Still Life Happens

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Brigham Young University

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Still Life Happens

Mary Ann Crabtree

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Brian Christensen, Chair
Collin Bradford
Bryon Draper

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ABSTRACT

Still Life Happens

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After dedicating over two years to pursuing an MFA degree focused on ceramics and sculpture, I find myself transported back to a familiar setting from my past: a tableau reminiscent of what remained in the dining space after four young children finished a meal and exited the room. Revisiting the scene recalls happy times despite the disorder. What helped maintain my sanity during the relentless repetition of the every-day-long task was the realization that every day, innocents are learning to become aware of the world around them. For my thesis exhibition, I created a tableau as a loud reminder of those messier times in my home. My exhibition features an oversized wooden toddler's chair and table, surrounded by scattered meal-time remnants exaggerated in scale predominantly crafted from ceramic. The food items are strewn about in seemingly random arrangements, creating a chaotic still life. Perhaps the disproportionate size of the furniture and the disorderliness subconsciously acknowledge the monumental challenge of caring for children, a task that once felt never-ending but has since become a distant memory. Viewers may find solace in the mundane subject matter and in the ease of recognizing the familiar elements on display.

Keywords: art, sculpture, tableau, installation, still life, mundane, quotidian, every day, space, sphere, ceramic, stoneware, cooking, recipe, dog kibble, large dog bowl, large ceramic food, ceramic wall platters, underglaze, low-fire glaze, upscale, milk paint, carved-wood food, large table, simulacra, large chair, IKEA junior chair, highchair, childhood food, mess, remnants, ABC gum, degradation, relic
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Introduction

During the period when I had young children at home, my primary creative expression revolved around preparing and serving meals. Although I anticipated the daily messes that inevitably followed each meal, I longed for a clean floor and furniture free from the telltale signs of smeared food and sticky fingerprints. The demands on my energy to tend to the needs of others seemed ceaseless at that time. Depending on my energy levels, a single misplaced pea could feel like the last straw, while a solitary kernel of corn became an obstacle. However, that challenge has evolved, and my floors are now much cleaner. For my thesis exhibition, I have revisited memories of the food from my own childhood and from my children's early years, as well as a tribute to our beloved family dog, who eagerly helped alleviate the perpetual chore of sweeping.
Title: Still Life Happens

“As artist Laurel Nakadate has observed, being a parent is already very much like being an artist. It means always lugging things around, living in chaos, doing things that are mysterious or impossible or scary. As with art, children can drive you crazy all day, make you wish all this could go away. Then in a single second, at any point, you are redeemed with a moment of intense, transformative love.”

Life persists. Despite chaos, life persists. The title of my thesis exhibition invites viewers to ponder both the aftermath of turmoil and the resilience inherent in life's continuity. Still-life art, with its rich history, often centers around the ordinary yet profound subject of food, a theme I explore in a three-dimensional tableau. Throughout history, still-life compositions have served as reminders of life's fleeting nature and the ever-present shadow of mortality. Whether grappling with the chaos of a never-ending home renovation or the heartache of losing a loved one, the longing for resolution is universal. Yet, amidst the turmoil, a realization emerges: life moves forward, albeit altered. Reestablishing routines becomes a beacon of stability, signaling the gradual easing of pain and the dawning of hope.

Description of MFA Thesis Exhibition

Upon entering the long, white room housing my thesis exhibition, the title stands prominently, arranged vertically along the base of the wall, with the black vinyl lettering touching the floor. Adjacent to it, colorful ceramic pieces resembling enlarged versions of various foods—corn, peas, cereal, peanuts, raisins, and pasta—are strategically placed. Some food items overflow into a corner to the left of the title, accompanied by a small, discarded child-

sized broom. Beyond, a large dog-food bowl, filled with multicolored ceramic kibble, serves as a focal point. Additional food pieces are scattered throughout the room, including beneath and atop a giant chair that appears to have been hastily pushed away from a table. Both the table and chair have been magnified to monumental proportions, emphasizing the scale disparity between the objects and the viewer. The arrangement suggests human presence followed by abandonment, inviting contemplation on the persistence of life amidst disorder.

