

# VANITAS

*The Transience of Earthly Pleasures*



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## Vanitas: *The Transience of Earthly Pleasures*

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IN GOTHIC NOVELIST EDGAR ALLAN POE'S little-known essay, 'Philosophy of Furniture' (1845), the master of gloom set out to advise ill-bred Americans how to achieve a desirably European, darkly Victorian décor. Yankee homemakers keen to 'adjust their chambers' (as Poe wrote) to produce elegantly somber interiors were encouraged to hang rich crimson silk curtains fringed with gold, lay thick carpets, and fill their rooms with richly presented artworks and magnificently bound books. Above all, Poe recommended that the lighting be kept atmospherically low and diffused; for the literary architect of the doomed house of Usher, strong steady lights were 'inadmissible'.

The evocative setting Poe earnestly describes is a recognizably gothic interior, a dark space filled with richly upholstered silence, perfect for concealing deathly secrets — whether a tell-tale beating heart beneath the floorboards, Dorian Grey's writhing portrait, or Jane Eyre's demonic predecessor. Such a dimly lit, cocooned chamber is the very antithesis of the light-filled and sparse Modernist space of the 20th century, whose quintessence turned out to be not so much the Modernist home as the modern art gallery: the white cube. Timeless, unadorned, and at the service of what Brian O'Doherty called 'the technology of flatness' (abstract painting), the white cube art-gallery was part laboratory, part storage space, part institution, but never was it home.<sup>1</sup> Relentlessly subjected to the scrutiny of Poe's detested harsh light, it was a futuristic place which nurtured Modern life like a glass hothouse, a stark contrast to the vast, shadowy, ancient family home central to the gothic tale, where masses of heirlooms, artworks and elaborate furnishings — alongside generations of skeletons — could be safely stockpiled.

It is in this kind of elegantly atmospheric, historic residence that curators Joe La Placa and Mark Sanders brilliantly set 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures'. The exhibition took place in autumn 2010 in the legendary 33 Portland Place, London a massive residency built in 1775 by master Regency-style architect Robert Adam. Originally the spectacular home of Lord Henry Wyndham and his beautiful wife Arundel, the palatial, 24-bedroom central London home passed through the hands of

successive grand families for centuries until (after a stint as the Embassy of Sierra Leone) the urban manorhouse re-emerged in the 1990s as the exclusive party venue and home of the enigmatic Lord Edward Davenport. It is into this thoroughly non-neutral and un-Modern space — whose shadowy interiors, dramatic staircase, majestically carved fireplaces, lofty decorated ceilings, and creaking solid-oak floorboards (under which one of the artworks, Kate MccGwire's cascade of shining feathers titled *Slick*), produce what Poe described for his ideal home as 'a tranquil but magical radiance' — that some twenty-five artists were invited for this exhibition to examine the contemporary possibilities of the *vanitas* genre.

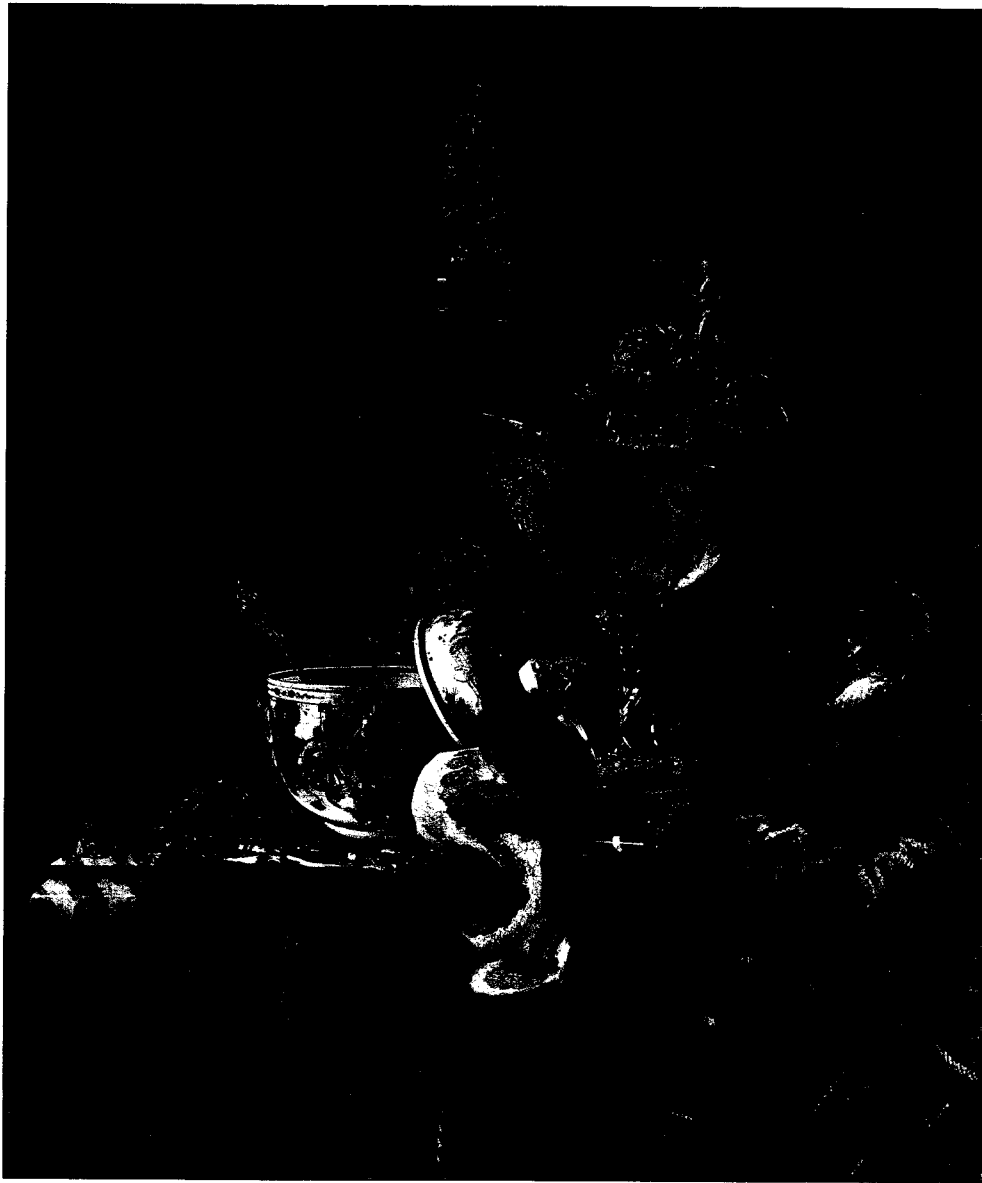
Originating in 17th century Holland (at the time the richest nation in Europe), the *vanitas* — derived from the Latin *vanus*, meaning both 'empty' and 'frivolous' — examined through still-life themes of death and the fleeting pleasure of life in exquisitely crafted oil-on-canvases. The *vanitas* still-life typically presented a prodigious display of materials which combined organic things signifying mortality and decay (flowers, animal carcasses, shells, fruits, and, most importantly, the death-knell skull) with a variety of everyday or precious objects — goblets, books, glass, candles, porcelain, watches, musical instruments, playing cards, coins, jewels, globes, dice, and mirrors. The symbolic message was clear: our time on Earth is fleeting, the pursuit of wealth futile in the face of death, and life as fragile as the *vanitas*' sparkling painted glass goblet hovering precariously on the table's edge. Or was its moral message really so clear? After all, for all the *vanitas*' moralistic preaching about letting go of Earthly pleasures, the artworks themselves are so magnificently painted and gorgeous that they contradict their own message. The *vanitas* is not just a picture of desirable objects, but a highly desirable object in its own right produced for the aesthetic pleasures of a wealthy mercantile class. How can we resist the temptation of the Earthly things in the artwork when we can barely escape the seduction of the *vanitas* artwork itself?

