

*The Revenge of the Florist*





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*New works by  
Michael Petry*

*Westbrook Gallery  
London 2009*



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Still life (*nature morte*) is a constant artistic subject, whose significance has changed in time.

Still life images adorn Egyptian tombs, illustrating the bounty of the after life. Still life images also appear in Greek dwellings, illustrating the bounty of the fore life. Roman Pompeii is rich in still life paintings and mosaics (*emblema*) of bowls of fruit, flowers, and animals, illustrating commercial activity, wealth and status, the seasons. Elsewhere, the Romans introduced skulls to contrast the living with the dead, the transient with the ultimate - *omnia mors aequat* (death makes all equal!). At all times, the artist strove to reproduce the flora and fauna as realistically as possible, to fool the eye (*trompe l'oeil*), to produce art that was mimetic.

By the early Renaissance, around 1300 AD, Giotto and others introduced images of everyday objects into religious paintings. But by this time, everyday objects had been vested with deep religious and allegorical meaning. The Virgin Mary commanded the rose (which also stood for Venus, and love) and the lily (which also stood for virginity, purity and justice). The pomegranate, being a single fruit containing many seeds, represented the church; the fish's bladder, being the shape produced by two overlapping circles, represented the dual nature of Christ; and the sunflower, which turns toward the radiance of the sun, was a symbol of divine love and devotion. Albrecht Durer's famous self-portrait sees him holding a delicate flower between elongated fingers, rich in allegorical meaning.

It took the curiosity of Leonardo da Vinci (in the late 1400's) to depict natural objects for their own sake, and focus on their mechanical and scientific function, rather than their Greek symbolic or Christian allegorical significance. The Medici dynasty in Florence was particularly fond of paintings of citrus fruit<sup>2</sup>. *Nature mortes* soon had other secular functions: wealthy patrons had their portraits painted alongside their possessions, in honour of their good fortune and temporal power. And from there, *nature mortes* were abstracted into piles of fish or meat, fruit or flowers. But beautiful piles nonetheless – when Caravaggio turned his hand to such images as in *Basket of Fruit* (c. 1595-1600), it was so lovely that it found its way into the collection of Cardinal Borromeo. Of course, moral reflection could occasionally reassert itself - for example, the 16th century Annibale Carracci depicted a *Butcher's Shop* (1583), which as well as a naturalistic depiction of meat spoke of the meat that was the flesh of the viewers of the painting and would have served to remind them of their mortality.

Despite its popularity, still life was seen as an inferior subject to biblical or historical themes like Raphael's *The School of Athens*, (1509–1510), or Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, (1637-38). *Nature morte* paintings were regarded as less serious, genre works, the speciality of women artists.

It took the Protestant reformation and its loathing of the literal depiction of religious subjects before *nature morte* paintings really came into their own. The Dutch took up still life painting with as much zeal as the collecting of tulips and other prized flowers. The Dutch returned to allegory with vengeance: butterflies for transformation and resurrection (long before Damian Hirst); ants for hard work (or for Dali terror); pearls for virginity; broken vessels for lost virginity. The Dutch churned out *vanitas* paintings depicting all manner of flowers, fruit, meat, and often the skull, sometimes fresh and in other images starting to rot. If not a skull, a watch, or hourglass, or a burning candle (a favourite of Richter) could be placed in a scene to remind viewers of their mortality and of the morality that they

should strive to uphold in this world, for soon they would meet their strict and severe maker. These paintings could be as easily read by their owners as a bible (if they could read).

Furthermore, Jan van Eyck and other Northern European painters were able to make *nature mortes* that were even more realistic due to advances in painting techniques.

Not to be outdone, Catholic Spain (notably Velazquez and Zuburan) produced paintings even more minimal and intense than the Dutch, called *bodegones*<sup>3</sup>. They often depicted nature in the raw, dead animals as opposed to cooked foodstuffs, fresh fruit as opposed to desserts, adding a strong moral message to the reminder of mortality, as the Roman Church still held sway in Southern Europe.

