

Ronald Boaks, Modernity & Beauty: New Still Life Photography
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- October 12, 2008

J. Lynn Fraser

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TORONTO

RONALD BOAKS, MODERNITY & BEAUTY: NEW STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

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September 18 – October 12, 2008

Ronald Boaks has rebranded the traditional still life vernacular. Still lifes in the Renaissance served as both vehicles to display wealth and rare objects as well as to impart moral teachings. Boaks uses a personal, modern vocabulary of objects to prompt his viewers to carefully contemplate his work and message.

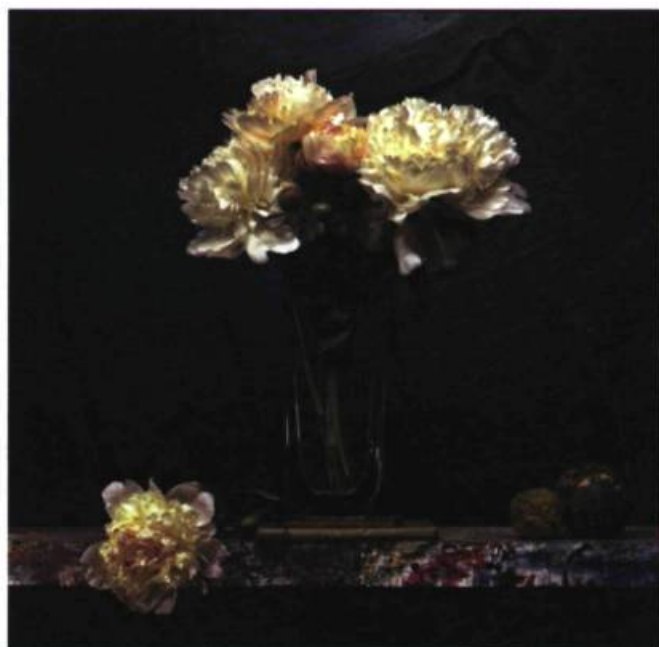
Like Renaissance still lifes, Boaks's work is very deliberate in its display of objects and its use of allusion, metaphor, and optical effects. "I live in a still life," Boaks comments as the objects in his work refer to family history, art history, and world history. His artworks are photographs of carefully choreographed vignettes that have been arranged in front of one of his own abstract paintings for which the Byelorussian-American painted Jules Olitsky is one influence.

"I am trying to get people to slow down and to look at things more contemplatively," the artist comments. Boaks re-interprets the 'moral warnings' associated

with some genres of traditional still lifes, that is the 'vanitas vanitatum' ('everything is vanity') message encoded into some Renaissance still lifes. Boaks's message to us is that we must reconsider our hectic, modern lives, and values. His works can only be understood by slow, intense observation.

In interpreting Boaks's work the viewer must take time to contemplate, dissect, and extrapolate meaning. Some of the components of his art works are obvious such as the book titles. His layering of meaning comes in to play when the titles are considered in relation to Boaks's own paintings in his photographs' background and what his objects symbolize in addition to the optical effects he creates.

Still Life, Homage to Henri (2008) is an example of Boaks alluding to both past and present. Henri Matisse's use of colour and specific objects found in paintings such as *Gold Fish* (1911) and *The Egyptian Curtain* (1948) are referenced. The two-toned painting in *Homage's* background alludes to the sculpture's feminine form in the foreground, as do the lemons, flowers, spheres, and figs, which are recurring motifs in Boaks's work as is the paint-



Still Life, After Fantin, 42 in. x 42 in., 2007

er's pallet. Boaks's interest in optical effects is seen the reversal of colours within the vase and with goldfish looking away from the viewer to the painting behind. This too, is a reference to light refraction and 'viewing' in Matisse's painting.

"I am constantly experimenting and evoking," Boaks notes about his work.

Overall the exhibition is itself a composition, with views and viewers as well as plays on light and dark, layering and texture, past and present, and composi-

tional layerings shifting in perspective from foreground to background. Boaks's still lifes draw upon the compositions, objects, surfaces, colours, and textures from painters who have influenced him such as Henri Fantin-Latour, Picasso, Miró, and Pollock. For this his works are a feast for the eyes and the mind, if the viewer takes the time to contemplate them. □