

by Sarah Randolph



RICHARD BAKER, "Shield," 1993  
oil on canvas  
Courtesy of Joan Washburn Gallery

# S T I L L

## The Paintings of RICHARD BAKER

STILL LIFE—a painting whose determining quality is the unmovings of its subject. The gaze shifts, but what is looked at remains silent. Nothing happens. Art critic Norman Bryson says: "Still life is the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest . . . Still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is a wholesale eviction of Event."

The still life has some quality akin to the prose poem, the way it meditates on the boundaries of place and object. It is by its nature reassuring. The still life speaks of presence, of the nourishing quality of objects (fruit, loaves, fish). It is an art of refuge, of return—through the thingness of things back to the fact of our own existence.

But the still life is also an art of irony. It comments on our domestic lives, on society's preoccupation with abundance, examining us by looking at what we own. In this way the still life partakes of our ambivalence about the things around us, the way they remind us of our material nature. We like to think of ourselves as spirit, but we are dross, mortal, indelibly physical.

What does it mean to paint an object? To sit with it and watch nothing move. By looking at it, you submit yourself to its gaze—it studies you.

I first saw Richard Baker's still lifes in a 1989 group show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. I was struck immediately by how risky his paintings seemed in scale and in subject—here were *small paintings of flowers*. How perversely big those images made themselves.

One of the paintings, "Six Fancy Tulips," was reproduced on the exhibition postcard. It showed a group of orange lily-flowered tulips which seemed to nibble at the top edge of the canvas with sharp mouths. They swayed above a brown landscape where two smokestacks squatted, one silent, one steaming. I took the postcard home and taped it to the cover of a notebook I was starting, to be a kind of governing icon.

# L I F E

December, 1993. A new show of Richard Baker's work opens at the Washburn Gallery in New York. The paintings are hung like a row of small windows around the square room, windows looking out onto scenes at once impossible and deeply familiar. I stop for a long time at three of them.

"Shield": Four muscular tulips float in midair, dominating the sky. The leaves are thick and fleshy, the stems like rods, the flower-heads, deep purple or white, almost solid-seeming. The tulips cross over each other in the sky, and as they cross they jumble slightly. At first glance they look intact, but soon it's apparent that the stems don't line up, that the arrangement is plausible but impossible. There's a kind of anxiety in the mismatch, a restlessness. A few faint clouds float in the pale, yellow-green sky. Below is a vague landscape, a blurred field or beach where the paint is scraped thin to reveal the canvas weave.

"Snapper": Three fish on a yellow board, held at the vertical. By some miracle they don't slip down out of the frame. Instead they gaze heavenward, the yellow board like a halo that "makes saints out of them" (as Rilke says). But what odd saints, wide-eyed, gloomy, impassive, their small fins helpless on land, their mouths closed firmly. They stare up at a blue-white sky, a hazy glare. The horizons play with them. Between one pair of fish-heads, a whitened sea, through another, a deep blue-green. To one side of the board, a tiny strip of horizon so distant we barely glimpse its green hill, to another, a full landscape of water and woods. As if each time we look at the painting we stand in a different place, inhabiting different angles of view.

"Scissors, Hammer": A pair of metal scissors and a worn mallet sit on a fickle tabletop whose planes won't quite resolve. All the world is shifting as we look. The yellow sky pushes towards us. The horizons find themselves where they will—one watery sliver just edging over the table on the left, one tiny sea finding itself between the scissors' open blades, a wedge of dark green field with road or river and its own ocean, slipped in like a pizza slice on the far right. This anxiety of place is becoming familiar. But the

objects themselves have the solid presence of long use, they are known. They are intimate with each other, the metal scissors yearning open-mouthed over the wooden mallet, and why shouldn't they feel desire? There is a sharp-edged blade, there is a surface of pounding, there are places for the hands to curve through. And our gaze falls on them like the light does, following curves and angles, wanting to slip into the hollows, but unable to.

When asked about the small scale of his work, Baker says, "the painting has the same physical relationship to my body as the object." We have met up again a month later when the gallery is quiet, to talk more about the paintings. We stand close to them, then step back, move close, then step back, in a dance reminiscent of the pavane. I point to features of the paintings, areas where the paint is thick, or thin, places where the eye shifts, where planes meet. Baker points to boundaries, borders, margins, telling me that edges are the most important places in a painting. They are where shapes are defined, where all the events in the painting occur.

And the paintings *are* edgy, the objects push right up against the edges of their tables, risking the precipice—one group of pebbles has the demeanor of lemmings wondering whether to take the leap. The rubber hats and masks appear actually to hang out over the brink. And the flowers push right to the edges of the canvas, the edges of the represented sky, sometimes with as little clearance as a quarter inch. "On the edge," Baker says, accepting the literary ramifications of the image. *On edge*, too, I think.

