INSIDE OUT

ARTISTS in the STUDIO
The American University Museum’s total collected works include over 17,600 pieces that cover a wide range of time periods, mediums, styles, and subject matter. The museum has primarily acquired works by artists with ties to the Washington, DC region starting with the Watkins Collection and reinforced by the Corcoran Legacy Collection. During most of the twentieth century, the style of work most often associated with the DC art scene were abstract works related to the themes and techniques of the Washington Color School and the Abstract Expressionism movement. These male-dominated movements, and many other artist groups, largely excluded women. Therefore, the majority of the paintings and photography in this exhibition are works with figurative subject matter. Even for those that found acceptance amongst their fellow artists, they still faced challenges when it came to support from museums and commercial galleries. The goal of this exhibition is to highlight how artists in our existing collection, specifically female artists, created space for themselves in the DC area art scene.

Before I began studying the work of women artists in the American University Museum’s collections, it was not my intention to put together an exhibition around still life, studios and interior scenes, and self-portraits. I was hoping to focus on portraits, a favorite research interest of mine, but found myself limited by the contents of the museum’s collection. Most women artists in the collection painted either still lifes or abstract compositions. The prevalence of abstract art resonated within Washington, DC’s art history, but I was curious about the large number of still lifes. It was from this curiosity that this exhibition emerged.

In sticking with my decision to curate an exhibition exclusively drawn from works by women artists in the American University Museum’s collections, this exhibition is not as comprehensive as it should be. I found that most works in the collection are by male artists, a common statistic at many museums and cultural institutions. Had I chosen to select artwork with the same subject matter but included male artists, I would have had thousands of objects to choose from. The collection is further limited by the scarce number of works by female artists of color, a result of institutionalized racism in the art world. Readers must move forward through this essay and exhibition with the understanding that despite the quality of these works, it leaves tremendous absences within the larger scope of art history. I hope that this exhibition serves as a catalyst for the museum to acquire works that offer a more accurate representation of the entire Washington art world in the twentieth century, allowing future curators to expand upon the ideas put forth in this show.

Artists in the Studio

THE ARTIST’S PROCESS HAS LONG BEEN ROMANTICIZED in art history, from the ateliers of centuries past to the paint splattered floors of the mid-twentieth century. The mythical artist-genius is almost always male, most often depicted furiously laboring over his creation. This heroic narrative is preserved both in art criticism and sometimes in the artist’s own memoirs. Despite the intrigue of the private artist’s studio, the labor behind a work of art is hidden when viewing the finished product. In most cases, the viewer is purposefully alienated from the labor behind the output. When the studio does become public as part of the story behind the artist or the artwork, it is typically revealed in a way that perpetuates an idea of solitude and sanctity in the creative process. Simply put, it is the perception that most of history’s memorable artworks transcend the messiness of the studio.

However, still lifes are unique in that they often offer a glimpse into the artist’s studio practice. The subject matter requires that the studio be brought into view. Similarly, studio works and other interior scenes allow us to peek behind the curtain to see the reality of the artmaking process. For female artists systematically underrepresented in the art world—from galleries to museums to academia—this disregard for creative labor contributes to the lack of understanding and appreciation they receive. In this exhibition, female artists (and one male collaborator) have created artwork that pushed their artistry to the forefront, exploring the ways in which space, identity, and labor intersect. When we consider these works inside out, using artistic production as the first step in interpreting these paintings, photographs, and prints, we can better understand how artists see the world around them, and in doing so, better understand the artists themselves.
Still life is a genre that depicts carefully posed objects, traditionally flower arrangements in vases or bowls of fruit. Artists have taken up this subject matter in paintings, drawings, and photographs. Many people have a hard time understanding the significance of still life. It can be easy to overlook scenes that apparently mirror our day-to-day lives when other artists share stories and images of a world apart from our own through history or mythology. Despite the rise in popularity of other subject matter, still life has stood the test of time throughout art history, outlasting changing styles from the Renaissance through Impressionism and abstraction.