All this moral instruction started to fall away under the high bourgeois painting of the French 18th century. Many lesser artists produced flower paintings by the lorry load for modern Parisians and the aristocracy. Few artists like Jean-Baptiste Chardin, were able to combine the rococo excesses with a real observation of natural objects be they bowls of flowers or as in *The Ray* (1728), freshly caught sea food. Painting styles became more and more bloated and with the birth of the Royal Academy of Art and the French Academy, and still life was again sidelined and seen as a lesser form. The Academies taught (until very recently) a *Hierarchy of Genres* with history paintings (be they myth or fact based) of classical Greece on top, followed by Christian religious scenes, then portraiture and finally nature mort.

By the time of Victoria, the allegorical meaning of objects had become both commonplace and banal. In particular, the Victorians codified the meaning of flowers as elaborately as the courting ritual of a bird of paradise. Each flower had its own significance and meaning. If a man were to give a woman any flower, she would understand the meaning it held within its very being. Red roses spoke of true love, hyacinths said forgive me.

It is this not-so-secret language that I have used as one of the codes in my new *Nature Morte* works. This series of four-dimensional paintings are made of coloured blown glass and cut flowers. These flower paintings are sculptural: while historical ones used the illusion of three dimensions (depicted in a flat two-dimensional picture plane), my new works include the fourth dimension of time. Traditional still life paintings attempted to bring time into them by depicting decay (rotting fruits, meat) and the mortality of the viewer (skulls), but my works allow the viewer to see decay in real time. The cut flowers slowly lose their bloom in the glass container. Scientifically, they are already dead having been cut from their roots, they simply die a bit more as we watch their beauty fade and they become desiccated. The viewer/owner must decide when to change the flowers, or leave them rotting, for the glass containers cannot be shown without flowers in them.

The glass vessels are not the work. They are not vases.

Each glass vessel, when filled with flowers, mimes the function of a vase, but does not become a vase, it remains an artwork, a sculptural painting in time.

This is a mimesis in reverse and comes from my stated position as an artist with a queer aesthetic. Dave Hickey when speaking of Robert Gober's installations commented that they are "interior decorating with a vengeance"<sup>4</sup> This vengeance is a reference to the acceptable jobs that the openly gay Gober would have found available to him when he was growing up. Gays were hairdressers, interior decorators, window dressers (as were



Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg), and florists, but not artists. Perhaps these new works are the revenge of the florist<sup>5</sup>.

For each glass vessel I have selected a flower, to speak a language of meaning that matches its colour, which in turn has been chosen by me to speak the language of the gay hanky code. This code solidified in the early 1970's as a means of gay men speaking their sexual desires in a heterosexual society. A gay man could wear a coloured hanky in his left (active) or right (passive) pocket signalling his sexual preference to others in the know. The colours used in the glass refer to this language.

Each glass receptacle is unique, and also a portrait of someone's anus. I invited people on the internet, both men and women, of whatever sexuality, to send me an image of their sphincter muscle and I have made a portrait of them in its shape. This is one sexual part of our bodies that we cannot visualize (without a mirror or a camera and some dexterity) yet it has been demonized (especially by the Victorians). Remarkably, as a sexual body part, its visage is similar for men and women.

But we all have butts.

So in these works (that appear as simple floral arrangements in pretty vases), we have sexually explicit portraits of real anonymous people from the web, who have a real fetish, which is reflected in the choice of the colour of the glass, and flowers, that offers yet another reading or layer of complexity, in paintings that change before the viewer's eyes.

Flowers die, we die. We can escape morality, but mortality always brings with it the floral bouquet. There is no escape from the hands of the florist.

Michael Petry, 2009



1 Ebert-Schiffere, Sybille, *Still Life: A History*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1998, p. 22,

2 *ibid.*, Ebert-Schiffere, p. 64

3 Schneider, Norbert, *Still Life*, Taschen, Cologne, 2009, page 45

4 Hickey, Dave, *In the Dancehall of the Dead: Robert Gober*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993, page 21

5 One of many part time jobs I had at University was as a florist in New York.







## Symbolic Meaning of Flowers

Acacia - Secret love; chaste love  
 Acanthus - Art or artistic; artifice  
 Achillea millefolia - War  
 Amaranth - Fidelity  
 Amaryllis - Pride; Timidity; splendid beauty  
 Anemone - Unfading love; truth  
 Arbutus - Thee only do I love