The *vanitas* is a genre filled with such contradictions, and not just in the literal contrast between the gaping skull and the furs or silver coins heaped on the canvas like a goth-inspired window display. When contemporary artists bring together signs of life with those of death, such as Alastair Mackie's tree branch comprised of matchsticks (*Shapeshifter*, 2010), an artwork perpetually on the verge — literally — of going up in smoke, they connect directly with the fleeting, contradictory spirit of the age-old *vanitas*. Also referencing the 17th century original is a markedly high level of labour-intensiveness, exemplified in Jodie Carey's *Untitled (Vanitas)*, 2010, a two-meter-high, lace-, chiffon- and bone-encrusted flowering pedestal, a whirl of dusty lusciousness and

declining femininity which might suggest Miss Havisham's withering wedding cake. As Svetlana Alpers has written, the *vanitas* painting's similar extreme labour-intensivity was prized because it reflected the artist's unwavering dedication to his craft, his admission of no short-cuts in executing an artistic vision. For example, Alpers writes, the premise of Willem Kalf's 1662 *vanitas* masterpiece *Still-life with Nautilus Cup* was to produce opulent objects such as a Persian rug, *facon de Venise* glassware, a Ming bowl — finer than any weaver, glassmaker or ceramicist could actually manufacture. The painted copies are paradoxically of greater material and aesthetic value than their original,<sup>2</sup> and consequently the painter's work was hailed as the greatest of all object-making occupations. In this sense, the *vanitas* then as now is a potent reminder of the unique and immense value of art-making among all human endeavors.

In the current, often specially commissioned artworks comprising 2010's *Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures* — spanning from a life-size porcelain electric chair delicately visited by dozens of meticulously formed ceramic butterflies (by Italian artist duo Bertozzi and Casoni), to a six-foot sculptural confection of lace, chiffon, plaster and bone by Jodie Carey, and including bonafide 17th century *vanitas* oils by the likes of Pieter Gerritsz van Roestraten and Jan Vermeulen — we discover an anti-Modern, retro fascination for carefully crafted art objects in combination with a contemporary sense of surprise and hybridity. The recent works on view update the *vanitas*' reflection on death in combination with any number of influences emerging from the interfering three centuries, whether 19th century gothic sentiments borrowed from Poe and his generation, or 1980s heavy metal iconography, or Romanticism, horror movies, Disneyesque gaiety, even pre-*vanitas* 'triumph of death' scenes from the Middle Ages. Such unorthodox cross-historical references are presented in any number of media, from traditional materials such as bronze (Jake and Dinos Chapman), porcelain (Bertozzi and Casoni), and oil on canvas (Aaron van Erp), or utterly unexpected materials from dead animals (Noble and Webster), to porn magazines (Tom Gallant), to rubber tyres (Wim Delvoye). Despite the array of unpredictably varied media and surfaces — perhaps akin to the many contrasting objects on display in the 17th century still-lives — what remains in contemporary *vanitas*-inspired art is the ambiguous messaging about death, at once feared and teased, as well as an exquisite attention to detail and a spirited relationship with the past.

