

Thief of Time – Emma Bennett

There's something immediately familiar about Emma Bennett's paintings. Fruit, fish, fowl and flowers instantly connect us to a still life tradition stretching back centuries to the Dutch and Flemish schools. Of course, we know what this is, we know what it means.

But something nags at the brain. These objects aren't anchored against backdrops. There are no table tops with rich folds of cloth. No horizontals, no verticals rooting them in the dark space of the canvas. The objects have their own internal shadows but cast none. Instead they hover in a dense black field of canvas, suspended, waiting to fall; glowing against the darkness like actors in the black box of a theatre with no distracting scenery.

There are subtle diagonals of light — a classical device that gives a nod to painters like Caravaggio — and the composition has a formality. But as you gaze at the paintings it seems as if these elements have fallen through space, frozen at a point of perfection - the flowers are still petals-just-opened fresh; the grapes plump and juicy; fish still have eyes not yet fogged with death and the rabbits and birds appear to be resting — not stiff with rigor or swollen with decay.

In the life that goes on beyond the painting, as it does after the photographer has pressed the shutter, it's easy to imagine that the falling continues, the composition collapses and the fruit puckers, death is more evident in the once-living creatures, so freshly dead in the image.

And this is where Bennett's paintings begin to make sense as part of a festival that celebrates photography. They are of a moment captured, suspended for the blink of an eye or the squeeze of a shutter. The artist is interested in Susan Sontag's take on photography and the idea that to take a photograph captures its subject, holding its life for the future. So without knowing the particulars of Emma Bennett's background, there is something here about life, about death, about movement and stillness. The moments before and after the image is frozen in space and time are left to the viewer's imagination, but the journey onwards is implicit.

Emma Bennett was born in 1974 and grew up in Brecon. She's at that interesting point where birth and death overlap. So these pictures aren't the traditional take on memento mori (remember you will die) but a collision of this sentiment with a celebration of life — its moments of perfection, of everything coming together in that moment of ideal composition before it collapses and mutates into something else, until that next moment of perfection, of everything being just so.

Look longer at the paintings — there's an inbuilt disruption of the ideal surface. Bennett subverts perfection by pouring paint thinned with turps to create a seemingly accidental disturbance of the image. This is more discreet in some works than others, where it might be a judder across the picture plane, elsewhere, as in *Hollowed (Unhallowed)*, the treatment appears like a veil lifted, a curtain pulled back, implying something's being revealed. In other paintings it suggests an ethereal presence, rather like the Victorian ectoplasm of a séance.

The turps, as it eats into the uniformity of the canvas, can reference the folds of cloth so associated with those Dutch masters, but these are not the symbols of wealth or compositional devices that those painters of old would have used — they don't offer a grounding for the objects but are elements in their own right and introduce a seemingly haphazard counterpoint to objects faithfully rendered with technical facility and control. Nor are they offering a moral message about vanitas and the brevity of life, they are more celebratory than this, even in their seeming melancholy: Remember that you live, rather than remember that you will die.

And these pictures take many months to complete. Starting with a photograph, or series of photographs (the snapshot of perfection); over time they acquire their own narrative or story arc. Why these objects together? What is their relationship beyond the formal composition? As the veil lifts the mind starts to work. They are caught here — a bird dies, tumbles downwards in death; grapes reach their eating peak, the bloom on the skin still powdery; flowers are open and almost ready to shed petals; hares, rabbits and other game and fish are at the point between bounding, flapping wings or shimmering through water — so newly dead that they are still on the cusp between states of being, still retaining something of their former selves before becoming consumables.

But it would be unusual for a young artist today to be painting like a Dutch or Flemish artist from the 16th or 17th Century. Her concerns couldn't be the same as theirs, with a mind filled with art history, references, experience informed by the last century and this. Bennett's current practice has evolved out of a more abstract approach to painting, and the pouring allows for accidents and surprises as she lets the thinned paint create another layer of meaning.

So that starting point for entering the world these pictures offer is a red herring, a false trail. Or a way in. The surface familiarity, teasing the mind with a compass pointing to understanding, suddenly veers away from the familiar to new territory. This work more than nods at the way Frank Stella or Yves Klein approached the notion of painting space.

Look again. Is this a warning that life is short? Or is it more that within that brevity of existence is a series of moments of perfection, of ripeness and readiness on that razor blade's edge between then, now and the next moment and the next that should be savoured, held in a suspended second before they are lost, the bloom goes, the eye clouds, the belly distends with putrefaction and the petals fall.

We're too ready to look gloomily forward (the next brown envelope, another funeral), or backwards to the last regret or the already fading memory of happiness, to inhabit the moment before our eyes. Present perfect.

© Emma Geliot is a freelance arts journalist & consultant and is deputy editor for *blown* magazine

Art in the Bar:
Emma Bennett: Thief of Time
01.05.13 – 07.07.13

Preview I Blaenwelediad
03.05.13 6-9pm

About Chapter Gallery

Chapter Gallery is an international art space that commissions, produces and presents contemporary visual and live art projects within a dynamic multi-artform venue in Cardiff, UK. We offer an ambitious, challenging and wide-ranging programme of exhibitions, residencies, commissions and events by established Welsh and international artists. Entrance to Chapter Gallery is always FREE. To be kept up to date with exhibitions and events you can email us at visual.arts@chapter.org

Ynglŷn ag Oriol Chapter

Mae Oriol Chapter yn ofod celfyddydol rhyngwladol sy'n comisiynu, yn cynhyrchu ac yn cyflwyno prosiectau celfyddyd weledol gyfoes oddi mewn i ganolfan gelfyddydau aml-gyfyngol yng Nghaerdydd, Cymru, UK.

Rydym yn cynnig rhaglen uchelgeisiol, heriol ac amrywiol o arddangosfeydd, cyfnodau preswyl, comisiynau a digwyddiadau gan artistiaid cydnabyddedig o Gymru ac o bedwar ban byd. Mae mynediad i Oriol Chapter yn RHAD AC AM DDIM bob amser.

I gael y wybodaeth ddiweddaraf am ein harddangosfeydd a'n digwyddiadau, e-bostiwch visual.arts@chapter.org

CHAPTER

Chapter, Market Road, Canton, Cardiff, UK
+44 (0) 29 2031 1050
visual.arts@chapter.org
www.chapter.org

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) /chaptergallery



Emma Bennett: Thief of Time

01.05.13 — 07.07.13





Above: Thief of Time, 2012, oil on canvas, 140x110cm
Front cover: Hollowed (Unhallowed), 2009, oil on canvas, 140x110cm
All images © the artist; courtesy CHARLIE SMITH, London