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Conversation

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CONVERSATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture & Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by
Tajreen Akter
B.F.A, University of Dhaka, 2012
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Abstract

My goal is to catch the moment in my paintings, whether it is an event from my busy everyday life or a slow formal arrangement of objects, that studies composition, light, color and movement. The drastic change in my life, traveling from Bangladesh to the United States, inspired me to render important small, quiet, little moments of my daily life by painting them. The intimacy of this connection is very important to me.

Poetic Relation

I have been away from my country for three years. I left everything behind to follow my dream to be an artist. I live here with my husband now. We do not have other family members here. Although studying for my MFA keeps me busy, still at some point I feel lonely. I miss my time with my friends, my family and the place where I was raised. Sometimes I try to recall memories of Bangladesh by sitting beside the window with a cup of tea. One day I was sitting by my window with my teacup, and I noticed my mint plant was dying. I ran to the kitchen to bring some water so that it could live. That day, that sudden moment, made me realize that small events like this can be a source of pleasure, which people often ignore. These moments when we cease our usual complaints about what we do not have are the inspiration of my paintings.

দেখিতে গিয়াছি পর্বতমালা

দেখিতে গিয়াছি সিন্ধু

দেখা হয় নাই চক্ষু মেলিয়া

ঘর হতে দু পা ফেলিয়া

একটি ধানের শিষের ওপরে

একটি শিশির বিন্দু...

“We went to see the mountains, we went to see the “Sindhu” (river), but it remained unseen with wide open eyes, which is just two steps away from where I live, the beauty of a dew drop on a paddy...” I have a childhood memory of repeating this rhyme over and over again without realizing the depth of it. Now I recall this rhyme in my paintings.

The relation of my paintings to my daily life is what I am interested in. My tea cups, the indoor plant, my studio fan, the studio shoes all are part of my life not unlike the way that Vuillard’s mother

was an ever repeated motif in his paintings. Far away from home, I am outwardly calm and silent but inside in my studio I speak, I laugh, I play. That is the time I argue with my still lifes and they argue back with me. And that is the time a conversation lights up.

Why Still Life?

When I started my MFA journey, I made mostly landscapes and some narrative figure paintings. However, later on I began to feel uncomfortable with figures because I wanted to paint every day and with figures the time with the model was something I had to schedule. Then I started painting still lifes for exercise. Slowly I came to feel that I could have the same conversation with the still life objects that I was having with human subjects.

I felt a real connection with all the still lifes I was painting and there is a reason for this. I came to the United States as a dependent of my husband and found myself sitting at home in my apartment doing nothing until my admission into LSU. As a woman artist, it is very challenging back at Bangladesh to paint because of the conservative culture, but I left the country with the hope that I could bring my art career to the next level. I could not work right after I came to the United States because of bureaucratic restrictions. Back then, all I had were the few things in our spare apartment, which I used to arrange and then rearrange. Those things became the source of my motivation, and were actually responsible for making me think about the value of the little things in life, that every single and small thing can make your day, bring a smile to your face. Every object or moment feels precious. After a while, my professor introduced me to Edouard Vuillard, an intimist. I started learning how to present my private moments with dignity and honesty by looking at his paintings.

Multiple Panels and the Apparent Errors

It did not feel good when I made large-scale paintings. I wanted quick results and with a big painting, it was not possible. In addition, I did not enjoy working on canvas so I chose a solid smoother surface (usually wood panel or Masonite). Additionally, I thought the small panels were more appropriate for capturing temporary moments. Later on, I thought of working with multiple panels to activate the outer space by creating uneven edges. At first, I tried working with individual panels because I wanted to experiment with perceptual illusions, but then I began to think more and more about Cézanne's scanning perspective. Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker say in their essay "Post- Impressionism", "In other words, we move as we see. In contemporary terms, one might say that human vision of a still life is less like the frozen vision of a still camera but more akin to the continuous vision of a video camera except that he worked with oil on canvas which dries and becomes static." (Khan)

In *The basket of apples*, (Figure 1) Cézanne purposely drew the right and left edges of the table unevenly to emphasize the distance between them in the painting, even though the viewer knows the line of the table should be straight. The fruit would roll off that side if the table were like that in real life. Additionally, the biscuits look like they were seen from a higher vantage point than the fruit. At first glance these appear to be errors, but are they really errors?

