



still meaningful

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In early times and other cultures – say, 17th century, the Netherlands – objects in a still-life painting were not mere things.

A rotting pear or a spilled glass of wine reminded viewers of life's impermanence. Such images told Dutch patrons in that golden age of art to place their emphasis on the next life by living virtuously.

That underlying theme of mortality, called “vanitas,” saved still-life painting from mere decoration.

But what of today, when most people don't seek metaphors in a painting of a bowl of fruit?

Peninsula Fine Arts Center is featuring several shows

based on the still-life. The anchor show is “Common Objects,” featuring work by 22 members of a 16-year-old, New York-based organization of still-life painters called Zeuxis, plus nine guest painters.

All artists were given the same task: incorporate a kitchen dish towel in two paintings. Thirty-one artists came up with diverse solutions.

Richard Baker of Brooklyn made the most obvious image: a flat, *trompe l'oeil* (fool-the-eye realism) image of a checked dish towel with the tags still attached that fills the small gouache on paper on board image.

Williamsburg artist William D. Barnes, one of two Virginia painters in the show, came up with a lush, painterly tabletop composition in which the tow-

el drapes off the table.

The towel plays a minor role in New Yorker Susan Cohen's realistic rendering of an open door with a view. We peer through a screen door at a towel-draped bistro table topped with a floral arrangement and a forest at yard's edge.

In these examples, the dish towel hardly evokes vanitas, unless you feel like you're wasting away washing dishes. It doesn't seem to mean anything.

Like a lot of art since the modern era, these paintings are more about the act of painting and formal aspects like composition, color and line. A fresh, original approach and a certain depth on the part of the artist elevates them above the decorative.

Cohen's sunny scene, for instance, could make you feel you are looking from a distance at something you desire, represented by that tabletop still-life. That setting, suggesting a cheery picnic, is balanced by the wall of woods, which looks impenetrable and

dark, creating an emotional counterpoint.

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