Subject Matter and Content

Within the realm of art, there exists a genre that encapsulates the very essence of ordinary existence and the relentless march of time—the genre known as still life. While traditionally portraying meticulously arranged objects from nature or human activity, still life also finds expression in the often-chaotic aftermath of a toddler's meal—a departure from the conventional, offering a vibrant depiction of innocence, exploration, and the aftermath of a child's early ventures into independence. This spontaneous, universal, yet somewhat expected disorder serves as tangible evidence of daily occurrences, unfettered by rules akin to Allan Kaprow's ironic rules for creating "art [that] seems closer to life\(^2\)" during the Happenings movement of the 1960s. For caregivers, the routine of everyday life unfolds as a series of “happening” events, each one a testament to the unpredictability of existence.

This scene unfolds upon a grand stage, featuring an imposing eight-foot-high table and a towering nine-foot-high junior chair, reminiscent of artistic movements and figures from the past, such as Robert Therrien and his monumental furniture. In contrast, rather than being the intended focus, the table and chair serve as context for the spilled food. Moving beyond the

highchair, the stage expands to encompass the surrounding area of the kitchen table, where the
chaos persists. Peas, melted popsicles, sticks, corn, and other remnants of meals are scattered and
piled up in a distant corner, bearing witness to a child's food preferences or aversions, like a
partially bitten celery stalk smeared with peanut butter and scattered raisins.

As viewers step into this space, they are immersed in a scene steeped in historical and
traditional significance. Amongst the spread of food, the stark, chalky-white table and chair serve
as blank canvases, symbolizing a blank slate and potential for creation every day. These
recognizable food shapes pay homage to the pop-art stylings of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van
Bruggen, renowned for their larger-than-life sculptures of everyday objects, highlighting how the
mundane can become extraordinary. "Still life happens" on this monumental stage, emphasizing
life's grand narrative. The imposing chair serves as a sentinel of transitions, drawing viewers into
an immersive encounter with the evidence of existence. For me, the chalk-white finish on the
furniture holds additional personal significance. White connotes surrender³ thereby signifying a
willingness to prioritize the needs of others over my own wishes and plans. The clean surfaces
also reflect my longing for enduring, pristine surfaces amidst the perpetual onslaught of messes
needing my attention.

³ Piggotts, History of the white flag, 20 February 2018,
https://piggotts.co.uk/updates/history-white-flag/#:~:text=the%20white%20flag%20was%20written,surrender%20with%20a%20white%20flag

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Materials and Process

The evolution of my thesis exhibition began with the creation of large ceramic buttons. Throughout my first Winter semester in 2022, I threw various buttons on the wheel as an experiment with flattened, concentric and torus forms. During Spring term of 2022, I transitioned from crafting sizable, platter-sized ceramic buttons on the wheel to crafting large food platters—15 to 22 inches—and embellished them with ceramic sculptural food items. This progression stemmed from a wall platter assignment in Brian Christensen’s Winter semester Art 680R class. Using a large clay torus thrown on the wheel, I fashioned two macaroni noodles and arranged them on the wall platter as if they were sliding over the edge. A white majolica glaze—colored with orange Mason stains—was poured over the macaroni, while a complementary blue underglaze adorned the edge of the 15-inch platter in a circular pattern. This initial creation sparked further experimentation with other foods suspended in sliding animation, such as apple pie and ice cream, goldfish crackers, peas and carrots. By the conclusion of the term, I had settled on depicting typical childhood foods, as well as foods I fed my own children when they were young. This led me to focus on crafting multiple wall platters featuring various foods in a state of suspended animation, with additional food items resting on the floor beneath the platters. During the summer of 2022, "Daily Offerings for the Innocents" was on exhibition at a juried show in West Valley, Utah.