Just as the curators chose a distinctively un-Modern space for 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures', the artworks on exhibit can be seen as stating their defiant refusal of many Modern-era ideas and values in art-making. The lavishness,



WILLEM KALF (1619–93)  
*Still Life with a Nautilus Cup and other Objects*, 1662  
Oil on canvas, 79.4×67.3 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
© Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

excess, and extreme craftsmanship in these contemporary works all point to this distinctly counter-Modern love for the exquisitely made. You will not find in this exhibition readymades, computer-based work, text pieces, and the like. Here as then the *vanitas* was not just about the decay of earthly things, but also about consecrating value to those rare and magnificent, handcrafted creations which succeeded in transcending the banal and the ordinary. Expect therefore in these works to be seduced, engrossed and sensually assaulted.

The *vanitas* was all but mothballed in the Modern age; in fact already during the 18th century the genre had fallen out of artistic favour. Cézanne's stabs at the obsolete genre in the late 19th century were already a startling anachronism, but during the 20th century the crusty old *vanitas* all but perished. The visibility of ordinary objects celebrated in the *vanitas* was plainly undesirable in the Modernist domestic interior, whose sparse decoration was designed to disguise the material trappings of everyday life. Rare exceptions in Modern-era art might include the occasional Surrealist venture into *vanitas* genre's updated possibilities, such as Henri Magritte's *La Gâcheuse (The Bungler)*, 1935, a skull topping a lovely young woman's naked torso, or Georgia O'Keeffe's antelope heads. But these early 20th-century examples of *vanitas* variations fell well outside of what, for example, Modernist champion Clement Greenberg would have deemed the most noble strand of Modernism: abstraction. One would be hard-pressed to find a truly Modernist *vanitas*; still-life paintings abound — one thinks of Braque, Picasso, Morandi — even assemblage,<sup>3</sup> but *vanitas*? Never.

Among the artists featured in 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures' there is no apology for failing to continue or uphold Modernist ideals; replacing such claims is the desire to invent a lush rethinking of art history spanning equally from the Middle Ages, across the 20th century into the present day, with an emphasis on surface texture and surprise. An allegory of the emphatically after-Modernist attitude running through the exhibition can be identified in John Isaacs's *Cast from Light and Dark Your Shadow is no Different from Mine (Henry Moore)* (2010). Here the artist presents a Henry Moore-inspired sculpture (created by adopting the Modern sculptor's very same technique of plaster and wood shavings layered onto a steel armature, then sanded and modeled) as a symbol of High Modernism. This sculpture lies — apparently beheaded — on what seems to be a Victorian mortuary slab. This tiled pedestal includes a drain, as if asked to sluice all the bloodied juices of what looks like an avant-garde, decapitated, Henry Moore-ish pelican lying upon it. Are we witnessing the postmortem of Modern art itself? In Issacs's still-life, the symbol of death is no longer a skull, which has ostensibly

been replaced with a by-now extinct, Modernist, sculptural ideal, propped up in advanced *rigor mortis* like the pheasant carcasses of a 17th-century still life.

Of all the elements within the 17th century *vanitas* other than the skull, the shadow represented a unique part of the picture; the rest of the *vanitas*' objects could be touched or smelled, but shadows could only be seen. These painted shadows reinforced a sense of the evanescence of human life, and contained a handy Biblical affiliation too: '*For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are like a shadow*' (Job, 8:9).<sup>4</sup> Tim Noble and Sue Webster's extraordinary contemporary work, *British Wildlife*, 2008, is a shadow-sculpture divided into two areas of interest: a mass of taxidermied animals producing a densely packed still-life, and an exquisitely detailed, profiled portrait in shadow of the artists (perhaps narcissistically depicted as forever 'in the spotlight'), produced by the strong beam projected upon the clustered carcasses. As with their other work on view, *Metal Fucking Rats with Heart-shaped Tail* (in which a heap of inanimate metals projects a very living picture of romancing rats), in this contemporary *vanitas* the realms of the living and of the dead are firmly delineated: the 'dead' mass of animal bodies or scrap metal here on the floor, and the 'living' shadow portrait there on the wall. The *vanitas* painting was sometimes plainly composed of two distinctly separate ontological realms, one-half picturing death, the other half life. One thinks of Adrien van Utrecht's *Vanitas Still Life*, 1643, which is divided rigidly in two, the right half overflowing with material abundance, the left stark in comparison, centring on the skull. A single lock of golden hair curls as if crossing from one world to the other – hair being perhaps a part of the body that is both living and dead, able to bridge these two worlds. The *vanitas* was often pushing past its own boundaries to invade our space, witnessed in paintings which seem to escape the painted frame. Noble and Webster's piece literally expands into our space, as we likewise project our own shadows on the wall alongside theirs.

In some ways Noble and Webster's work is perpetually on the verge of dying, or vanishing: one need only pull the plug and these pitch-perfect double portraits are gone ('*our days upon earth are like a shadow...*'). In this way *British Wildlife* is a precious but inherently unstable object, not unlike the piles of fruits or jewels in the old paintings, balanced at the edge of a tablecloth and forever on the brink of tumbling to the floor — perhaps right out of the picture. The heaping of rare things (such as this accumulation of taxidermied animals, a collection which Noble inherited from his father) relates to the *vanitas*' love of stuffing its paintings with a flood of objects. Then



ADRIAEN VAN UTRECHT (1599–1652)  
*Vanitas Still Life with a Bouquet and a Skull*, 1643  
Oil on canvas, 67 × 86 cm  
Courtesy Sotheby's New York  
Old Master Paintings 29 May 2003



as now, the mass of animal bodies or mounds of gold are meant to overwhelm us with the power of sheer abundance. Displays of excess in works such as Pieter Boel's *An Allegory of Worldly Life*, 1633 signaled newfound wealth and power comparable to the splendor of the great sovereigns of the past — the Crown Jewels or Tutankhamen's coffin, a comparison Norman Bryson makes in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-life Painting*.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary artists Tim Noble and Sue Webster manage paradoxically to turn such material excess in their work into a dematerialized shadow picture, perpetually on the verge of disappearing.