Cézanne threw this question out to the rest of the world. The early Renaissance sought a frozen mathematical perspective in order to construct a coherent illusion of rational space. Nevertheless, does that perspective describe everything that an artist experiences with his or her eye? Cézanne answered through his still lifes, no.



Figure 1: Paul Cézanne, *The basket of Apples*, 1893

In the larger more complex multi-panel compositions, where my eyes had to move across a greater distance, I noticed similar phenomena. This more complicated interpretation of human vision has become very important to me. Is human perception fully expressed by Renaissance pictorial conventions? The answer is still no. It is endlessly complicated and fascinating.

In *My working desk* (Figure 2), along with all my multiple panel paintings I tried to use not only the inner space of the paintings but also the outer space of the paintings. With the uneven edges, I was able to activate the wall beyond the sides of the panels. If the painting is observed closely, an intentional visual play can be found. I totally relied on what I saw. I wanted to create a vertical panorama with the drawer underneath the pullout shelf that holds the container with silverware top of it. The additional panel on the left with the dark brown block relates to the bands around the drawer. The dark rectangle above continues the orthogonal of the desk in the top panel. As is the case with “*Abandoned belongings*”

discussed below, the picture, at first mysterious, resolves itself into the retractable shelf of a desk with an open drawer below.

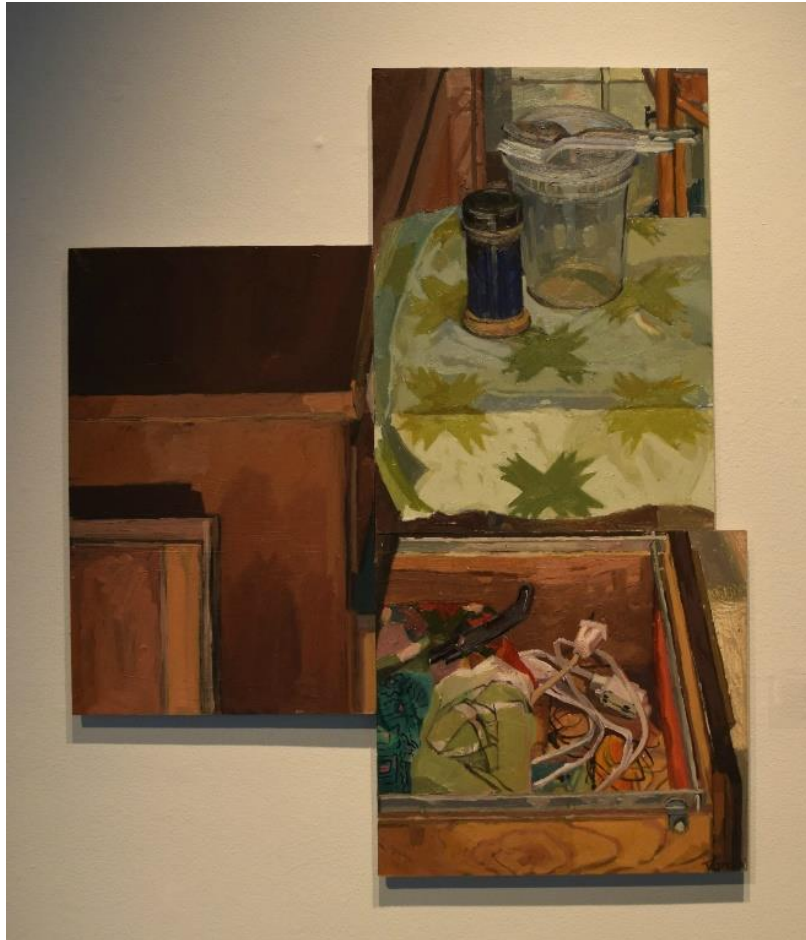


Figure 2: Tajreen Akter, *My Working Desk*, oil on panel, 2016

In *A Random Shelf* (Figure 3), the uneven edges of the drawer suggest space. The change of scale is slight in the upper panels but is more visible in the lower part of the painting because, as the drawer protrudes from the body of the shelving unit, it moves to the viewer's eye. Again, some parts of the painting superficially appear illogical.



Figure 3: Tajreen Akter, *A Random Shelf*, oil on panel, 2015

Stationeries 2 (Figure 4) was the first step to paint “A Random Shelf” painting. It helped me to play with a variety of greens and grays.