Bachelor's Buttons - Celibacy  
 Baby's Breath - Everlasting love  
 Begonia - Beware  
 Bilberry - Treachery  
 Bird Of Paradise - Magnificence  
 Bittersweet - Truth  
 Bluebell - Humility; constancy  
 Bouquet of withered flowers - Rejected love

Camellia (Pink) - Longing for you  
 Camellia (Red) - You're a flame in my heart  
 Camellia (White) - You're adorable  
 Carnation (pink) - I'll never forget you  
 Carnation (red) - My heart aches for you  
 Carnation (white) - Sweet and lovely  
 Carnation (yellow) - You have disappointed me  
 Chamomile - Patience ; attracts wealth  
 Chrysanthemum (red) - I love  
 Chrysanthemum (white) - Truth  
 Chrysanthemum (yellow) - Slighted love  
 Cornflower - Delicacy  
 Coxcomb - Foppery  
 Crocus - Cheerfulness

Daffodil - Respect; unrequited love  
 Dahlia - Good taste; instability  
 Daisy - Innocence  
 Delphinium - Airy, big hearted

Edelweiss - Daring; noble courage  
 Eucalyptus - Protection

Fern - Sincerity  
 Forget-me-not - Memories  
 Forsythia - Anticipation  
 Fuchsia - Good taste

Gardenia - You're lovely  
 Geranium (Scented) - melancholy; stupidity  
 Gladiolus - Love at first sight  
 Gloxinia - Love at first sight

Heliotrope - Devotion; faithfulness  
 Hemlock - You will be my death  
 Hibiscus - Delicate beauty  
 Hollyhock - Female ambition; fecundity  
 Honeysuckle - sweetness of disposition  
 Hyacinth (general) - flower dedicated to Apollo  
 Hyacinth (purple) - I'm sorry; please forgive me  
 Hyacinth (red or pink) - Play  
 Hyacinth (white) - I'll pray for you  
 Hyacinth (yellow) - Jealousy  
 Hydrangea - frigidity; heartlessness; vanity

Iris - Faith; hope; wisdom and valour

Jasmine - wealth; grace and elegance

Laburnum - Forsaken; pensive beauty  
 Lavender - Devotion, distrust  
 Lilac - First love  
 Lily (calla) - Beauty  
 Lily (day) - Coquetry  
 Lily (eucharis) - Maidenly charms  
 Lily (orange) - Hatred  
 Lily (white) - Virginity  
 Lily (pink) - Wealth and pride  
 Lisianthus - Calming

Magnolia - Sweetness  
 Morning Glory - Affectation

Narcissus - Egotism; formality  
 Nasturtium - Conquest; victory in battle

Oleander - Caution; beware  
 Orchid - Love; beauty; refinement

Pansy - Thoughts; love  
 Peach blossom - I am your captive  
 Peony - Shame; bashfulness  
 Periwinkle (blue) - Early friendship  
 Petunia - Resentment; anger  
 Poppy (general) - Eternal sleep; oblivion  
 Poppy (red) - Fantastic extravagance  
 Poppy (white) - Consolation; sleep

Rose (red) - True love  
 Rose (white) - Eternal Love  
 Rose (pink) - Perfect happiness  
 Rose (yellow) - Jealousy  
 Rose (black) - Death  
 Rose (tea) - I'll always remember  
 Rose (dark crimson) - Mourning

Snapdragon - No  
 Snowdrop - Hope  
 Statice - Lasting beauty  
 Sunflower - Haughtiness  
 Sweet William - Grant me one smile

Tuberose - Dangerous pleasure  
 Tulip (general) - Fame  
 Tulip (red) - Believe me  
 Tulip (variegated) - Beautiful eyes  
 Tulip (yellow) - Hopeless love

Violet - Modesty; faithfulness  
 Viscaria - Will you dance with me?