Signs of transition and instability have always been a hallmark of *vanitas*; importantly, this exhibition graced the lavish spaces of 33 Portland Place for just a brief five days during the 2010 frieze art fair, and became itself a rapidly passing delight. In many of the artworks therein we discover similarly a heightened sense of instability — not just the traditional *vanitas*' savouring of quiet decay, but a far more dramatic and explosive transformation. Nothing of the genre's traditional composure could prepare us for Ori Gersht's *Time After Time* (2007), wherein a tranquil vase of flowers, mimicking the still-life paintings of 19th century painter Henri Fantin-Latour, is seen visibly exploding. A bouquet inspired by one of Fantin-Latour's floral compositions is staged here in real life, photographed precisely in the nano-second of its violent eruption. Historically, the kind of detailed mimesis of reality studiously delivered in the *vanitas* was effortlessly trumped, a few centuries later, with the advent of photography. In Gersht's work both mimetic traditions, painting and photography, are brought together to suggest a literal shattering of art, time and tradition. The flowers are spared the *vanitas*' usual decay and withering but are instantaneously blasted to their end, as recorded using a super-rapid shutter speed of 1/7500 of a second to immortalize a brief, entropic moment of beauty's destruction.

The flower held an especially potent presence in the *vanitas*; the shortness of its bloom made for easy metaphor regarding life's fleetingness — a symbolism enhanced by its Biblical connections: ('*Man that is born of woman is of a few days: he comes forth like a flower and he is cut down*', Job 14, 1–2).<sup>6</sup> Its symbolic meaning turned literal in the wake of the mid 17th-century Dutch tulip craze, which eventually crashed, depleting great fortunes and dramatizing the free market's terrifying unpredictability alongside the folly of human desire. Each flower held special symbolic significance; tulips became a symbol of human foolishness, not surprisingly, although earlier they had signified fine taste and grace.<sup>7</sup> Bertozzi and Casoni's *Vasco con Mazzo di Fiori (Vase with a Bouquet of Flowers)* (2010), with its variety of porcelain blooms, also recalls in its detailed handiwork



PIETER OR PETER BOEL (1622–74)  
*Allegory of the Vanities of the World*, 1663  
Oil on canvas, 260 × 207 cm  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France



HENRI FANTIN-LATOURE (1836–1904)  
*Roses dans un Verre a Pied*, 1865  
Oil on canvas, 36.2×36.8 cm  
© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

the opportunity provided by the *vanitas* for 17-century flower painters to exhibit their in-depth botanical erudition, demonstrating the artist to be a unique figure of multi-disciplinary knowledge, not just a mere painter.

Bouke de Vries' *Skull Face Mao* and *Mao with Dunces Cap* (both 2010) are formed by stacking endless identical skulls on the Chairman's bust, resulting in a rampant colony of skulls which seem to crawl over the leader like some hideous, bulbous rash. Delicate materials such as porcelain, glass and crystal were commonplace in the *vanitas*; these fragile vessels conveyed both notions of the 'frivolous' and the 'empty'. The presence of Chinese porcelain in some Dutch still-lives moreover reflected ties of trade and commerce with the East, and thus networks of economic and colonial power; such an East/West crossover is made explicit in de Vries' works. The carefully balanced heap of skulls (his many victims?) seems on the verge of toppling — just as Mao's regime eventually did. During the Cultural Revolution, when Mao's cult of personality reached its zenith, 'enemies of the people' were publicly humiliated in dunce caps daubed with slogans. His regime victimized millions, yet Mao remains for some an admired figure. De Vries takes advantage of the *vanitas*' mixed message-making to overlap contradictory histories and iconographies, wherein heroes and enemies, perpetrators and victims, are all bound together through the conventional image of death: the skull.

Alastair Mackie's dramatically lit *Mud Skull* plainly brings together notions of instability (the fragile material, mud) with a sign of death's permanence (the skull). In the *vanitas* painting the skull displayed the crushing and indomitable presence of death; here instead it is more precarious, as fragile as the painted flowers and transparent glassware of the 17th-century original. Mackie's *Mud Skull* moreover suggests much further foray deeper into history, suggesting archaeological remains and primeval, earthy beginnings, collapsing time across centuries, if not millennia.

It is perhaps because a return to *vanitas* necessarily means taking up a pre-Modern cultural legacy that so many of the works have an unmistakable flavour of nostalgia — nostalgia being, for curator Raymond J. Kelly writing in *To Be, or Not To Be: Four Hundred Years of Vanitas Painting*, one of the few key traits consistently defining the *vanitas* work.<sup>8</sup> Jodie Carey's Victoriana-inspired plastered object of desire is a swirling refusal of all things Modern, moreover referencing the distinctly feminine association that Bryson identifies with the domesticity of the still-life setting. Kate MccGwire's work also breathes a 19th century air. *Smoulder* (2010) is an antique trunk which was used for the safekeeping of valuable deeds, into which a kind of well or hollow, lined

with layers of pigeon feathers, has been inserted beneath a glass dome. We peer inside as if into a bottomless pit, suggesting the records of values stashed here long ago in hope but which expired, like the dead birds, many years ago. MccGwire's large work, *Slick* (2010) presents the idea of sculpture-as-limitless-growth. Extending from within the building's very architecture, out of the fireplace, a slinking mass of root-like protuberances are covered in shining magpie feathers, taken from the many birds of this species culled as 'pests'. Reminding one of the attacking birds that eventually make their way down the chimney in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), this sculptural overlap references other horror cinema as well, particularly movies that featured formless, creeping beings from *The Blob* (1958) to *The Fog* (1980). These seeping monsters enter unwanted into a domestic space (*Slick*'s feathers spread under the very floorboards, as if they were liquid) with no regard for the human inhabitants who are mercilessly pushed out.

