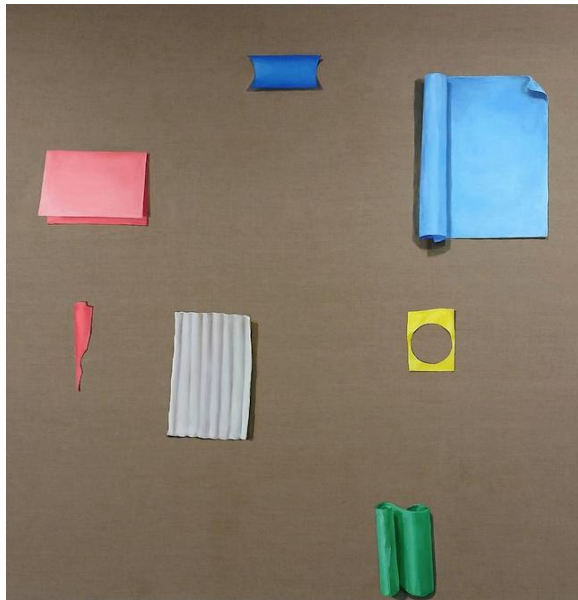


MOMIUS

Remnant Intuition: Contemporary Turns on the Grace of Still Life

BY E.C. WOODLEY • REVIEWS • OCTOBER 13, 2017



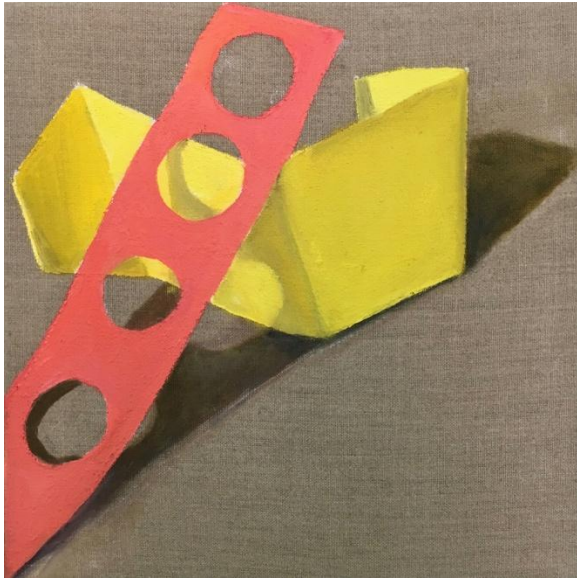
Howard Podeswa, "Still Life with Paper (The Standards)," 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

"We reason, that is, our mind wanders, each time our courage fails to force us to pursue an intuition through all the successive stages which end in its fixation, in the expression of its own reality. The reality that must be expressed resides, I now realised, not in the appearance of the subject but in the degree of penetration of that intuition to a depth where appearances matter little."

~ Proust, *Time Regained*

Objects are made by us and in this sense they contain us, are made *of* us. And as we work at their production, and rely upon their daily aid, we may glimpse something of ourselves in them. Perhaps this is one reason why still life speaks easily to us, tinged with a sort of intimacy. And why for the 400 years these works have been produced and exhibited almost without ceasing.

This fall season in Toronto included two still life exhibitions right next to each other on Tecumseth Street, contrasting contemporary impulses of the genre. Howard Podeswa's deeply felt *Still Life with Paper* was, on the surface, a major departure from his last exhibition, *A Brief History* at Koffler Gallery, which centered on two gut-wrenching 5 meter long Boschian paintings depicting Hell and Heaven. *The Guest's Shadow*, at Susan Hobbs brings intensely domestic subject material to Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky's cast sculptures. The term "remnants" – the traditional subject matter of still life – appears in several of Podeswa's titles, and both exhibitions deal in the cast away or the easily overlooked.



Howard Podeswa, *"Still Life with Remnants (Red and Yellow Paper),"* 2017. Image courtesy of the artist

The oil paintings of *Still Life with Paper* depict geometric colored-paper constructions Podeswa found in an exercise book published in 1929 and designed to teach children how to work with pastel. Podeswa painted them under the banner of a Morandi quote: "To achieve understanding it is necessary not to see many things, but to look hard at what you do see." Merlin James said of Morandi's art that it is one of "inner rather than outer revolution." In this new work, like Morandi, Podeswa looks hard at what he has set before himself, and paints the reality of his own intuition. The foundational beauty of this exhibition is an intuition in Proust's sense: one that runs surely and deep.

While Morandi and the author/artist of the found exercise book, A.G. Tompkins, might be counted as guides here, the greater influence is that of the artist's late father, Yidel Podeswa, a painter of still life. In this exhibition Podeswa, the son, has come home. The subject of teaching art recently acquired great significance for the artist when Yidel, ill with cancer, gave his son painting lessons for the first time, offering his various "recipes" and methods. Each of the work's colors – gentle whites that recall lilies of Renaissance and Netherlandish painting, yellow like the almost-neon of a Post-it note, or an expansive blue like the monochrome sky of a dome in an Eastern European synagogue – graces its appointed form in perfect balance between surface and interior, light and substance.