If still lifes often act as landscapes of interior spaces (instead of trees, rivers, hills against fields we see fruit, flowers, bowls on tabletops) Richard Baker's still lifes play with us: they are placed outdoors, displaced into real landscapes. Sometimes his flowers float mid-air above distant vistas, their horizons pressed way out to the sides of the canvas. His tables sit under skies white or yellow, sometimes even blue, with scraps of

ocean or field visible in the corners. But we never doubt that his objects are human, part of the human world. Under his hand they are anthropomorphized: the three fish with their morose optimism, the huddle of stones, the impatient scissors and the stoic mallet. They loom over the tiny fields, the faint trees.

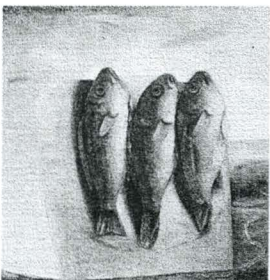
At a nearby Greek restaurant we sit down to big plates of moussaka and brown mugs of coffee, talking until one by one the other patrons leave and the early winter dusk crosses the street windows.

We talk about objects—what role do they serve in the paintings? I ask Baker if he thinks the paintings could work without their central subjects, as abstractions, formal studies, and he laughs. The day before, a friend challenged him with the idea that the "backgrounds" are becoming paintings in their own right. Baker is entertaining the thought, but I find myself arguing for the presence of objects, for their eloquence and tenderness, for their humor.

He talks about the conceptual layers of the painting—he calls them "the form thing," "the flat thing," and "the function thing." I think I understand the "form thing"—the paintings' formal underpinnings, the interplay of its shapes. The "flat thing" is the way the painting exists simultaneously as an object in its own right, and as the image of an object—flat paint on a three-dimensional object (the boxy canvas), depicting another world of depth and objecthood. It is the last of these that I'm puzzled about, the "function thing," and as Baker begins to explain it, it seems at the heart of his work, the real knot of it.

Objects in a painting, cups, say, or fruit, can never actually be used in their functional capacity. You can't pick up the cup and drink, bite into the fruit. So what the painter is left to work with are the other qualities that objects have, their visual form, their associations, their intangible objectness. When the function of the object is taken away, we are left (though Baker never used these words) with something like its spiritual value. If we are frustrated in our desire to *use* the object, we can be returned to the fact of its *presence*.

In art school, Baker tells me, he lost faith in paint, in the capacity of paint to carry meaning. He turned towards conceptual work, painting pictures of blank index cards, paper, empty notebooks in lumpy paint which he adulterated with coffee grounds and dirt for texture. He painted these objects exactly to scale, so the painted index card was the same size as a real index card, the painted envelope as a real envelope.



RICHARD BAKER, "Snapper," 1993  
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RICHARD BAKER, "Scissors, Hammer," 1993  
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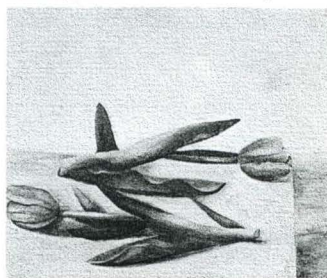
The scale tempted the viewer to want to use them, but the lumpy paint kept them at a remove from the functional. "They were all surfaces waiting for information, inspiration," he says now, looking back.

Some of that imagery is sneaking into his new work—the last painting he finished before the show depicted a piece of paper cut into the shape of Baker's head (with its characteristically large ears!) sitting at the edge of a table beside the clay model of a hand. A kind of ironic self-portrait, where the objects made by the artist are stand-ins for the artist himself.

Increasingly, Baker's still lifes are putting themselves at an extra level of remove from world. This new body of work contains several paintings of objects which are themselves representations—a group of plastic squid, plastic animal noses, and most importantly a group of rubber hats and masks.

In one painting we see a mound of fruit, but the mound of fruit won't sit like a mound. It is oddly flattened, it tilts, and beneath it, where we expect shadow, is a strange, flesh-colored band. I first saw the piece in Baker's studio and tried unsuccessfully to figure out what was so strange about the fruit. Then I turned, and hanging on a nearby ladder was a floppy rubber hat with a fleshy inside like a bathing cap, studded on the outside with the bright impression of fruit in bas relief. At that moment the painting shifted. Before, there was fruit that wouldn't quite resolve into its dimensions, after, there was

RICHARD BAKER, "Plumb Line," 1993  
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*Plumb Line (Tulips)*

*How much did Pythagoras know? His salutations, an encyclopedia caught in a flicker of the eyes. Two smooth flowers use the horizon, its taste of yellow, to name the indivisible, altering his hypothesis with their absorption. Their avowals persist without anger. They are chopped, mortal, but undiminished, their bodies held in robes, two specimen priestesses. If there is a lament, it is enclosed, cultured in a space, a cream that soaked in childhood. The sound of electrons spinning is a motor, keeping the planes hopeful, the window ringing, until the parched eyelid of the sky becomes a shrine for forgetting the unforgettable.*

rubber, a limp hat with no head to fill it, something set down while its owner stepped away.

Sitting in front of the plastic squid or the rubber fruit hat, Baker can remain utterly faithful to the object he is painting, and still be playful about the reality of the world he depicts. He bought the fruit hat because it looked just like the piles of fruit he was already painting. By painting the hat in the fruit's stead he can maintain a dual loyalty to the real and the surreal, a dual citizenship.