Tom Gallant's *Rose Window V (After Morris)* (2009) also looks back to the 19th century, combining William Morris floral patterning with printed pornographic images, applied like lace on a window-like, transparent, vertical plane. Presumably referencing the enormous, round stained glass window which formed the Gothic cathedral centerpiece, Gallant's *Rose Window* projects a fragmented, delicate and decidedly un-Modern pattern of petals and tracery all around it. Glass was among the most favorite reflective surfaces in the *vanitas* genre, an especially enticing surface for captivating the eye. Often etched, painted glass reveled in the kind of virtuoso detailing also present in the minute handiwork of Gallant's 'large glass'. Jonathan Wateridge's large-scale figurative painting *Real-Life Counterparts* (2010) recalls Old Master paintings while simultaneously reaching back to a time closer to our own, the 1970s. In some unnamed sub-Saharan airport two actors meet the 'real life' journalist and photographer whom they are portraying in a film, as if encountering their own doubles — themselves later in life, aged and unrecognizable. Before these two generations of doubles lies a kind of impromptu still life: a sprawling mass of disparate objects, perhaps the exploded remains of luggage after some unspecified catastrophe, spread like witnesses before the uncanny human encounter taking place behind them.

Bertozzi and Casoni's *Sedia Elettrica con Farfalle (Electric Chair with Butterflies)* (2010), like the duo's ceramic *Vassoio (Tray)* (2010) offering a tempting, *trompe l'oeil* cluster of objects, are perhaps among the works in the exhibition that most overtly express a desire to update the *vanitas* tradition. Naturally, neither butterflies nor, certainly, the electric chair are objects drawn from the conventional *vanitas* — the electric chair



ANDY WARHOL (1930–87)  
*Skull*, 1976, 38.1 × 48.3 cm  
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas  
Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

instantly bringing to mind Andy Warhol's eerily empty, silkscreened *Electric Chair*, and the butterflies recalling ... dare we reference the inevitable Damien Hirst, with his controversial (and innumerable) *Butterfly Paintings*? The life / death overlap perhaps points to these earlier generations of Pop-artists, both of whose art was notoriously in perpetual conversation with death, yet this work remains distinct. To begin with, Bertozzi and Casoni's electric chair departs from both these precedents in its remarkable craftsmanship. What looks like a vintage electric chair is in fact by no means a 'readymade' but its very opposite: an elaborately handcrafted porcelain object, painstakingly sculpted down to its 'steel' buckles, 'leather' straps, and 'wooden' details. In the extreme laboriousness of its production, *Electric Chair with Butterflies* points again to the extreme demands of human effort expected of the *vanitas* work: prospective 17th-century buyers required that artists demonstrated a worthy investment of their time, skill and expertise in exchange for the collector's hard-earned money. Such an emphasis on labour-intensivity as a hallmark of art again refutes a Modernist paradigm, whereby craftsmanship is subsumed to the all-important Idea; a work such as *Electric Chair with Butterflies* makes a pointblank refusal of the readymade and other deskilling strategies born of Modernist ideals.

Also apparent in *Electric Chair with Butterflies* is another signal of the conventions of the genre: the *trompe l'oeil*, artworks that delight in fooling the human eye for their allegiance to 'reality'. In the 17th century such deceptive skills were especially prized; for example, well-trained painters were rewarded for creating paintings that succeeded in deceiving the king's eye.<sup>9</sup> The persuasiveness of the painting as 'real' also reiterated its perpetual moralizing message: the world itself is but an illusion. Once again, in these contemporary works' insistent return to pre-Modern artistic values (*trompe l'oeil*, manual skill, precious materiality), the works in 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures' breathe a distinctly counter-Modern air.

Butterflies and moths are, curiously, motifs that recur in a number of works here, perhaps because they succeed so well in representing the passage from one form of life to another, of intermediate states between life and death-like inertia in the pupae. Unlike, for example, flowers — the preferred artistic metaphor in the original *vanitas*, for their linear passage from blooming life to inevitable decay — the butterfly or moth is perhaps more suited to a changing, cyclical sense of life. Might this reflect our late capitalist state of mind, ceaselessly fluctuating from boom to bust and back again? In this scenario these delicate insects are a better symbol of the contemporary society and its market's re-emergences and rebirths, replacing the flower's one-way doom. Winged

insects appear in Tom Gallant's work *Moths* (2010), which are arranged in an orderly, gridded collage which conceals images of sex beneath the wing's patterning. Gallant's paper 'moths' are pinned as if to the velvet, suggesting erotic adventures collected like trophies in a case. In Hugo Wilson's *Rorschach Plate 1, Psychopathic Responses* and *Rorschach Plate 4, Self-Portrait* (both 2010), immensely enlarged moths are set behind the noted symmetrical inkblots invented in 1921 by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach. Patients were invited to 'see' inside these unrecognizable symmetries, presumably projecting upon them the repressed images that lay dormant in their minds. In Hugo Wilson's work the artist brings the abstracted, Modern-era nature of the Rorschach blot together with age-old mimetic representation, literalized in the moth image below; the artist replaces indecipherable, psychoanalytical 'depth' with the blatant provision of recognizable surface imagery.