Towards the end of Fall semester 2022, a visiting artist, Jason Lanegan, stopped by my campus studio in the 3D Art and Engineering Building—B66. He asked whether I was inclined to focus on crafting numerous platters or if I was more intrigued by the concept of depicting what ended up on the floor. Reflecting on this inquiry, I realized my fascination lay in exploring the creation of large ceramic food items. In response, Lanegan suggested introducing contextual
elements—such as a sizable highchair—to accompany the spilled food; however, I promptly dismissed this suggestion, feeling it exceeded my capabilities. I grappled with uncertainties regarding scale, such as the question of how large any furniture would need to be relative to the spilled food. For instance, if I sculpted a ceramic pea enlarged tenfold compared to its real-life counterpart, would the accompanying furniture require proportional scaling?

At the conclusion of Fall semester, I experimented with displaying my food-themed ceramic, first on my studio desk during the open studios event, and a few days later, arranged on and below a counter-height table at the B66 exhibition on West Campus. It was during this time that I debuted my current title alongside my work for the open studio event. Upon reviewing my work in the annual B66 exhibition, I felt dissatisfied with the presentation of the upscaled food on a standard-sized table. This dissatisfaction prompted me to explore alternative display options. It was then that I became aware of Robert Therrien's striking installation, *Under the Table*, exhibition at the Broad in Los Angeles. During the semester break, inspired by Therrien's work, I began planning a design for a smaller-scale table to be featured in my thesis exhibition. In early January, I submitted my thesis exhibition proposal to my committee—Brian Christensen, Collin Bradford, and Bryon Draper—and upon receiving their approval to move forward, I commenced the design and construction of an 8-foot-high wooden table inspired by the aesthetic of a small IKEA table I had at home.

**Table**

After consulting with experienced builders and conducting online research, I felt assured of my decision to use ¾” sanded plywood for crafting the hollow tapered legs, each featuring bevel cuts. Opting to use the standard full 8-foot panel height for the legs meant that the resulting
large table would be approximately three-and-a-half times larger than the original table I used as a reference for my design. Despite my initial concerns regarding scaling the food to match the enlarged table, ultimately during my thesis exhibition opening, spectators appeared unfazed by the technical discrepancy. One visitor even remarked that the upscaled food seemed appropriate and proportionate for the size of the table.

For the open studios event at the end of Winter semester in April, I arranged my 8 H × 12 W × 12 D ft. table, showcasing newly crafted ceramic food items created during the semester: crushed M&M's and peanuts, cereal flakes, lattice cereal squares, peas, green beans, melted popsicles, and ABC gum stuck to the underside of the table. In the preceding semester, I began experimenting with creating food items with a more deteriorated appearance, intending to further explore this concept for my planned thesis exhibition. Upon completing the table—a task that consumed both finances and mental energy—and with a sense of dread, I realized I was set on an inevitable course to create a very large chair. After careful consideration, I opted to replicate an IKEA Ingolf Junior chair, as its angled legs promised stability for the towering 9 ft. chair.

Chair

One of the sculpture professors on my MFA committee, Bryon Draper, quipped that if I could construct a large table, then I could certainly construct a chair to go with it. Building the table proved to be considerably less challenging than crafting the chair. While his words did not magically resolve construction challenges, they served as occasional encouragement during moments of difficulty. Though I initially considered using 4 in. plastic plumbing pipe or ¾ in. plywood, I ultimately opted for wood for the chosen design, considering both design aesthetics and cost. I used 1-inch thick, soft maple boards procured from MacBeath Hardwood in Salt Lake
City, thanks in part to a 3D scholarship from BYU that covered most material expenses for the chair. Beginning the chair project in May 2023, I primarily worked in the empty framing shop on West Campus, where I had access to essential tools such as the wood planer, table saw, joiner, belt sander, and router. Using the more practical band saw in B66, I cut the 16 leg pieces before assembling everything back in the framing shop. Through online research, I determined that employing a laminated, bent-wood technique would yield the best results for the curved, crossed back of the chair. To preserve more wood while crafting the top part of the curved chair back, I tripled the wood thickness rather than using thin strips and used a sled on the table saw to create kerf cuts perpendicular to the length of each board. These boards were then layered with wood glue, stacked, weighted, and secured to a curved jig. Subsequently, I used this solid, curved chair back as a jig to form the contour of the laminated crossed back.

