk hankerchief	"
Hundred Dinar note	"
Turkish coffee pot	"

#### Sarajevo Still Lifes II

Key	<i>watercolour, 18x12cm, 1994</i>
Lock of Hair	"
Shoes	"
Tablets	"

#### Souvenir

Still life with glass bowl and coffee pot	<i>oil on paper, 36x25cm, 1994</i>
Still life with two cups and a coffee pot	"
Still life with plant, bottle and coffee pot	"
Still life with Boddingtons can	"

Still life with three bowls on a hearth	<i>watercolour, 44x30cm, 1995</i>
Still life with three wooden boats	"
Still life with three mugs and two dusters	"
Still life with a red colander	"
Still life with four glasses on Bessie's tablecloth	"
Still life with coffee pan	"
Still life with Wendy's glass	"

Still life with four Grolsch bottles	<i>oil on canvas, 44x30cm, 1995</i>
Still life with three Edinburgh mugs	"
Still life with coffee pot, cup and stacked bowls	"
Still life with three glass bowls	"

### Biographical Details

Jonathan Chapman was trained as a painter at Leicester Polytechnic School of Art and graduated in 1987. He subsequently worked as an exhibition organiser with the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh. In 1991 he gained an M.Phil in Public Art and Design from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, University of Dundee. Following periods lecturing part-time at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and at the University of Sunderland, Jonathan Chapman is now a full-time lecturer in Visual Art and Art History at University College Scarborough.

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