

PRINCIPLES AND LOGIC OF THE DEPICTION OF FLOWERS IN VANITAS PHOTOGRAPHY

Mg.art. **Līga Sakse**

Latvian Academy of Culture, Riga, Latvia

Abstract

Art must reflect something that cannot be called trivial or perceived by rational means, as well as what we cannot experience in reality – the borderline between life and non-existence, death among other things. Certainly, ways of depiction vary – there are works of art where the temporariness of life and the inevitability of death have been modelled as a type of a game and there are also those works of art that bear an indirect reminder of death – through allegories or metaphors. Vanitas belongs to the latter. Vanitas is an allegorically presented still life that emerged as an independent genre in about 1550 and became most widespread in the 16th and 17th centuries in Belgium and Flanders. Traditionally the composition of a still life of this type included a human skull, a burnt-out candle, small cut flowers as well as other objects that all seemed to say – everything and anything is transient.

The purpose of the paper is to undertake the comparative analysis of vanitas still lives by artists from the USA, Japan and Germany. The photographs of flowers will be used to read the cultural historical message contained in them as well as the technical means of expression used in photography that are enhanced by a profoundly personal depiction. The perceivable designation created by the photographer and the *aesthetic object* registered by the collective consciousness will be defined and described taking into consideration, as far as possible, the social context that has led to the creation of the given artefact. Works of art will be summarised according to different principles of depiction and the main trends that are reflected in contemporary art photography and have not been encountered before will be outlined. It will result in a general overview through applying acceptable norms that will make it possible to determine whether the picture is or is not contemporary as well as to establish criteria characterising the concept of *the contemporary*.

Keywords: *photography, contemporary, still life, artefact, vanitas.*

Introduction

The research focuses mainly on the contemporary art forms of photography, particularly on such phenomenon as still life of a floral photography and asks basic question: what does it mean for a flower when it is *inhabiting* a globalized art world? In fact, a vanitas is a symbolic work of art showing the transience of life, that is of images of photography which bring the message of the certainty of death. Art historian William John Thomas Mitchell emphasized the dominance of pictures and metaphors surrounding us. According to W. J. T. Mitchell (*the studies of W. J. T. Mitchell discovered the pictorial turn of human sciences and introduced the phrase pictorial turn in the March 1992 issue of Artforum*) the pictorial turn is about that the pictures that surround us do not only transform our world and identity, but also form them more and more. (...) Mitchell demonstrates the signs of the pictorial turn in Pierce's semiotics, Nelson Goodman's analytic art philosophy, Derrida's criticism of logocentrism, the work of the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault [Hornyk 2002]. However, the etymology of the Latin noun *vānitas* (from the Latin adjective *vanus* – empty) means *emptiness* [Lewis and Short 1958] and the different meanings of the noun *emptiness* vary with the particular context and the cultural tradition in which it is used. A number of photographs have depicted emptiness in the vanitas genre in the 21st century. Each artist has a different proposal of how the vanitas theme should be illustrated, what artefacts to present, what story to tell. The theme of vanitas has been used in modern still life images of photographers German-born Vera Mercer, British artists Mat Collishaw and Alexander James Hamilton, American Tanya Marcuse, Dutch artists Julia Hetta and Maurice Scheltens, Swiss-born Brigitte Lustenberger, Dutch-born German Annet Van Der Voort, Israeli-born Ori Gersht within a relative period of a few years. Photography medium itself has a close connection to themes like melancholy, memory, decay, mortality and death. Robert Burton pointed out that the fact of the death and the phenomenon itself was the main cause of melancholia and melancholy in this sense was the character of mortality in 1621 [Burton 1989–2000]. The main issue in the research is the fact that the creator of a photograph is most often triggered by a cultural background and collective memory. Data for this research have been collected by focusing on the works the following artists: Americans Joel-Peter Witkin, David La Chapell and Erin Perfect; contemporary German photographers Agelinde Scholl, Luzia Simons and Michael Wesely; Japanese artists Kenji Shibata, Yumiko Izu and Azuma Makoto. Through studying authors' working experience and by analysing individual motivations, cultural backgrounds and artefacts the main trends over the past several years will be outlined. What makes something interesting is that it can be seen to be like, or analogous to, something else. There is an art and there are fashions of seeing things in order to make them interesting; and to supply this art, these fashions, there is

a steady recycling of the artefacts and tastes of the past [Sontag 1979: 137]. Moreover, by studying the main topics, we can discover important insights and inspiration for perspective of the irreversible process of globalization in the 21st century that brought cultural enrichment to visual arts. What tendencies has a vanitas genre exerted in the globalization *game*? What impact does the innovation have on the artist's concepts of photography? The findings may be useful in understanding:

1. The logic and different principles of depiction of flowers.
2. The opposition and contrast between artefacts of Western world and the Far East.
3. The acceptable norms that will determine contemporariness of the photography.
4. The identification of the main trends that are reflected in contemporary art photography.
5. The role of the vanitas genre in the tendencies of the future perspective of art.

The staged reality by Joel-Peter Witkin, David La Chapelle and Erin Perfect in the USA

The 21st century is a brilliant period for the still life photographers to visualize the American way of life that give a hint of an awareness of some of the ideas of transhumanists, who are scientifically constructive in ensuring immortality. Artists regard the expression of the vanitas theme somewhat positively, even though some geographical and cultural differences of background exist. They use photography as an important tool for raising their voice. Still life photographs from the USA show a lot of creativity led by cultural elites. The paper actualizes Joel-Peter Witkin, whose artworks are a cultural obsession that defined the *decadence*; also Erin Perfect's viewers' confrontation with her artwork *Untitled* from the series *Suspending Belief*; and David La Chapelle's arrangement *Late Summer* 2008–2011 signifies the artist's interest not only in commercial visuals, but also in the concept of the kitsch – where it is a part of the American life characteristics.

Joel-Peter Witkin (b. 1939), an American artist of mixed Italian and Hebrew parentage, builds a figural scene and still life arrangement of fruits, flowers and dismembered parts of corpses, introduces religious allusions. Witkin's main topic is death that emphasizes Heaven, Hell, and salvation of the soul in the afterlife, based on a deep interest and knowledge of the history of art. "In order to know if I were truly alive, I'd make the invisible visible" [Witkin 1985]! He undertakes every idea by sketching on paper to depict all the details before doing photography work on analog camera and transforming the negatives into image in the darkroom. "My purpose is to acknowledge the wonder of being part of Creation. Though I myself don't create anything, I make from what has been created" [Horvat 1989]. The detail of the work

The Bone House (fig. 1) is used on the artist's cover of the catalogue *Photology* by Davide Faccioli. "What I'm trying to say is that I know who I am and I also know why I'm here and what comes after death. And even if that sounds like a very rebellious assertion, I guess that what I do is the meaning of my life" [Witkin 2010].



Figure 1. Joel-Peter Witkin, Davide Faccioli.
Catalogue *Photology* (2007), cover.

David La Chapelle's (b. 1963) still life photography is focused on the theme of mortality using natural and artificial specimens in photograph *Late Summer* 2008–2011, C-Print, 152 × 110 cm, courtesy of the *Artist ROBILANT + VOENA*, London – Milan. The arrangement for the photograph *Late Summer* signifies the artist's interest in kitsch. He focused on the extreme kitsch form arranging still life from well-known food packages, banknote, cut flowers, artificially made fruits and other ready-made items of the consumer society. "I feel that we are living in a very precarious time, with environmental devastation, economic instability, religious wars waged, and excessive consumption amidst extreme poverty. I have always used photography as a means to try to understand the world and the paradox that is my life. I reintroduce my personal ideas of transfiguration, regaining paradise, and the notion of life after death" [La Chapelle 2018].



Figure 2. Erin Perfect. *Untitled*, from the series *Suspending Belief* (2012)
© courtesy of Erin Perfect.

By choosing to highlight arrangements of still life *Untitled*, from the series *Suspending Belief* 2012 (fig. 2), American photographer **Erin Perfect** assigns the tulip to the role of the impossible mission. This masterly photograph shows the box falling on the fragile tulip's stem so gently as if no gravitational pull existed. The arrangement of the tomato, the berries, the box and the tulip has been used with the purpose to confront the viewer. These images deal with naivety, in that there is an innocence in us that wants to believe something contrary to what our minds deem plausible. I am interested in questioning the intersection between naivety and optimism as well as scepticism and pessimism. These images challenge the viewer to allow contradictory ideas to co-exist within their minds by questioning their own relationship to scepticism and naivety [Perfect 2016]. However, by analysing context (table 1) we find the artefact of death, kitsch and scepticism in American artworks.