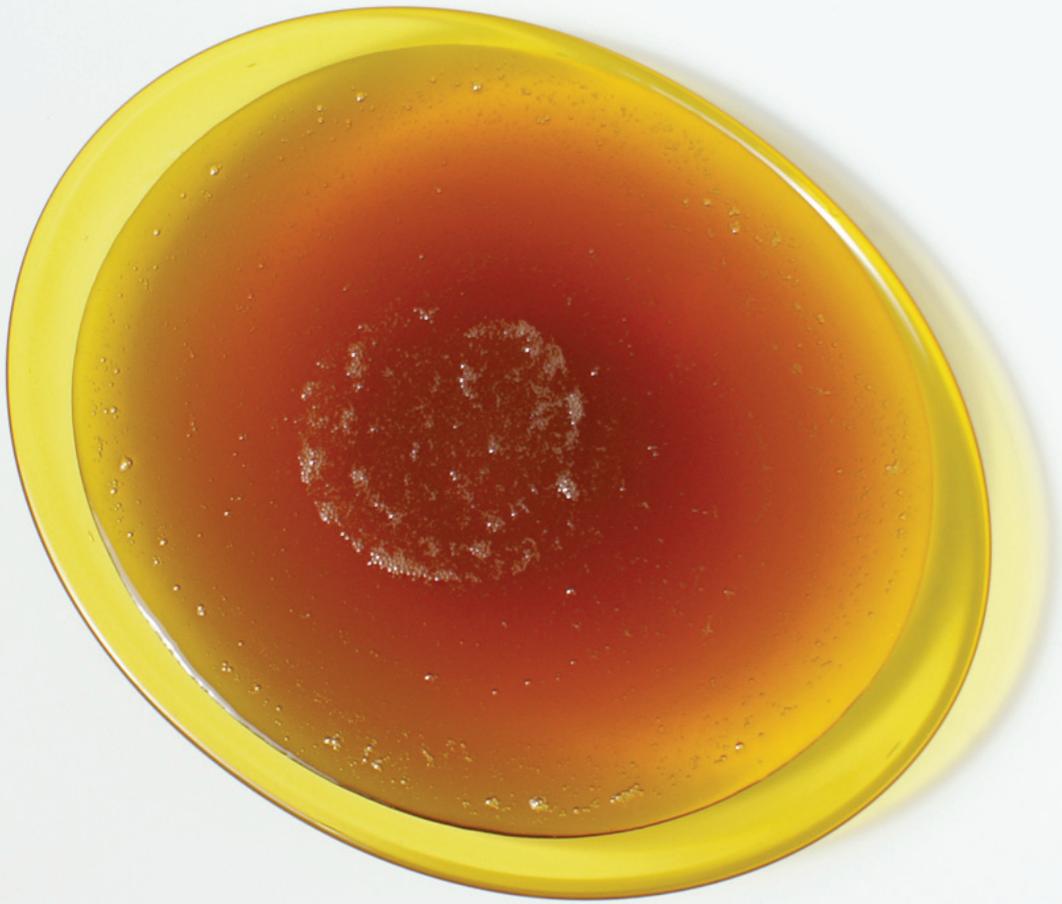
Wistaria - I cling to you  
 Wormwood - Absence

Xeranthemum - Cheerfulness under adversity

Zinnia - Thoughts of friends



*Libation bowls*





From the early Bronze age through to ancient Egypt and classical Greece, throughout Persia, Assyria and into Spain, Italy and France libations have been made to the gods, and special libation bowls were used. These bearers of offerings were made from terracotta, glass, onyx, bronze, silver, and gold. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. these bowls started to be called *phialai*.

Libation bowls were used for offering precious goods to the gods: wine; oil; foods; perfume; milk; and honey. The Greeks had special wine jugs that were used to pour wine into the libation dishes, which were then emptied onto the ground, into fires, and on alters. The terracotta bowls often depicted scenes of the gods or the tales of heroes, and most were linked to Dionysus, the god of wine and chaos. Dionysus is the reverse of Apollo, the bearer of light, order and the arts. Homes needed an alter to both gods to keep a balance of cosmic powers.

The giving of a libation, something that it cannot be taken back, was linked to the marking of territory by animals (a fluid is returned to the earth) and had great significance for ancient peoples. Ritual giving continues in most religions today in some form or other.



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Petry is currently writing a new book for Thames & Hudson and will be the first Artist in Residence at Sir John Soane's Museum next year.

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Glass hot work: Liam Reeves

Glass cold work: Anthony Harris

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