**Relics: Ceramic, Wood, and Resin Food**

As mentioned earlier, my exploration into using food as a subject began with the creation of large, ceramic wall platters. *Macro-roni, 2022,* marked my initial foray into using ceramic food as a sculptural element. Building upon this experience, I ventured into crafting a stylized depiction of peas and carrots cascading from a sizable wall platter onto the floor, which achieved moderate success. Rather than attempting to reinterpret the forms with color and texture, I opted to replicate what I observed on a larger scale. Some of the forms, such as raisins, peanuts, and M&M's, proved to be particularly successful in simulating the color and texture of their real counterparts. For much of the food, I generously applied commercial underglazes and fired them to a mid-range cone 6 temperature. For the raisins and M&M's, I used cone 04 glazes available in the studio (recipes are listed in the appendix). The only unglazed clay I used was for the dog.
kibble filling the large, stoneware dog bowl, which was fired to cone 10 in a reduction atmosphere.

Some of the food items featured in the display were crafted from wood. One such example is *Ants on a Log*, 2023, portraying a large celery stalk bearing remnants of peanut butter-like smears and is the only wooden item showcased. Accompanying it were several wooden raisins smeared with similar peanut butter marks, strategically placed either on or near the celery stalk. These wooden pieces were transformed with layers of milk paint and colored wax.

Another nostalgic childhood artifact recreated for the exhibition is melted popsicles and their discarded sticks evidently left behind with indifference. Using low-odor epoxy resin mixed with dyes, I poured it over the 21-inch-long sticks resting on a plexiglass sheet coated with a releasing agent, capturing the essence of abandoned popsicles in vivid detail.

**Broom: Never-ending Childhood**

Near the room's corner lies a child's broom, a commercially manufactured item rendered ineffective by the size and weight of the food. Conceptually, it prompts reflection on the responsibilities of adulthood, questioning how someone like me, who may not feel entirely grown-up, finds themselves in charge of managing children and their messes.

**Where I Fit in the Discipline**

**Still Life Genre**

The still life genre in art boasts a rich history, tracing its origins back to ancient civilizations. Depictions of everyday items like food, plants, and common objects can be found
in ancient Egyptian and Greek artwork. However, it wasn't until the Renaissance in Europe that still life gained significant popularity. During this period, artists delved into realistic representations of quotidian objects, mastering techniques to capture the interplay of light and shadow. Early still-life paintings often carried religious or symbolic connotations, with objects symbolizing themes such as mortality, the transience of life, or abundance.

**Still-life Tableau: Picture or Scene**

The concept of my installation challenges the traditional boundaries of the still-life genre by departing from conventional 2D mediums and instead employing 3D objects scaled to the size of real-life food subjects often depicted in traditional still-life paintings. While traditional still life typically features whole or partial representations of natural foods, my focus shifts to smaller components, such as individual kernels of corn or peas, which are then upscaled to the dimensions of larger fruits like apples or cantaloupes, commonly seen in still-life artworks.

In the sphere of art practice, tableau installations refer to compositions or arrangements of figures or objects within a confined space, evoking a sense of a frozen moment akin to a scene from a play. This stillness often conveys a sense of theatricality, allowing viewers to interpret potential narratives or emotional resonances within the scene. Like traditional still life, artists often imbue objects with symbolic significance and consider their spatial relationships. Tableaus frequently blur temporal boundaries, offering viewers the opportunity to engage with the work on various levels inviting contemplation on the transient nature of human experience.

