



INDEPENDENT

The Shape of Things: Still Life in Britain: Pallant House Gallery review: Turning the humble cup and saucer into cutting-edge art

★★★★☆

This excellent exhibition is a fascinating walk through the often surprisingly radical history of British still life, from an 18th-century image of a joint of beef through the surrealism of Paul Nash, to David Hockney's iconic Pop Art painting of a Typhoo teabag

Mark Hudson • 1 hour ago



'Bright Interests' by Edward Wadsworth makes a great poster image for the exhibition – but lacks the sinister edge Magritte or Max Ernst would have brought to the subject (*Edward Alexander Wadsworth*)

There was a time, not so long ago, when an exhibition of 20th-century British still life would have seemed – how can I put this politely? – not the most exciting prospect. On the continent, **artists such as Picasso used the genre of still life**, with its focus on everyday objects (flowers, pots and pans), as the starting point for some of the most radical paintings of the 20th century. Yet even British artists have tended to deride British Modern Art as timid and provincial, politely lagging behind the European and American avant gardes.

Chichester's Pallant House Gallery, however, has been **at the hub of a major reassessment of British Modernism** over the past two decades, with exhibitions that have revived the reputations of near forgotten figures such as John Minton and Glyn Philpot, while turning the perceived and much-scorned gentility and quirkiness of this kind of art into very bankable virtues. Judging on past form, future exhibitions in this substantial survey will include many surprising works, while making intriguing connections between past and present.

Its current exhibition, *The Shape of Things*, sets out its stall by contrasting historical classics with cutting-edge contemporary works. And if you think paintings of domestic clutter can hardly be cutting edge, you're immediately proved wrong by Gordon Cheung's glitched collages in which digitally sourced images appear to slide off the paper. British-Israeli artist Ori Gerscht plays on the idea of still life as a meditation on the fleeting nature of reality, as conceived by the 17th-century Dutch painters who established the genre with their studies of fading flowers and rotting fruit. His digitally enabled images of the kind of vases painted by the much loved 20th century Italian artist Giorgio Morandi being shot to pieces with an air rifle, bring a very 21st-century twist to that time-honoured notion.

Yet more arresting than either is *Still Life with Joint of Beef on a Pewter Dish* (1750-60) by the Chichester artist George Smith – one of the first British painters to focus substantially on still life. The viscerally precise textures of the yellowed fat and the starkly lit greying meat immediately compel. It is, however, accompanied by a caption framing it as an implicit call to patriotism with its validation of “solidly English fare”. Yet the gutsy physicality of the work renders such explanations superfluous. The fact that the content is pretty much exactly what it says in the title points up one of the great strengths of still life as a form: its matter-of-factness. Once you’ve got past the historical context, what you see is pretty much what you get.

Certainly, those 17th century Dutch flower painters may have had the transitory nature of sensual pleasure and the vanity of human ambition at the forefront of their minds when looking at everyday objects, and it’s undoubtedly true that we can learn a great deal about the histories of trade and colonialism from looking at their paintings. Yet for 20th-century artists, still life was first and foremost a way to explore the basics of visual language, form, colour, texture, space and form without breaking the bank. The scale of the works tends to be modest; the subjects are whatever’s to hand. Though this show provides more than enough contextual information, you don’t need to read too much of it to get the point.

While Picasso and Braque were using the contents of Parisian cafe tables, including bits of collaged newspaper, to take visual reality apart in their Cubist still lives, their British contemporaries took a gentler approach, looking to earlier French movements such as Post-Impressionism and Fauvism. If Spencer Gore’s perfectly pleasant *Still Life with Apples* (1912) feels painfully in thrall to Cezanne and Gauguin, and Vanessa Bell’s superficially Matisse-like *Vase of Flowers* (1917) resembles an inflated children’s book illustration, there is much that delights. The Scottish colourist JD Fergusson’s *The Blue Lamp* (1920) has a zinging freshness with its looping crimson ellipses, while the thickly encrusted surfaces of Harold Gilman’s *The Cup and Saucer* (1915) make these modest vessels feel palpably present.

There's a sense of greater confidence, a less slavish looking towards Europe, in a room focusing on British **Surrealism**. Edward Wadsworth's *Bright Interests* (1928) makes a great poster image for the exhibition with its oddball arrangement of objects, including a conch shell and a ball of wool tied up with ribbon, placed on a seaside promenade. Yet it lacks the sinister edge Magritte or Max Ernst would have brought to the subject. Paul Nash's small *Dead Spring* (1929), with its dead plants, severely framed architectural elements and painfully constrained mood – a response, we're told, to his father's death – feels a properly convincing piece of English surrealism. Generally, indeed, there's nothing in this room that isn't an outright pleasure to look at – unless it's *Black and White* (1932), Dod Procter's drably conventional study of an ermine muff and a pair of evening gloves. The fact that everyone's engaged in essentially the same activity – looking at arrangements of objects on a tabletop – lends a sense of coherence and communality to these pieces, though most of the artists were unknown to each other.

The inclusion of Barbara Hepworth's exquisitely elegant *Conoid, Sphere and Hollow III* (1937), an arrangement of severely abstract white marble forms, begs the question of whether sculpture has a place in still life, even if the work is inspired by domestic objects as it is here. Still life has traditionally been about capturing the effects of light and texture, rather than creating new forms – as sculpture inevitably does. Yet the work's presence provides an opportunity to reflect, as does Jann Haworth's *Donuts, Coffee Cups and Comic* (1962) which presents its subjects as soft toys on a real-life tabletop in a room devoted to still life and post-war consumerism – which is largely taken up with Pop Art.



Gordon Cheung's glitched collages make digitally sourced images seem as if they are sliding off the paper (*Gordon Cheung*)

The divide between painting and sculpture breaks down in works such as *Love* (2007) by Haworth's former husband, the pop artist Peter Blake, in which the painting's arrangement of toys and other quirky ephemera continues as real objects on a shelf below the painting. In **David Hockney's** iconic *Tea Painting in the Illusionistic Style* (1961), the canvas is shaped in imitation of the object depicted: a Typhoo tea packet with a naked man seeming to float across it; a reminder of Hockney at his vital early best.

This lively exhibition only loses pace in its final room on still life today – although not because the exhibits lack quality. I particularly liked *Wild Food* (2012) by Anthea Hamilton, one of several Black British artists who are drawn into what might otherwise feel too cosily a white British story. Her photo-still life of what looks like sliced yam and burdock leaves is printed onto a silk kimono draped on a traditional Japanese wooden rack. Wolfgang Tillmans's huge *Hampstead Still Life* (2018) is a truly monumental image of freesias in a vase seen against a window. All the same, the sense of an umbilical link to the traditions of still life painting and its sense of a shared aesthetic enterprise, which was still very evident in much of the Pop Art work, now feels long gone. But then it is in the very nature of the genre that all things must pass.

Until Oct 20. pallant.org.uk