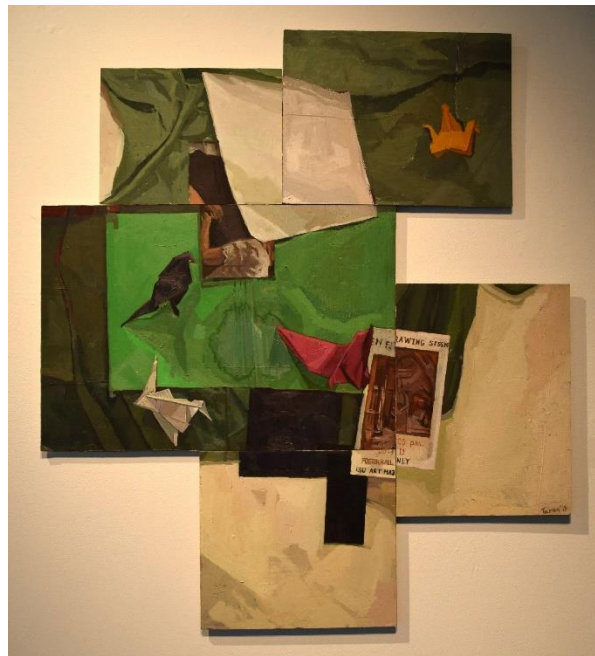


Figure 4: Tajreen Akter, *Stationaries 2*, oil on panel, 2016

Commentary

I mostly work with whatever I am surrounded by, in my studio or at home. I tend to create still lifes from things that I use every day. At first, I worked with fewer objects, but gradually I started adding more and more still life objects to create a more complex formal structure. Color, space, and composition are my priorities in selecting a subject.

The two umbrella paintings (Figure 5, Figure 6) were done just out of curiosity because I enjoy painting patterns. Later on, I used the same umbrellas as the inspiration for a newer painting that in addition to aspiring to subtle distortions or an exaggeration of space also allows the viewer to imagine a story. Increasingly, I want a composition to imply a narrative, often autobiographical. I try to arrange the still life objects on an imaginary stage where they can act and react. The narrative is open-ended where each viewer can create his own story, but for me it also becomes a self-portrait.



Figure 5: Tajreen Akter, *Umbrella 1*



Figure 6: Tajreen Akter, *Umbrella 2*

In *Conversation I* (Figure 7), my intention by setting up a still life with my two old friends, the umbrellas, was to paint the rain falling in my studio. Outside that day, it was pouring cats and dogs. I have noticed most of people here get annoyed whenever it starts to rain. However, in Bangladesh, rainy days are the happiest days. People love the warm rain during monsoon season. They prefer getting wet under the rain to seeking shelter from it. Therefore, rain for me is a happy memory and I wanted to use bright colors to keep it like that.



Figure 7: Tajreen Akter, *Conversation I*, oil on panel, 2016

When a number of things related to a person come together, they start to speak. Through my still life compositions, I create a scene that can help to drag our eyes inside the picture space. I like creating mystery in my paintings. Sometimes this is communicated by an open drawer or sometimes by an

unexpected pair of human feet. This narrative element allows an open conversation. I reuse many objects to maintain a pictorial thread but also to develop new identities for the same objects.