Shades of psychoanalysis recur throughout 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures', for example in the repeated references to Sigmund Freud. Oliver Clegg's *First Act* and *Second Act* (both 2008), black-and-white etchings of a flimsy house of cards, were originally meant for display in the Freud Museum in the psychoanalyst's former home in Hampstead, London. These images are printed onto pages of text taken from the plays of the 19th century German philosopher and writer Heinrich Heine, a figure with whom Freud felt he shared a great affinity. Both were radicals in their time — 'taking chances', at it were, with the conventions of their day, as referenced in the playing cards which plainly links to the symbols of chance and luck (cards, dice, game boards) common in *vanitas* and which obviously pointed towards the genre's main theme: the unpredictability of life's changing circumstances. Freud liked card games, particularly an obscure game called tarock, the subject of a three-dimensional work also by the artist titled *House of Cards* (2008). Here the grid of flat rectangular pages from the etchings have been as if peeled off, stiffened up, and balanced into a precarious card structure that becomes a kind of precarious, symbolic double-portrait of both men, to be scrutinized in a vitrine.

The late Charles Matton's magnificent miniature worlds also take in one instance *Sigmund Freud's Study II* (2007) as a place deserving of intense, pleasure-filled scrutiny. Much has been made of Freud's collections of Roman, Chinese, Greek and Egyptian sculptures, drawing parallels between these archaeological finds and the psychiatrist's 'digging' about in the human psyche. Matton's exquisite miniature seems to replicate Freud's meticulousness in his habits of collection and display; in its fanatical detail, Matton's work alludes to the minute details that Freud observed in demystifying the



vicissitudes of the human mind. As a kind of over-wrought dolls-house, the suggestion is also to play – perhaps allusions to ‘mind games’ and an almost infantile desire to find an answer to everything, even the boundless complexity of the human mind. For Jean Baudrillard writing about Matton, the artist’s methods are distinctly counter-Modern. As Baudrillard writes, Matton is ‘quite certainly a fetishist, but a fetishist of the object rather than, as with the ‘Moderns’, of interpretation and intellect’;<sup>10</sup> in this sense the late artist shares the dominant counter-Modern spirit of the contemporary *vanitas*. In the equally magical *Library Homage to Georges Perec, II*, a mirrored back wall concocts the illusion of an infinitely extended miniaturized library of limitless proportions, like a place imagined in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. The rooms present themselves like tiny, claustrophobic film-sets, alive in their details yet by their nature destined always to be hopelessly vacant and uninhabited. Matton’s ‘Boxes’ together become like the many rooms of a vast but infinitesimal, intellectual ghost town, architectures void of the contemplative life they seem to invite but could never host.

The many interiors seen in ‘Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures’, including Matton’s irresistible worlds, can be said to veer from the strictly *vanitas* still-life towards another deathly mood, that of the gothic. A great many visual and literary art forms take death as their subject;<sup>11</sup> the *vanitas* in visual art and the gothic in literature are only two such examples, but this pair share much in common. Both looked relentlessly back towards the past — in contrast with Modernism, which insistently turned boldly toward the future. What is ‘gothic’, exactly? The most respected definition of this term is considered by many to be that by literary theorist Chris Baldick, who claimed that

*‘[The gothic] should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce a sickening descent into disintegration.’<sup>12</sup>*

Three qualities — claustrophobia; the unwanted but lasting effects of the past; and the inevitable catastrophe sparked by their co-existence — are said to provide the gothic’s defining signals. Charles Matton’s claustrophobic rooms, which suggest long-gone historical places which seem visibly to shrink in size as their memory fades into the past, might in Baldick’s sense be deemed ‘gothic’. Paul Fryer’s unearthly box, *Journey’s End* (2009), is an extraordinary contraption which visualizes the final journey of cosmic rays — allegedly one of the causes of physical aging — which have travelled through the cosmos for millions of years before hitting our earth. This is another

claustrophobic boxed structure, connecting back eons into history and capturing energies that will bring us to our eventual decay: it too can be said, in Baldick's terms, to bear the three hallmarks of gothic. Also in a gothic mood are Aaron van Erp's exitless painted spaces, titled *Laboratory Assistant* (2005) and *Good, that Rascal won't be Bothering Us for a While* (2005), both suggesting the gothic novel's 'forbidden chamber'. These are closed-off interiors where uncertain and dubious events are taking place, housing strange rituals whose histories we can only guess at but which hint unmistakably at some unpleasant outcome. And Polly Morgan's *Involucre*, a mass of ravens whose bulb-like shape suggests some hideous, shrieking flower (the 'involucre' is the circular section beneath wildflowers which keeps the petals gathered in a cluster) and cannot but recall Poe once again, and his *nevermore* refrain of death in 'The Raven'.

One may guess that an iconographic overlap between the *vanitas* and the gothic might conveniently centre on the skull, an object often associated in the popular imagination with the term 'gothic.' In fact, when looked at closely, this association is not altogether justified. The skull only attaches itself to the term 'gothic' very recently, probably by way of Goth subculture. This too is odd because Goths do not usually favor skull iconography in their adornments, preferring for example all varieties of crosses (Celtic, Greek; Egyptian ankhs) to skulls. (Skulls do however abound in the imagery surrounding heavy metal, a musical genre among the many — though not the predominant — at the origins of Goth music.) Late medieval (Gothic) art sometimes depicted dancing and laughing 'full-body' skeletons, but very rarely the isolated death's-head skull.<sup>13</sup> Only once in any notable work of (late) gothic fiction does the skull appear as an indicator of dread, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): 'The moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull', wrote Wilde.<sup>14</sup> As beautifully evocative as that solitary line may be, why exactly the skull screams 'gothic' so strongly in the popular imagination, despite not really being grounded in (albeit tangentially connected to) the three main cultural contexts where 'gothic' is used today — the subculture, the literature, the art — remains quite the mystery.