Still life has never been a predominant subject matter in America but has maintained a strong presence within the larger body of American art since the early nineteenth century. Despite an increase in its popularity, the genre faced challenges through its associations with student work, decorative arts, and Europe’s hierarchy of genres. By the end of the century, the genre had benefited from economic changes that brought new interest in still life, as more individuals identified with the middle class. They could afford to buy objects to decorate their homes, such as paintings, prints, furniture, and decor adorned with still life imagery. Furthermore, artists employed the trompe l’oeil technique, where viewers are deceived into believing that objects are three-dimensional, finding still life the predominant vessel to achieve these illusions at a time when many Americans began to question the nature of vision and the science behind it.

As modernism arose in the early twentieth century, many artists began to embrace still life for the experimental possibilities it held. For these artists, still life proved a fruitful tool to explore the many ways in which space can be expressed within the medium of painting. While painters explored still life’s possibilities to expand their medium, photographers adopted the genre using the conventions of painting.

When studying a still life, it is vital to consider the degree of purpose and thought put into them. The objects depicted are almost always carefully placed and arranged by the artist. In situations where artists have less of a hand in curating the arrangement, it was still arranged by someone, or carefully selected by the artist to comment on the nature of still life. This degree of manipulation and thought put into the composition showcases the artist’s close attention to detail and structure. Most importantly, it demonstrates the artist’s attention to one’s physical surroundings and how that fits into the creative process.
Still life can be modern and experimental even when arranged traditionally. For twentieth century artists like Valerie Hardy, still life can be used to study the relationship between objects and space. What appears to be an ordinary scene of a glass vase of roses, *Still Life with Roses* (1975) is inquisitive of the light that illuminates the scene looking through the vase and onto the wall behind it. Hardy’s thick brushstrokes feel reminiscent of the abstract art that reigned supreme throughout the mid- to late-twentieth century. In this artwork, Hardy offers an investigation into distinguishing between the room and the object, and utilizes the nature of still life to her advantage.

While best known for her abstract and geometric artwork from the sixties and seventies, Alma Thomas’s (1891-1978) earlier paintings displayed representational subject matter, frequently still life. In the 1950s, she began studying at American University, during which time she created *Still Life with Chrysanthemums* (1954). She outlines the floral and fruit arrangement on the table with heavy black lines and applies thick strokes of color to suggest the object’s shape. Thomas throws off the perspective of this painting, showcasing almost different perspectives or viewpoints of the scene. The background and foreground operate on two different angles. Interestingly, Thomas includes another painting, which looks to be a still life, as the backdrop to her arrangement in the foreground.

Thomas notably painted and worked in her home, and in doing so, intertwined daily life and artistic production in the same space. The majority of her other still life paintings lack a painting in the background, as she has added here. Thus, the painting becomes a self-referential tool to herself and her studio practice. It also becomes a further investigation of space as the viewer looks beyond the arrangement in the foreground to the scene in the background painting.
While still life is most often associated with painting, numerous artists took up the genre through photography in the twentieth century. In many ways, these artists borrowed the conventions of painting to create scenes that in other ways manipulated and emphasized the capabilities of photography. For photographers who took up still life, the medium allowed them to move beyond the studio into spaces that are not traditionally considered for artistic production. This expands the definition of a workspace and our understanding of still life. In doing so, artists that do not work within the traditional studio environment or work on traditional still life arrangements can achieve the same consideration and respect. For many artists, other obligations, such as family caretaking, housework, or financial challenges prevented them from working exclusively in a traditional studio.