I use a minimal color palette. I will occasionally foray into other pigments in order to capture a contrasting local color. Color temperature is extremely important to my painting, so if I cannot get the right color from a short palette I add more colors to keep the temperature right in order to create the right mood. I may not always be true to the subject but I try to react to what the atmosphere needs.

Although, a smooth surface of controlled gradations may allow a strong sense of volume, I prefer working in a painterly style in which the brush strokes are visible. I want to emphasize the physicality of the painted objects as well as their illusion. I am not concerned with achieving a smooth surface by hiding the brush strokes. Rather I try mixing the quartertones, that create volume by smudging the brush in between two colors.

Formal Analysis

“*My studio fan*” (Figure 8) is a very simple still life of a single object. What could be more boring than a circle in center of a square? However, the two dimensional composition is slightly asymmetrical and thus dynamic. The plane of the fan is turned slightly away from the picture plane. The purple piece of paper in the lower left corner leads the eye back in space to the red point in between the blades of the fan. The opposing direction of the light source creates a contrasting diagonal movement.



Figure 8: Tajreen Akter, *My Studio Fan*, oil on panel, 2015

The brushwork is open with subtle color changes and a subdued palette. The fan is not an anonymous formal object, as you would find in a Morandi still life, but a specific appliance whose brand name is nearly legible. The subject matter may also create a tension in the viewers mind. What season could it be? It may be a month of winter when no one needs a fan, or it can be patiently waiting for its owners return on a hot summer day!

Abandoned belongings (Figure 9) is about odd objects that I could not bear to throw away because of their joyful colors. It is an arrangement of color and form. And also space. It looks like on single plane the still life objects are composed on single plane, but when you notice the two alligator clips and then the dimly illuminated pink flip-flops in the lower right corner, you realize that the plane is a shelf, floating about 30" above a linoleum floor. Even closer inspection reveals that this plane is not floating but is in fact the pullout drawer of a desk. To complete the spatial illusion, in the upper right hand corner, there is a sliver of vertical wall.



Figure 9: Tajreen Akter, *My Abandoned Belongings*, oil on panel, 2015

The composition is a play of circles and ellipses. The eye moves from the cd to the painters' tape to the large roll of tape, and then back to the cd. This visual route takes the eye through three nearly unrecognizable objects (actually chap sticks) that function to further move the eye as they create a line of color accents. The shallow triangles at the edges of the framing rectangle act as both a dynamic two-dimensional composition (think of Malevich's *White on White*) and as further clues to the 3D structure of parallel planes.

The Blue Vase (Figure 10) by Vuillard is a very simple still life painting, although the mirror adds an additional spatial pull. I did something similar in “*The View*” (Figure 11) by adding a mirror to create spatial ambiguity. The angle of the mirror in my painting causes the space of the painting to rotate. The palette, on which the cups rest, is tilted towards the viewers, while the mirror is tilted away. Thus, the ellipses of the cups are widest in those closest to the viewer and become increasingly shallower in their reflection in the mirror. The primary center of interest is in the central cup. The cup, on the left appears too small because it is in your peripheral vision. The actual space of the still life is two feet deep but the reflection of the window in the mirror makes you believe that you are looking into a deep landscape space.