The German contribution of Michael Wesely, Agelinde Scholl and the still life photography by Luzia Simons

This piece focuses on Central-European contemporary photography – German still life variations of the vanitas genre. Artist's task in Agelinde Scholl's *Küchenstilleben* series, Luzia Simons' scannogramm *Stockage* and Michael Wesely's *Stilleben* project visualizes idea in a way that changes the viewer's attitude to life, changing one's perception of matter. According to German artist **Agelinde Scholl's** (b. 1943) graphic and photography works, her topic is the *secret life of things* – so



Figure 3. Agelinde Scholl. *Küchenstillleben* (2013)
© courtesy of Agelinde Scholl.

familiar with the individual character of the objects that portrayed the essence of the aging process (fig. 3).

In the *Küchenstillleben* (courtesy of Erin Perfect) project Scholl observing the biowaste in compost by looking for structure of aesthetic objects and dealing with the phenomenon of time. She works in series, often over the years, which has become a part of the theme of *time*, in order to do justice to the *simultaneity of a multitude of moments* and also to the constant change of appearances [Scholl 2013]. Brazilian-born German **Luzia Simons** (b. 1953) using modern scanning techniques produces scannogramm *Stockage 113* (2011) in size 180 × 126 cm of tulips – a cultural symbol – an artefact of globalization and a metaphor for mobility. Once the much sought-after flower was worth its weight in gold, and developed into a cultural symbol in both the Occident and Orient. Originating from the Orient, it was brought to Europe and altered by cultivation in Holland; finally, it returned to its ancient origins in new varieties – thus becoming an example of cultural migration, a symbol of exchange and of insidious changes in aesthetic significance [Simons 2006]. In this way, Simons' increased images come to include the beginning

of irrevocable decay, intercultural identity and malfunctions. **Michael Wesely's** (b. 1963) pioneering techniques have allowed him to capture uniquely long exposures of still lives. For *Stilleben* project (2001–2007) Wesely used a special pin-hole camera to create his photographs (fig. 4) that are related to ideas of temporality and ephemera, and present still images that literally embody the passage of time.



Figure 4. Michael Wesely. *Stilleben* (17.1.–29.1.2007).
München: Schirmer/Mosel, p. 33.

The vase of tulips in the photo illustration becomes completely abstract after thirteen days of exposing, while time itself becomes visible. It is no longer the motif alone that counts – that is often a more invisible than visible, merely looming presence. But peripheral conditions such as light, movement, and other atmospheric elements emerge differently as focal points [Wesely 2007]. By way of the capacity we are currently gaining of seeing something solid in the most abstract things (particles). This does require us to stop trying to tell real from fictional and concern ourselves with the difference between concrete and abstract [Fluss 2011: 170]. To the extent that disturbing the superficial naturalism emphasizes the symbolic character of the image, reference can be made to that classical theme of transience such as was so loved by the 17th century Dutch painters of still lives. Apart from such references, they can also be seen as extraordinary pictures that encourage us to think critically about images, their content, and the way we approach them on the one hand in mass culture and, on the other, in art: writes F. W. Kaiser [Wesely 2007: 94]. The widespread presence of time in photography is expanding the boundaries of still life

photography. German's artworks represent the idea of the vanitas (table 1) through the following artefacts: the aging process, the mobilization, the intercultural identity in globalization process and the phenomena of passing time. In this perspective, looking at Wesely's works, the movement is reached in two dimensions of the photography; it will matter more and more in the future.

The Japanese term *mono no aware* in art of Kenji Shibata, Yumiko Izu and Azuma Makoto