In my installation, the represented foods serve to disrupt viewers' temporal perceptions. Depending on the viewer's age, different cues may evoke distinct points of reference. For instance, as a child, I recall being tasked by my mother to gather peas, corn, and carrots that had
fallen onto the carpet, a ritual I later repeated with my own children. However, the inclusion of
goldfish crackers—a food absent from my own childhood—suggests a temporal shift, pointing
either to a younger generation or to a blending of generational experiences.

**Artist: Robert Therrien**

While my furniture may not reach the grand scale of Robert Therrien's iconic *Under the Table*, 1994, wood dining set, I have ventured into crafting large, albeit non-functional, wooden furniture pieces for a specific contextual purpose. Unlike the finishes on Therrien's work, for my furniture, I opted for a white chalk-paint finish containing plaster. This choice of finish color draws inspiration from classical ruins where the original polychrome finishes have worn away, revealing the natural color of the marble substrate beneath. The chalky-white finish is also a nod to the common practice in the art world of displaying objects on matte white pedestals to denote their significance.

**Artists: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen**

Reflecting on my initial encounters with Oldenburg's artworks, particularly his collaborative pieces with van Bruggen, I'm reminded of subjects that vary from being occasionally chaotic (such as *Floor Burger*, 1962), fantastical in their scale (like *Binoculars*, 1991), instantly recognizable (as seen in *Clothespin*, 1976), and playfully oversized replicas of everyday objects (as depicted in *Shuttlecocks*, 1994). While the items I portray may seem mundane and disposable, their magnified scale—akin to the duo's public installations—command attention and cannot easily be sidestepped.
Artist: Sam Taylor-Johnson

The use of video art, as seen in *Still Life*, 2001, depicting the time-lapse decay of fruit, and *A Little Death*, 2002, featuring a moldering rabbit, serves as both visual and conceptual inspiration for some of the food in my exhibition. These works establish meaningful connections to the visual narratives I aim to convey as I work to capture similar themes of transience and transformation.

Artist: Mary Kelly

*Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79, focuses on documenting the daily interactions between caregivers and infants, including verbal exchanges with developing children. My own work similarly captures the scattered remnants of daily activities involving children, without delving into the more explicit aspects such as impressions on diaper liners.
Lisa Confesses

Years ago, Lisa S. confided in me about her overwhelming anxiety regarding the messes her four children left after meals. She admitted that her anxiety was so intense that she could barely bring herself to sweep the scattered food into a corner, allowing it to accumulate throughout the week. Only when she couldn't ignore it any longer would she muster the willpower to dispose of the debris, dreading the repetitive routine. At the time, I admired her courage for acknowledging a less-than-ideal situation. Although I sympathized with her struggles, I lacked the confidence to admit that I, too, fell short of the ideal of a spotless caregiver. Eventually, our family welcomed a remarkable dog into our lives, who not only excelled at cleaning up after meals but also introduced us to new cleaning tasks.

Sheila Notices Something Missing

A friend of mine, Sheila V., who, at the time of the telling was an empty nester, once shared her frustration over her late dog's heavy shedding. However, when I met Sheila, there was no sign of the hair she described, despite her gestures towards the stairs, floors, and furniture. While she didn't miss the routine of cleaning up dog hair, she did express a sense of sadness about what its absence represented.

Maya: Roomba and Peacemaker

Our family’s black Labrador, Maya, left a fair amount of hair about our house. She also helpfully gobbled up food our young children dropped from the table and left scattered about the house. As a bonus for their parents, our children were very mindful that if they argued, Maya

Background Information
would leave the room to find some peace. Because they wanted her company, they consciously tempered their arguments so as not to drive her away.

They’re Back!