A more prominent and authentic signal of 'gothic' (in literature) is an insistence on surfaces and textures. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980/86) the gothic novel, a form of fiction originating in the mid to late 18th century, delighted in lavishing prolonged attention to an array of surface details, from eery exteriors presented in precise architectural detail to exacting descriptions of furnishings, fabrics, jewelry, and the like.<sup>15</sup> Goths' love for silver, rubber, leather, feathers, fishnet and more in their attire might confirm a subcultural continuity of this surface-

fetishizing marker of the gothic. The gothic's emphatic interest in surface textures is shared with the *vanitas* painting, in which 'all surfaces emit signs of vigilant attention', as Bryson writes.<sup>16</sup> The *vanitas* painter took evident delight in assembling widely disparate objects which emphatically shift in surface quality from metal to fur, to fruits to ceramic, to bone — all attesting to the artist's consummate painting skill in conveying the particular sheen, weight and feel of the materials arranged before him.

In Wim Delvoye's *Untitled (Car Tire)* (2009), a steel-belted radial tire has been intricately carved to gain immense sculptural presence, resulting in a perfectly balanced, overdecorated circular sculpture which draws attention to the tactile qualities of the black rubber and the shining metal concealed within it — as if 'beneath the skin'. Extreme attention to surface is also foregrounded in Dolly Thompson's *Night Landing (Blue)* (2010), created from the assiduous application of coats of oil, acrylic and resin to capture light within its many layered paint-like substances, like an Old Master painting. *Night Landing* glows with an infinitely seductive glossiness, its emphasis on surface perpetually contradicting the depth of field in the endless nocturnal space of the picture. Magical faraway places are also presented in Reece Jones's *Habbakuk* (2010), a trio of charcoal drawings picturing an icy and uninhabitable landscape. 'Habbakuk' (mis-spelled from the original Hebrew) was a doomed, top secret project conceived during World War II which attempted to hollow out and level off huge icebergs for use as makeshift air craft stations during long haul missions. Operation Habbakuk resulted in yet another 20th-century pipe dream — like Modernism itself? — long forgotten but able today to lend itself to the invention of a dreamy, Caspar David Friedrich-like frozen landscape. Among the many cultural sites which relish in the imaging of death including the *vanitas* and the gothic, one might also recall that Romanticism (itself related to 18th-century gothic) too was mesmerized by deathly subject matter, a theme apparent in artworks such as Friedrich's similar arctic drama *The Wreck of the Hope* (1824–25), also about the frailty of human endeavor in the face of the overwhelming forces of nature.

Original 'Gothic' (medieval) death-centred art emerging in the 15th century conveyed a different message on death to the *vanitas*, belonging to a radically different era two long centuries before the *vanitas* appeared in full fledge. The medieval *danse macabre* pictured a personal yet unemotional encounter with Death, which is seen embodied and accompanying all souls to their end in a natural and unromanticized cycle of life. Death is portrayed as a living, busy, merry skeletal creature, leading its doomed companions to their inevitable and untimely appointment with mortality. This



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT (1960–88)  
*Riding with Death*, 1988  
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 249 × 289.5 cm.  
Private Collection  
Copyright Credits : © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat  
ADAGP, BI, Paris 2010



Sedlec Ossuary, Church of All Saints, Sedlec, Czech Republic

is the triumph of death; in these works life and death do not coexist in moralistic fraternity as they do in the *vanitas*. Where the *vanitas*, with its exquisite craftsmanship and general gorgeousness, seems finally to side with the pleasures of the material world, in the Middle Ages it is Death who gets the final word. Death in the 15th century was seen as mockingly pleased with his easy victory — a theme revisited majestically in a late Jean-Michel Basquiat painting, *Riding with Death* (1988), where we see an emaciated figure riding the bare white bones of an unstoppable creature.

Compare Basquiat's galloping death with a similar image in Wolfe Lenkiewicz's *Death Becomes Her* (2010), in which the artist adopts Disney iconography in this same spirit of a ruthless encounter with Death. Familiar faces from the reassuring children's animation are made to wear Death's relentless grin. Lenkiewicz's *Danse of Death* (2010) too can be said to refuse the *vanitas*' balancing act between life and death in order to side decisively with death; here the puppet master decides with expressionless indifference the fate of his prey. In *Now Now Pinocchio Be a Good Boy*, Lenkiewicz readapts a noted Disney still from the film *Pinocchio* (1940), of the puppet's instructive encounter with the wisely admonishing Jiminy Cricket. Lenkiewicz inserts the wooden character's startled, severed head inside a *vanitas* arrangement of old books and homey objects, reducing the puppet who so wanted life to an empty, skull: one who has indeed lived, and lost.

In Bertozzi and Casoni's truly macabre *Ossobello (Beautiful Bones)* (2010), one is again not necessarily reminded of the *vanitas* but of late medieval, grisly churches and ossuaries, which were originally established to cope with the impossible accumulation of bones in the 15th century, with its massive death tolls due to plague, famine and war. Some of these bone collections eventually shifted into exuberant if grim sculptures of disturbingly vast proportions. The Sedlec Ossuary in Czech Republic (the subject of a short film by the late Surrealist Jan Švankmajer from 1970) contains some 50,000 human skeletons, artistically arranged to form the decorations and furnishings for an elaborate chapel. These include an extraordinary chandelier said to comprise every bone in the human body, a bony coat of arms, and forests of tall pyramids comprised of stacked bones. This authentic Gothic originating in the Middle Ages, with its merciless picture of Death as an industrious collector, enjoying his hoard of bones like a child delighting in his Christmas toys, contrasts with the more distant and dignified portrayal of death in the *vanitas*. The Middle Ages' more active, gleeful Death is also observed in Jake and Dinos Chapman's leering *Skull* (2008) sculpture. Here the artist duo unconventionally mix this medieval familiarity with bodily gore with contemporary cartoon excess in

order to produce, perhaps surprisingly, what can also be considered an extremely conventional work of art: a bronze, figurative sculpture.