The emptiness and the nothingness of the Oriental and Western world describes the first Japanese author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature award, Yasunari Kawabata (b. 1899): "My own works have been described as works of emptiness, but it is not to be taken for the nihilism of the West. The spiritual foundation would seem to be quite different" [Kawabata 1969]. Most of Japanese artistic photographs evoke in the viewer a gentle sadness of the images of flowers characterized by the term *mono no aware* – awareness of the transience of all things heightens the appreciation of their beauty. Nevertheless, Japan's traditional culture is still so powerful that it continues to be the prevailing force in modelling and tuning the national character of the Japanese, with the result that they still have two faces – one modern and rational, and one traditional and emotional [DeMente 1994: 13]. This paper focuses on Japanese artist Kenji Shibata's photograph *11:53:36* from the series *Locked in the Ether*, Yumiko Izu photograph *Secret Garden Blanc 72* and Azuma Makoto *Exobotanica – Botanical Space Flight*. **Kenji Shibata** (b. 1972) uses *mono no aware* – in storytelling style and creates a photo image by freezing flowers into a large block of water, for example, photograph named *11:53:36* from the series *Locked in the Ether* (2014) lambda print, 72.1×96.4 cm. Shibata's artefact for photograph *11:53:36* is a single moment towards the inevitable passing of all things. The flowers he photographs are well cemented in the ice structure and dead, but their last breaths are immortalized in the ice. They're floating in limbo, lost somewhere ineffable, blushing still with colour and life [Chan 2014]. Japanese-born photographer **Yumiko Izu** (b. 1968) finds her roots in Japan's visual culture, she currently lives and works in Rhinebeck, New York. By choosing to highlight the detail of a fully opened white tulip in softened monochrome tones against a white background Yumiko Izu's *Secret Garden Blanc 72* (2008) photograph is rich with associations. She has been producing large-scale pigment prints for studying the interplay of life and death, which were published in the monograph *Resonance by Serendia Contemporary* in 2016. Yumiko Izu's *Resonance* pulsates with the life-memories of one woman's time here on earth. It is an inner wilderness where the sediments of time, washed by water and cleansed of all impurities, stretch to limitless horizons. In this landscape, flowers without roots and skulls without flesh sing

paecans to life [Kodemari 2016]. The cultural heritage of her native memory allows working originally with the basic concept – in nothingness, there is everything. The pieces from Yumiko *Secret Garden* series are sensitive in texture, very light coloured in halftones. When it became fashionable to talk in the Western world about the East and its aesthetic qualities, they were verbalized in spatial or physical terms, that is, half-light, semi-darkness, halftones, weak light, deep shadows. Since we only know how to divide the world into contrasts, awakened phenomena is its half to us [Teters 2010: 13].



Figure 5. Azuma Makoto *Exobiotanica – Botanical Space Flight* (July 15, 2014). Black Rock Desert, Nevada, USA © AMKK.

Flower artist **Azuma Makoto** (b. 1976) uses experimental methods to fuse nature and sees the beauty in the whole circle of life. In Japan, in ikebana (Japanese art of flower arranging, or the way of flowers) they say you listen to the voice of the flower, so to speak. It's important to live as such. The point is not to see flowers as objects, but as living things. Listen to the plant's voice. Be conscious of it [Mazurek 2017]. The artist founded an experimental laboratory Azuma Makoto Kaju Kenkyusho (AMKK – Azuma Makoto Botanical Research Institute) with the mission of expanding art activities pursuing infinite potential of plants in 2009. In 2012 it also published flower works in the *Encyclopedia of Flowers* photographed by Shunsuke Shiinoki. The chapter *Appearance* of the book is dedicated to the flower's existence, look, posture – appearance: with time held in abeyance, a portrait that captures the moment of a life's blossom in full glory, gradually withering and changing [Makoto 2012]. "I wanted to take flowers and plants into an impossible environment where they could never exist. And seeing this very striking visual visualization – this juxtaposition – really makes you think. People who were never interested in flowers before will now see this and become interested" [Mazurek 2017].

With an avant-garde approach to flower bouquet space flight *Exobiotanica*, Makoto Azuma celebrated creativity’s role in the contemporary art world. Azuma designed the frame to dangle beneath a helium balloon that would carry a lavish bouquet of flowers into stratosphere. He used brightly coloured flowers from around the world so that they contrast against the darkness of space. Volunteers from JP Aerospace in California helped Azuma rig the unlikely satellites with GPS sensors and GoPro cameras to record the voyage [De La Cruz 2014]. The arrangement of flowers made it up to 30,000 metres and the flowers were never found, though, the device was retrieved about 8 km from the launch site. Making just an art object was not a goal at all. I thought I could make more beautiful flower art in the world of minus 60 degree Celsius: says Azuma [McCafferty 2016]. After the space flight *Exobiotanica*, Azuma felt deeply connected to his dream and said: I always wanted to travel to space. This is a dream come true [De La Cruz 2014].