The masks are perhaps the riskiest work in the show. One is of a baker(!), the other of a red-faced "Indian." They introduce the figure into the still life in a way that's much more startling than the subtle personhood of his fish or tools, and so they interrogate the very idea of still life. With these pieces Baker brings to the forefront his questions about perception and illusion, about the faithfulness of depiction and the purposes of the activity of painting. "Masking," he says to me, so the way the painting itself becomes a mask is immediately apparent.

"The true purpose of masks," says Salman Rushdie, "is not concealment but transformation."

After art school (at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore, then at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston), Baker came to Provincetown, and searched for a new way into painting. "I picked the still life," he says, "because it was the dumbest, most flat-footed genre I could think of. I started with the most overused subject matter—flowers—and I used it in the dumbest way I could. I just set them square-on in the middle of the canvas, against a color field. Gradually, the color field became a real field, a landscape."

Baker is suspicious of any kind of ease in painting. He is unwilling to let novelty of subject matter do his work for him. Unwilling, even, to rely on his skill as a painter. He uses bad brushes and other tricks to keep the act of painting difficult. In some of these new paintings, he has laid a thick mat of acrylic down over one area, and glued it to the canvas before priming.

So the canvas he works on is no longer even—there's a raised area, a rectangle placed almost randomly. It gives him something to struggle against, a ridge to press across, a feature on the geography of the canvas to keep the paintbrush from travelling too smoothly.

Critics have usually seen Baker's paintings—especially his flowers that float mid-air—in the tradition of surrealism, but their impossibility doesn't bring to mind dream images, the subconscious. Instead, their dislocation seems to be about *seeing*. As you sit before an object, the eye locates it again and again from different angles, and the mind gradually lifts it out of its surroundings. As if the very force of perceiving causes a kind of levitation.

February. A letter arrives from Baker, narrow white pages covered with blue writing:

*I am still involved in a debate with myself of why the "object" in my painting is necessary....Philip Guston posited that there can be "too much 'art' and not enough 'nourishment,'" and I suspect that painting without the "object" would be just that kind of art for me....*

*It is true that one can be moved by paint as an evocative material expressing some sense of the world, but if that ability or aspect of paint can be coupled with its ability to describe, then it may be possible to have something truly and perversely unique, and perhaps closer to what it is actually like to perceive the world (perception, after all, is a matter of looking and seeing).*

Years ago, I spent a few weeks in Paris during a rainy spring, and gradually the grey sky, like the grey stones of the city, began to weigh down on me. I went into the Orangerie again, and saw the Cezanne still lifes as if for the first time. They were a revelation. Apples. I felt as if standing in front of them saved me. Rilke says: "in Cezanne [the fruits] cease to be edible altogether, that's how thinglike and real they become, how simply indestructible in their stubborn existence."

"There must be objects," Wittgenstein says, "if the world is to have an unalterable form." "The world of the ten thousand things," Buddhists call this existence.

Baker's dead fish, his fish heads, his slabs of meat, his flowers, are not reminders of transience—they do not bring to mind that ineffable Japanese sense of *mono no aware*, the feeling we get when we remember that the present moment is in the act of leaving us. If they are re-

ment is in the act of leaving us. If they are reminders, they bring us back to materiality. To the physical presence of the things of this earth.

Rilke says: "Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—at most: column, tower...but to say them, you must understand, oh to say them more intensely than they ever dreamed of existing."

It's curious I keep thinking of Rilke, whose melodramatic sincerity is exactly the kind of tone Baker steers away from. But in another sense it seems apt—there is something metaphysical in these paintings, for all their self-consciousness and playfulness. They have something of the quality of icons.

When he sits before his objects, Baker seems to lapse out of irony and into contemplation. As if he becomes seduced by them.



The still life has always seemed to me an essentially religious subject in its quality of long contemplation, in its humility. Among the "great" genres—icon, landscape, figure—it may seem modest. We often think of the artist in his or her studio, arranging and rearranging flowers or pieces of fruit. There is something almost funny in the image, something domestic, anti-heroic.

The choice of so antiheroic a subject becomes an heroic act. It is a claiming of the domestic, of the ordinary. "Attention itself gains the power to transfigure the commonplace," says Bryson. Or in poet Barbara Jordan's language: "All things become sacred from long gazing."

In his letter, Baker pointed me towards an essay by Thomas Lawson, who posits painting as a last exit from the dilemmas of postmodernism, a kind of radical freedom the existentialists might have appreciated, a joke turned back on irony itself. It is the very perversity of painting that appeals to Lawson, the fact that painting might be chosen as a tool in this age of skepticism, irony, and despair, precisely because it is "the medium that requires the greatest amount of faith."



Still life—I always feel the echo of the variant reading, that life persists, that we are still here. Stubborn life. ■

**SARAH RANDOLPH** is a poet whose work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Sonora Review*, and elsewhere. She is editor and publisher of Cosmos Press.