Gail Rebhan (b. 1953) demonstrates the extent to which still life can reveal personal details about an artist. She does not rely on traditional fruit and flowers carefully placed in a studio setting, but instead looks to her home environment by capturing specific viewpoints over four days in her 1981 multiphotograph work *Gail's Shoes: January 4, 1981; January 5, 1981; January 6, 1981; January 7, 1981.* This work looks at the shoes and other personal belongings left over from her day-to-day activities. To describe the series in which this artwork belongs, she emphasizes the significance of taking a broader perspective on what her still lifes share with the viewer: “There is a social/documentary aspect to ‘Sequential Still Life’ inasmuch as one’s objects can reveal much about socio-economic class, education level, aesthetic sensibilities, and perhaps the importance that each person places on their surroundings.” Rebhan’s interpretation can be easily extended to all still life. The artist offers an intimate glimpse into her life, opening it up for viewers to ponder and examine. In this setting, these mundane, everyday objects become elevated into the space of high art, shifting our perspective of what holds such significance and value. We are prompted into thinking that Rebhan has allowed fate to arrange the shoes and clothes she photographed. But like any still life, she has actually carefully selected this glimpse into her home.
Artmaking at its core is a profoundly personal activity, one of the many reasons why the artmaking process is concealed or hidden by many artists. Those who choose to share their process carefully curate a narrative that only reveals what they’re willing to share or presents an idea of artmaking that serves their artistic pursuits. Since Jackson Pollock famously shared his process through photographs and film captured for *Life* magazine, more and more living artists have given the public an inside look into their studios. With the rise of performance art, many more would make their entire art production public.

Often, artists who share their process do so to combat the patriarchal associations we have traditionally attached to artmaking. Historically, artists were thought to possess a spiritual or otherworldly connection to guide them that the general public lacked. This notion evolved as the ideas around art and the conceptualization behind art grew. As people emphasized conceptualization in the artmaking process, this shaped the concept of the artist into the lone artistic genius, one who labors not just physically, but psychologically and spiritually to produce a work of art. These artists, particularly male artists, present themselves as individuals at work, free from the influence of others. We can see this ideal in Martha Holmes’s photographs of Jackson Pollock in his studio. The studio thus assumes a degree of sanctity.

Traditionally, the studio is the artist’s workspace and its sole purpose is for the creation of art, typically understood as the mediums of painting, sculpture, and photography. Artists pushed beyond the traditional studio in the twentieth century, but the general conception of artmaking and the identity of being an artist cannot shake the connotations and associations of the traditional studio. Prior to the twentieth century, artists played into the developing “cults of artists” in which the public became transfixed with individual artist’s personalities and biographies, extending to the physical space in which an artist worked. Into the twentieth century, popular magazines such as *Life*, *Vogue*, and *Harper’s Bazaar* often showcased photo essays about male artists’ studios next to stories about fashion which together reinforced the idea of producers as men and consumers as women. The identity of the artist thus revolved around their masculinity. The studio
was considered an extension of the artist’s personality, thus supposedly offering insight into the creative male genius. Some artists work against this idea, while others work to manipulate the concept of the studio for their artistic or personal purposes.

Yet, as it has become more evident in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, artists make art and enact their creative processes in many different places. As artists work in a variety of places, the definition of the studio changes, and we can think differently about how artists in the twentieth century functioned in a studio. Earlier artists’ supposed spiritual connection to a creative source is exposed as inspiration in the physical reality of everyday life. For many artists, this truth allows them to utilize the studio and interior scenes in creating a commentary on the artmaking process itself or on the idea of being an artist.

Artistic partners Gwendolyn Akin and Allan Ludwig provide an interesting look into still lifes and studios. In their photograph *Elk Head #4* (1987), a taxidermied elk head lays upon the floor with a traditional photography studio backdrop. This work becomes a modern take on the European tradition of painting still life arrangements of hunting trophies or game, which became especially popular among Dutch artists working towards the end of the seventeenth century. Yet, the zoomed-out perspective onto the elk head and the photography backdrop makes the viewer acutely aware of the presence of the studio in the process of creating this still life. The artists create a work that is both aesthetically rich as much as it is grotesque, thus extinguishing the romanticism found in the Dutch still lifes it parodies.

In Rosaline Moore’s (b. 1939) *Studio Interior* (1979), the artist also takes a step back, observing the space in the studio. Central to the scene is a painting on an easel with supplies resting on an adjacent table, suggesting the artist is at work on another piece. This painting was purchased by American University as a part of Moore’s reward for winning the David Lloyd Kreeger Award for Painting when she was a graduate student in the Master of Fine Arts program. The scene presents her
as an active, skillful, and accomplished artist. Other artists attempt to achieve the same objective by using the studio to assert their autonomy and creative genius, by linking themselves to historically significant artists or showcasing their extensive artistic production. However, Moore demonstrates how the studio can inspire artistic production independent of such idealizing or self-aggrandizing subject matter.