Still Life with Paper (The Standards) (2017) is an understated masterpiece and the great work of this exhibition. Seven small paper objects occupy their own space on the raw dark brown linen of this large canvas. Subtle shadows indicate that the single forms belong to different times of the day, and at the top of the painting, the blue semi-cylinder with its double shadow seems to live in more than a single time at once. The paper objects are dignified and deepened in feeling by the natural light that falls on them – although, on this count interference is run by the instability of the stark fluorescent gallery lighting, which shuts down the light depicted and reduces the gorgeousness of the painting. In the careful music of this arrangement every object is fully individuated and holds its own amidst the collective. But its affect is less Morandian metaphor than it is the beauty of the painter's touch: a gentle, precise tenderness, an articulation of love and respect. Perhaps these objects exist more in time than in space, but there is something of the eternal here too and the expression seems more of religion than psychology. If there is a psychology here it is of grace, succor, and luminous elegy.

Perhaps this can also be understood in the geometry of the paper shapes that are always softened, bent, creased, folded, or rolled like the loose ends of a garment even more ephemeral than the body it is intended to clothe.

Wepler and Mahovsky's sculptures seem at first offhand, dripping with paint like an ice cream cake run amok or the mess of a factory corner where pigment has been mixed. *Who Goes There* (2017) is a wild, bending, three-legged table caught in mid fall. It's weirdly linear: a sort of massive cartoonish drawing that even while approaching a vertical plane is solid with stuff from which it will not be parted. This is Georges Méliès let loose in a thrift store, fabulously stopping language in a pull for attention.

In Wepler and Mahovsky, also like Morandi, objects become anthropomorphic and acquire character. But what sort of character? Can it be named? Despite their sometimes-lumpen materiality these works embody common emotional and existential states: an anxiety, for instance, that overwhelms character even as it seems to exaggerate it, a feeling of being trapped within oneself, lodged in a moment from which one cannot escape. In this sculpture, narrative is frozen, isolated, caught not making sense. This is heightened, more so than their earlier *Clutter Sculptures*, because their objects lie entirely within the realm of interior, domestic, everyday life and work, where objects and people live in a bind of dependence.



Wepler and Mahovsky, "The Guest's Shadow," 2017. Image courtesy of Susan Hobbs gallery. Photo: Richard Winchell

The Guest's Shadow (2017) is a snaking line of what were once small copper objects and cheap souvenirs, and are now represented by a long piece of fragile copper foil into which the objects have been pressed to capture their form and surface markings. It seems a sort of shiny monochrome substitute-in-miniature: a pilgrimage for believers who cannot escape the bounds of their New Jersey everyday for a holy land of American vacation spots and historical monuments. *Drying Hanky, New York Apartment* (2017) presents a little tableau of a perpetually drying embroidered handkerchief draped on a wall-mounted pink plastic hand mirror and an oversized blue plastic comb. The mirror

reflects a painted scene from a New York tenement, like a blurry later dream of Edward Hopper: window partly open, light as though through a blind, an object or two before it. The garish 1970's pink and blue plastic belongs to the recent past – as almost all of Wepler and Mahovsky's objects do. They were cheap articles even when new, redolent of a mistake or a shortsighted manufacturing gambit: quickly out of date and soon to be lost to the margins.

Wepler and Mahovsky's genre might be called the still life of disorder, even as their chosen objects – a desk, clipboards, and a shelving unit – are intended, in the world outside the exhibition, to combat this condition. Their objects accumulate even where accumulation should be impossible. *The Known Universe* (2017) is a shelving unit lacking shelves and to which its objects: book, house plants, a tea cup, a pitcher, and a dog figurine among them, cling in place to the shelving unit's frame so that at first we do not notice the lack of a proper support. Everything, shelving unit included, is unified beneath accumulated drips of paint like an extravagant, chalky running-glaze in a cartoon of Japanese pottery.

The objects of traditional still life transcend individual lives, the life of the maker or user, and participate as endlessly repeated forms in what Norman Bryson calls "cultural formulae." Certainly Wepler and Mahovsky's objects fall into this category and in this, rather than the almost heroic agelessness and indestructibility that Bryson finds in still life, they transmit a sort of minor pathos. Things already culturally dim despite the ancient line they belong to: the platter or spoon as travel souvenir. Things shiny and new on a souvenir shelf, all set up for obscurity.



Wepler and Mahovsky, "The Known Universe," 2017. Image courtesy of Susan Hobbs gallery. Photo: Richard Winchell.

Along with accumulation there is in this exhibition a continual display of making. *Mountain* (2017) is a compelling sculpture in which a modern, industrial desk is made of the same type of cardboard sheets that are stacked on its surface. A hermetic circular economy attuned to endless production, one that might trap the anxiety of modernism if modernist production was not immune to that emotion. Everything drips with brown hues that are not quite contemporary and like all colors from the past whose names we've lost, they possess a certain aloof independence.

Wepler and Mahovsky's still life seems to me very much of its time and place, or at least the time and place of the generation of its makers. Our approach to "the business of intimacy", as Virginia Woolf called the interplay between writer and reader, has always been run through with irony. An earlier piece, *Skull and Bottle* (2007) is an enamel covered hydrocal-laden skull with a bottle sitting squarely on top. A sort of ironic joke of a traditional vanitas painting, and perhaps the only way to proceed with this motif in a period when it reads more as kitsch than as the precise sign of an existential condition. In a way, the poured, plastered lack of definition serves as much to make the joke as it does to admirably protect the image from ridicule and allow it to exist anew in a gallery or museum. It is the sort of joke that wants not to have to be a joke and sees no other choice. Or a parody, perhaps, in which the materiality of the thing commands a certain respect that can't be laughed away. There is something in Wepler and Mahovsky's work that attempts to set aside appearances, but views Proust's deep, penetrating intuition with unease and uncertainty. Still life lends itself equally to the occasion of both of these exhibitions: openhearted seriousness and something more protective, its romantic impulses covert.