The medieval triumph of death presented an image of that exact, awful passage to death, the very seconds of transition from life unto death, when both co-exist not as separate realms (as presented, more reassuringly, in the *vanitas*) but as a ghastly in-between state moving inexorably to death. Rachel Howard's *Jacob and Eva* (both 2007) present dead or dying blurs of humanity who have recently hung to their deaths – whether suicides or criminals, we do not know. The streaky blurred application of gloss on canvas again returns our attention to the surface of the work, rather than to depth. The paint itself exists in a state of transition between adhering dry to the canvas or dripping perpetually wet from it, the paint ceaselessly pulled downward like the human bodies dragged down to their deaths.

Jake and Dinos Chapman's noted re-working of an especially violent scene from Francisco Goya's *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (from the series *The Disasters of War*, 1808) again takes the brazen imaging of mutilation and death as its subject. *The Same Thing only Smaller* (2006) and *Same Thing only Silver* (2008) transfer this image which was originally produced as an etching, to precious and permanent sculptural materials rendering permanent this gruesome act — violence sadly surviving intact, in all its brutality, through history right up to the present. However, there may be another, more mundane meaning behind this work too. The translation of these art-historical images into silver and painted resin, on tabletop scale, reiterates without apology their market availability, and this perhaps points to another side of the *vanitas*: its dose of guilt among art-lovers. Simon Schama claims that the desirable and costly *vanitas* provokes not just pleasure but a gnawing uneasiness borne of the paradoxical discomfort of riches and the cohabitation of affluence with anxiety. 'We lose our free will when entrapped by material possessions', Schama proposes to be another possible message that we might extract from the *vanitas* picture.<sup>17</sup> The *vanitas* is for Schama finally about the infinite seduction of art in all its material splendour — even the possible preference of this delectable fantasy to life itself. In seeing Kalf's painting *Still-life with Nautilus Cup*, Goethe is alleged to have said:

*'One must see this picture in order to understand in what sense art is superior to nature and what the spirit of man imparts to objects. For me at least, there is no question that should I have the choice of the golden vessels or the picture, I would choose the picture'.<sup>18</sup>*

What an extraordinary preference: art is said to imitate life, but given the choice between them, Goethe actually preferred the copy, art. In some ways the unchanging subject of the *vanitas* is perhaps such limitless expectations of art, perhaps actually surpassing life itself, as expressed in Goethe's extraordinary comment some two centuries ago. At the entrance of 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthly Pleasures' is a moving image work by Martin Sexton titled *Beneath the Pavement... Lies the Beach* (2010). This small, split screen film is projected onto a thin layer of the ashes from the notorious 2004 Momart art fire in London, which destroyed perhaps as much as £100,000 worth of contemporary artworks. *Beneath the Pavement...* seems to make the case that art can not be smothered even when it has been materially destroyed, resulting in an artwork that literally emerges from art's very own ashes. Sexton's work literalizes the claim that art-making, even more than life, always survives, always perseveres, can even be resurrected. Even the once-lost genre of the *vanitas* can today — in surprising, hybrid and unprecedented guises — nobly rise again in a unique exhibition of 'tranquil but magical radiance'.



- 1 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 1976.
- 2 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London, John Murray Limited), 1983, 78.
- 3 For a discussion of variations on the still life in contemporary art, see Ann Gallagher, *Still Life* (London: British Council), 2002.
- 4 Cited in Raymond J. Kelly, *To Be, or Not To Be: Four Hundred Years of Vanitas Painting* (Flint Institute of the Arts), 2006, 19.
- 5 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (London: Reaktion Books), 1990, 127.
- 6 Cited in Kelly, op. cit., 23.
- 7 Ibid., 19.
- 8 Ibid., 46. For Kelly *vanitas* is always signaled by three themes: nostalgia, specificity, and significance, i.e., objects which carry a meaning beyond themselves.
- 9 Kelly, op. cit., 15.
- 10 Jean Baudrillard, *Charles Matton* (Palais de Tokyo, Paris), 1987.
- 11 Other examples of Western visual art forms and recurring themes centring on death other than the *vanitas* include the *memento mori*, burial scenes, dying heroes, gravestones and sarcophagi, dead Christs, *pieta'*, depositions, descents from the cross, lamentations, *ars moriendi*, martyrdoms, last judgments and divine punishments, and more. See Enrico De Pascale, *Death and Resurrection in Art*, trans. Anthony Shugaar (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and Milan: Mondadori), 2007. Literary forms specifically centring on death other than gothic tales include the related detective novels and murder mysteries, tragedies, elegies, and graveyard poems.
- 12 Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, 1993, xiii.
- 13 See Eleanor Townsend, *Death and Art: Europe 1200-1530* (London: V&A Publishing) 2009.
- 14 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) (London: Biblios), 2010, 191.
- 15 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980) (New York: Methuen), 1986.
- 16 Bryson, op. cit. III.
- 17 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Fontana Press), 1991, 203.
- 18 Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, cited in Bryson, op. cit., 125.