Self-portraits are a complex genre for both the artist and viewer. Curator and author of *Eye to I* Brandon Brame Fortune describes the nature of self-portraits as the “slippage between the public self and the private one.” The artist must decide how they would like to present themselves to the painting’s audience, selecting how much of an intimate and personal look they want to offer their viewers. Artists can also use self-portrait as a form of visual biography whose meaning is sometimes lost when the personal references are too intimate for the viewer to understand. However, in some instances, as much as it may reflect their physical likeness, the self-portrait is more a product of one’s imagination rather than a helpful glimpse at an artist’s personal identity.

Rebecca Davenport (b. 1943), although known for her portraits, also represented herself in a 1973 *Self-Portrait*. Like many of her portraits, this work is a bit of a trompe l’oeil showing meticulous detail evidenced in the grains of the wood floor and the careful folds in her outfit. Davenport often worked directly from photographs to create such realist impressions. She camouflages herself into the background by matching her outfit to the wall, seemingly becoming a part of the room. Space plays a significant role in the painting’s narrative, and she even self-identifies with it, blurring the boundaries between herself and the wall. Far from a wallflower, she appears to control the entire experience of viewing this artwork with her strong, seated position and gaze that meets the viewers’
The artist’s extension of their likeness and identity to the room, even unintentionally, can be applied beyond self-portraiture. Still life and paintings of studios or interior scenes can also be self-referential, sharing intimate details about the artist. Sometimes, these types of works share more about the artist than a self-portrait. In some ways, we can interpret how an artist sees the world around them, especially the space they occupy, as a form of self-portraiture.

Sarah Baker’s (1899-1983) visual devices form self-references that demonstrate the relationship between making art, artistic identity, and audience interpretation. *Poppies* (c. 1920) depicts a floral arrangement in front of a mirror that reflects a figure we can assume is the artist herself. This likely references two significant works of art in the history of European painting, *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck and *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez. In *Arnolfini Portrait*, a mirror in the center of the room shows not only the couple but also represents two more figures on the side of the viewer, one of whom is presumably the artist himself. Velázquez, on the other hand, portrays himself painting in front of an easel wall. A mirror reflects the Spanish King and Queen that he is painting. These two significant works demonstrate the ways in which artists use their artwork to contemplate reality and illusion so that it affects their viewer’s interpretations of the work. Baker’s choices demonstrate her attention to the space in which she’s working.
and how she wants us to associate it with herself and her artistic production. She wants us acutely aware of her creative labor and artistic conceptualization that we can extend beyond just this work but to others, like her many still life paintings, even those that do not include a reflection of the artist.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone, not just artists, has been acutely aware of the space around them and how it intersects with their inward and outward perspectives. Before the pandemic, most people thought of the studio as a place of isolated artistic production where an artist created artwork inspired by an extraordinary vision or skill set beyond an average human’s capabilities. But during the pandemic, many shuttered museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions gave a platform to see inside the artist’s studio. With the help of technology like social media and video communications, viewers had an inside look into worlds previously only accessible to a small audience. When one lifts the curtain to artistic production, we can appreciate artists’ adaptability, creativity, and labor even more. The artists in this exhibition offer their own lifting of the curtain to viewers, providing us the chance to appreciate them and their artistic production. And now we are seeing them inside out.

ENDNOTES

13 Fortune, Eye to I: Self-Portraits from the National Portrait Gallery, 11.
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The Corcoran Gallery of Art, one of the first private museums in the United States, was established in 1869 by William Wilson Corcoran and expanded in 1880 to include the Corcoran College of Art and Design with the mission ‘dedicated to art and used solely for the purpose of encouraging the American genius.’ In 2014, the Corcoran transferred the college to the George Washington University and distributed the works from its Collection to museums and institutions in Washington, DC.

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