



## Uncommon paintings focus on common object



Still Life exhibit -- New York artist Richard Baker's "Wonder Towel" is one of nearly 60 still life works on view at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center in "The Common Object." Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center (Daily Press / May 10, 2010)

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Ordinary dish towels become stars in still life paintings

Mark St. John Erickson  
 At a Glance  
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If you think there are no more surprises in the world of art, go take a good hard look at "The Common Object."

This seemingly unpromising exhibit — which runs at the [Peninsula Fine Arts Center](#) through July 11 — showcases nearly 60 still life paintings by 31 artists.

Yet despite the fact that each one starts with the very same subject — or perhaps precisely because — virtually every image in this remarkable collection seems fresh and different.

Ordinary dish towels might not seem like the stuff of greatness in most people's eyes, but here you'll find them ingeniously folded, draped, crumpled and sculpted. You'll also see them assume guises that are bewilderingly abstract or eye-teasingly realistic — not to mention big, medium or very small.

Sometimes they're wildly conspicuous in these varied roles. Sometimes they're withdrawn. And sometimes they almost

seem to disappear in a jumble of other still-life components.

But in all the best cases here, these deceptively simple props play indispensable parts in knock-out works — helping them make a lot from virtually nothing — and never do they remain pedestrian or dull.

Just check out New York artist Richard Baker's deceptively blunt, straightforward approach in the aptly named "Wonder Towel." This hyperrealist life-size portrait includes not only a newly purchased, still-folded dish towel but also the manufacturer's paper label, the price tag and the plastic hook for hanging it up in the store.

Double takes are part of the pleasure here. You can practically count the threads in Baker's eye-fooling achievement. Equally important is the daring minimalism of his approach, which boldly rejects any artful setting, arrangement or angle in favor of attacking his subject head-on with no more than paint and a brush.

Such defining choices are exactly what the other members of the Zeuxis still-life painters group faced when — as a sort of artistic incitement — each of them received their own dish towels in the mail.

And with each decision they made after opening the package, they not only laid their own interests, imaginations and abilities bare, but also underscored the unsuspected versatility and potential of their otherwise everyday subjects.



Massachusetts artist Catherine Kehoe's "On the Line" (Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New York artist Michael La Presti's "Tabletop #2" (Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



Williamsburg artist William Barnes' "Still Life with Turkish Pitcher" (Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



Baltimore artist Mark Karnes' "Light Bulb" (Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New York City artist Robert Jesse's "Composition with Checkered Cloth"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New York artist Phyllis Floyd's "My Dishtowels"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)

In both of New York artist Phyllis Floyd's responses, she piled her dish towels high, arranging them in ways that transformed the folded, rumbled fabric and grids of colored stripes into a cottony version of a geological formation. Some thrust up, other lie down and still others fold over like a complex outcrop of rocks in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

What results are two near-abstract pieces of sculpture. But "My Dishtowels #6," especially, is also a beautifully executed piece of realist watercolor painting.

Far moodier and more full of atmosphere are two classical tabletop still lifes painted by Charlottesville artist Elizabeth Geiger. Here the dish towels join a large cast of other simple objects — including fruits, flowers and serving dishes — in elaborate visual plays acted out on the stage provided by a table.

"August Fruits" is the more traditional of these two large paintings, conjuring up a rich, seemingly natural kitchen scene in which pears, plums and apples spill across the table in front of the stoneware jug that dominates the center. And just behind this commanding pot, the

dish towel can be found tucked away — playing a subordinate role inside an overturned basket but still providing an important passage of color and pattern.

"Feast of St. Francis" takes a more unorthodox tack, making you guess at the meaning of the flower arrangements, fruit bowls, wine, coffee cups and flatware placed on the table in an orderly but uncertain fashion. But clearly Geiger is exploring some preparatory moment in a larger story, with a beautifully scattered pattern of forks, spoons and knives lying at the ready inside the folds of a blue-and-white dish towel.

Don't miss a trio of tiny but spectacular still lifes by Baltimore artist Mark Karnes, who can make ordinary salt and pepper shakers, light bulbs and wine screws look like ethereal spirits.

Even the gray-green grid of his dish towels seems poised to evaporate here, but it retains just enough substance to provide an evocatively ghostly backdrop.

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Charlottesville artist Elizabeth Geiger's "Feast of St. Francis"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



Vermont artist Kate Emlen's "Mackerel and Honey"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



Maine artist Bevin Engman's "Orange, Black and Coil"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



Florida artist Lucy Barber's "Still Life with Breakfast at Tiffany"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New York artist Susan Cohen's "Porch Door with Common Object"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New Jersey artist Margaret McCann's "Carmen Miranda Still Life"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)



New York artist Anthony Martino's "Summer Tea and Soft Soap #2"  
(Courtesy of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center / May 11, 2010)