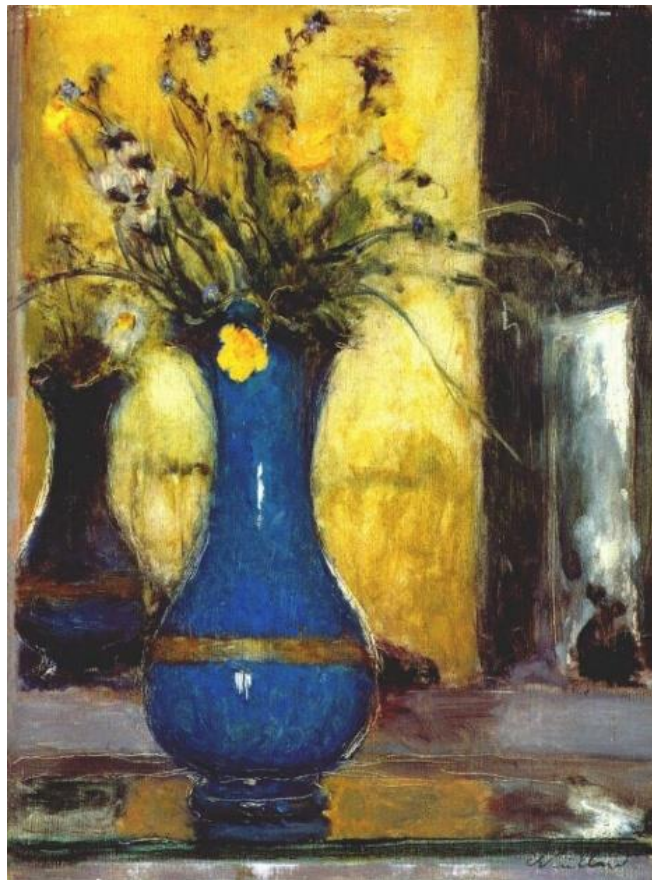


Figure 10: Edouard Vuillard, *the Blue Vase*, 1930



Figure 11: Tajreen Akter, *The View*, oil on panel, 2016

However, this deep space is blocked by the way I painted the flatness of the mirror and by the hanging origami bird. In fact, this deep space is not in front of me but it is behind my head because it is the reflection in the mirror. If you look carefully the painting refers to its process even more explicitly because the palette used for the painting is in the painting. The red paint in the lower right hand corner was used to paint the red cup. The fact that the painting is on four panels and that the objects in the painting are slightly disjointed, further emphasizes the movements of the artists head (or multiple viewpoints). This movement, as in the case of Cézanne illustrated above, introduces the element of time.

Artist Influences

Vuillard was the first artist who helped me develop my concept of still life painting. His intimate still lifes are my source of inspirations. His rich and vibrant colors and painterly brushworks are key components of his paintings. One of his early creations where he, for the first time experimented with “trompe l'oeil” made me think of using trompe l'oeil myself. In *Self-portrait with a friend*, Vuillard (Figure 12) painted the bottles of oil at the right front corner of the painting very prominently with strong contrasts of light at the right front corner of the painting. They look very realistic and three-dimensional. And these bottles are also working as a repoussoir, a concept I used with the spot light in my painting “*Stationeries*” (Figure 13).



Figure 12: *Edouard Vuillard Self-portrait with a friend*, 1889

I like Giorgio Morandi paintings because of their unique use of ordinary and often-repeated still-life objects. Morandi removed the labels and painted over his objects to give them anonymity and universality, so that they could be found in any house. For a similar reason I do not remove any identifying marks from the objects in my paintings because I want them to look the same as they are around us. Probably we have seen them, but never noticed them. Maybe we buy them for our everyday use, but never really care about them.