Photographers in Japan are more likely to see creativity coming from their national context, the global art experience and the traditional culture. Japanese cultural background has a positive impact on the symbolic dimension as well as on the still life’s creativity and innovation of the idea of the *memento mori*. The artefacts for Japanese artists (table 1) are life-memories, a single moment and space flight,

Table 1. Table of used artefacts, aesthetic objects and the author’s individual context. (2018) © courtesy of Līga Sakse

Author	Nationality	An artefact	Aesthetic object	The context
Joel-Peter Witkins	Hebrew-born American	Death	The scene of corpse parts, flowers, fruits and drapery	The wonder of being part of Creation
David LaChapelle	American	The kitsch	Food packages, banknote, cut flowers, artificially made fruits	Very personal ideas of transfiguration, the notion of life after death
Erin Perfect	American	Scepticism	The arrangement of the vegetable, berries, falling wooden box and the tulip	Confront by questioning the intersection between naivety and optimism
Kenji Shibata	Japanese	A single moment	Freezing flowers into large ice blocks	The inevitable passing of all things
Yumiko Izu	Japanese	Life-memories	Light colored flowers without roots	Studying the interplay of life and death
Azuma Makoto	Japanese	Space flight	A bouquet of flowers into the stratosphere	To see flowers as living things
Agelinde Scholl	German	The aging	Biowaste, natural objects in compost	Transience
Luzia Simons	Brazil-born German	Globalization	The scans of tulips	Intercultural identity and malfunctions
Michael Wesely	German	The passage of time	The time alone is more invisible than the vase of tulips	With uniquely long exposures encourage to think critically about images

more effectively, Azuma's principle of depiction flowers into the atmosphere and photographed with satellites suspended against the edge of the earth outlined the new trend in the contemporary art world.

Conclusion

Looking at the images in an alienated way – other than how it is often done, we experience the *mental* image: at first, allegoric reality creating with objects and then the artefact appears in the concept of artist's vision. Data collected through the publications and interviews with artists indicate that despite their distinct cultural background the theme of life and death is an important for each of the authors. The approaches to death, kitsch, scepticism of American artists dealing with the objective world (table 1) show personal ideas of transfiguration. Thereby, the work of German photography represents our world through a single moment, the aging process and the phenomenon of passing time. As a matter of fact, the members of Japanese nation have been identifying the idea of *emptiness* through life-memories, single moment and space flight. However, artefacts impacting innovative photographic culture play an important role in a globalized world and the findings point out the interconnections from the USA, Germany and Japan:

1. The logic of depicting flowers preserved ancient elements incorporated with an individual concept of artwork and the principles of depiction are influences of the modern content and innovations.

2. The contrast between artefacts of the Far East provides access to the Japanese gentle sadness identity, regardless of Oriental background. And for the modern Western world German artists are working to show the dimension of time more than that of national heritage. Following Central-Europeans, still life floral photography particularly flourished during the later years. At the same time American artists have one of the greatest impacts on the vanitas renaissance in visual communication and the contemporary photographers, who now have turned into *researchers* themselves.

3. The idea of *emptiness* is a mechanism that develops contemporary culture. The sentiment of nothingness remains relevant in the contemporary photography, moreover, the vanitas theme is not an ancient relic, but a living element in a modern context.

4. Importantly, the main trends outline the importance of vanitas, that everything and anything is transient among the artists and is still reflected in the contemporary art photography nowadays.

5. Therefore, by creating a totally new way of expression, it is clear – the tendencies of the vanitas genre exerting influence have a future perspective in art.

The awareness of the fact that art is a social function and that, in the meantime, it became primarily a business, grew gradually. The de-constructivist approach to the

whole set of modernist *constructs*, including art, presented a significant contribution to developing this awareness, as did the vanishing acts that occurred within the artistic practice itself [Džalto 2015: 674].

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Appendices

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- Figure 2. Erin Perfect. *Untitled*, from the series *Suspending Belief* (2012) © courtesy of Erin Perfect.
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- Figure 5. Azuma Makoto. *Exobiotanica – Botanical Space Flight* (July 15, 2014). Black Rock Desert, Nevada, USA © AMKK.
- Table 1. Table of used artefacts, aesthetic objects and the author's individual context. (2018) © courtesy of Līga Sakse.