Although I used to feed raisins to my young children—who ate them without issue—they now oddly insist that they don't like them. Consequently, we went for quite some time without any fresh raisins (a bit of an oxymoron, perhaps?) until recently, when I purchased some at the request of my elderly mother shortly after she moved in with us.
Exhibition

My MFA thesis exhibition was installed in the Weight Room Gallery on Brigham Young University’s West Campus (WCCB). The exhibition commenced on Friday, November 17, and concluded on Saturday afternoon, December 2, 2023. The opening reception took place on November 17 from 6–8pm. Positioned in the heart of the gallery, the exhibition featured ceramic pieces placed atop a large table and chair, with additional pieces scattered throughout the room. Posted on the wall was an invitation encouraging visitors to rearrange any of the ceramic food still-life compositions resting on the floor at their discretion, knowing that the room would be photographed daily to document any alterations. Each day of the exhibition revealed noticeable changes in the arrangements. Remarkably, despite the daily rearrangements, all ceramic pieces remained unbroken.
Conclusion

My thesis exhibition is currently on display at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah, running from January to March 2024. As I reflect on the culmination of my MFA experience, I am considering other venues for my exhibition. Should I take the opportunity to set it up again, I am considering implementing some changes. In addition to inviting visitors to create their own food arrangements, I would explore the idea of initially installing only a few pieces of food. Then, each day, I would gradually introduce more food until the conclusion of the exhibition. Perhaps the new exhibition could be entitled, “The Snack Show,” as it was so dubbed by one young visitor to my exhibition.
Figure 1—Still Life Happens: Table and Chair, Exhibition View, 2023, 9 × 12 × 13 ft.
Figure 3 – Exhibition View

Figure 4 – Exhibition View
Figure 5 – Exhibition View
Figure 6 – Exhibition View
Figure 7 – Exhibition View
Figure 8 – Exhibition View
ABC Gum, (under the table), epoxy putty, 2023, 2 × 6 × 10 in.
Figure 11 – *Errant Peas*, ceramic, 2023, $8 \times 38 \times 30$ in.

Figure 12 – *Spoiled Fish*, ceramic, 2023, $3 \times 24 \times 23$ in.
Figure 13 – Nachos and Beans, ceramic, 2023, 20 × 15 × 12 in.

Figure 14 – Crushed and Faded, ceramic, 2023, 4 × 15 × 13 in.
Figure 15 – Frosted Flakes, ceramic, 2023, 8 × 30 × 18 in.

Figure 16 – Cereal Squares, ceramic, 2023, 4 × 20 × 20 in.
Figure 17 – Trail Mix, ceramic, 2023, 4 × 18 × 12 in.

Figure 18 – Kibble Mix, ceramic, 2022, 6 × 20 × 20 in.
Appendix

Glaze Recipes

For raisins:

Alligator Lansky Red Brown

Cone: 04  
Color: red brown  
Surface texture: matte  
Colemanite 35.61  
Custer Feldspar 15.75  
Kaolin 6.85  
Barium Carbonate 7.88  
Flint 6.51  
RIO 27.40  
Totals: 100.00 %

For M&Ms:

Jackie’s Base Satin Matte Glaze

Cone: 04  
Color: varies  
38 Gerstley Borate  
10 Lithium Carbonate  
5 Nepheline Syenite  
5 EPK  
42 Silica  
2 Bentonite  
Totals: 100.00 %  
Color:  
15% Vanadium Yellow Stain 6404  
or  
15% Tangerine Stain 6027

For peas:

Light Green Glaze

Cone: 04  
Color: chrome Oxide Green  
55 Gerstley Borate
20 EPK
15 Silica
10 Tin oxide
Totals: 100.00 %
Color: 5% Chrome Oxide

For Kibble Mix bowl:

Shiney White
Cone 10 reduction
Color: white
51 Kona F4 Minspar
19 Flint
14 Whiting
8 Zircopax
7 Om4 Ball
1 Tin oxide
Totals: 100.00 %
Color: 4% Bentonite

Clays Used

Laguna Clay: Stoneware—for Kibble, Dark Brown, Death Valley, and Soldate 60; for other items B-mix, Clay’s Mix, Long Beach White, paper clay
Aardvark Clay: Smoothstone Stoneware, MCW white earthenware

Milk Paint

Old Fashioned Milk Paint from Tooele, Utah
Bibliography