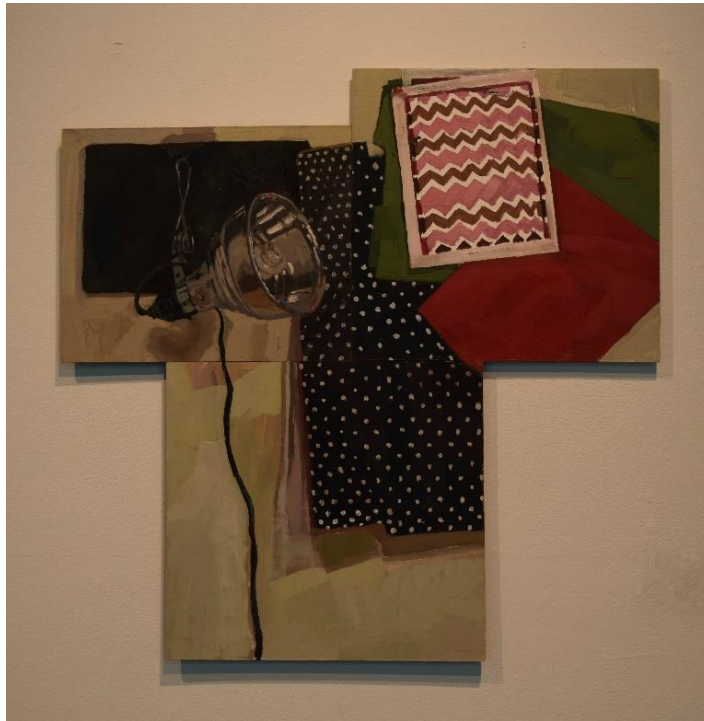


Figure 13: Tajreen Akter, *Stationaries*, oil on panel, 2015

Morandi's cunningly composed still lifes (Figure 14) influence the composition of my own still lifes, but sometimes I also paint found compositions. In *Daily Studio Scene* (Figure 15) the labels, the bottles and the tubes are almost recognizable and probably can be found in any artist's studio. The composition I captured could have changed at any moment.



Figure 14: Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*

I started looking at Pierre Bonnard's work for the intensity of his colors. From my museum visits, I have been able to experience some of his works in person, and these trips have helped me improve my color technique. I have also seen much work by Patrick George and I am moved by his dedication to a specific event while still maintaining such open and fluent brushwork. Recently I met the artist Jane Patterson who made a visit to LSU. After having seen one of her works in person at a private collection, I have been looking at her work for two years now on my laptop. However, the meeting with her and our conversation about how she works with colors has been very useful. Nevertheless, Antonio Lopez Garcia, Sangram Majumdar and Peter Van Dyck all have a contemporary way of thinking about traditional painting that I study closely.



Figure 15: Tajreen Akter, *Daily Studio Scene*, oil on panel 2015

In closing with one of the roots of still life painting (Figure 16) because the tradition of still life painted from observation is long, deep and continuous



Figure 16: *Villa di Poppea*. Oplontis, 1 st c. A.D. Torre Annunziata.

Conversation

My conversation probably started the day I decided to do still lifes. I did not know what I was doing or what the purpose was. I was painting still life because I was enjoying the small paintings I was making with differently shaped and colored objects. The most interesting part about working with my simple objects is that they function differently each time I try to paint them. They start reacting to the space they sit in and the light on and around them. Depending of their shape and size, they make me respond to the surface I have chosen to paint on differently each time. It is fascinating to me.

My earlier works were just a pathway to lead me to my intimate moments with my daily objects. I repeated a lot of objects and set ups but with a different manner every time to have different conversations. In “*Untitled*” (Figure 17), I used my studio coffee mug to arrange a set up for experimenting with trompe l’oeil and patterns. But after having gotten a sense of the trompe l’oeil process I aimed at a more poetic use of the same objects.



Figure 17: Tajreen Akter, *Untitled*, oil on panel, 2014

In “*The View*” (Figure 18), my old black coffee mug got some friends, so it is reacting to me in a completely different manner. The green fabric has now changed into a harmony of red and white. Over the last few years, my way of thinking about painting has changed and I am hopeful this is just the beginning. My still life objects have many more exciting discussions that are still unspoken.



Figure 18: Tajreen Akter, *The View*, oil on panel 2016

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Vita

Tajreen Akter was born in Bangladesh in 1988. Mahtab Uddin Bhuiyan and Zakia Mahtab are her father and mother. She started her art career at the age of ten. She spent her formative years in Dhaka. She received her Bachelor of Arts with honors in Painting from Dhaka University in 2012. She entered Louisiana State University's Master of Fine Arts program in 2013. She intends to graduate in August of 2016.