

The Poetics of the Olav Maran Still-life

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This article expands upon the subject of the traditional still-life painting of Olav Maran, analyzing the artistic model and the inherent aesthetic and moral qualities. An attempt is made to decipher the painter's philosophical message and point to the methods used to express it. Also, the general characteristics of the genre of still-life painting are described and parallels are drawn between the still-life of Olav Maran and its historical predecessors in world art, especially Spanish 17th century painting and the work of Jean-Siméon Chardin.

Summary

The conversion of the Estonian modernist painter Olav Maran to a traditional style is related to his turn to religion in 1968. In the following years, Maran's works displayed a coexistence of modernist and traditional elements. He is mainly known for his 'old master like' still-lives, the painting of which Maran started in the middle of the 1970s. As stated by Maran, the purpose of the still-life is to bring out the feelings of balance, imperishability, beauty and the practicality of everyday items that were conceived a long time ago to serve us. 'To make myself comfortable painting them, I made the arrangements similar to natural forms, thus avoiding artistic vanity and self-expression. The fact that I used to be conflicted while painting made the objects also conflicted and strained in their composition. Deformation was an expression of anger with the world. Then my feelings about items became benevolent. I compared every object to Cinderella, who escaped the kitchen for the ball, trying to look as handsome as possible. I painted every item as it would like to look, leaving out the odd and arbitrary.'

One of the constituent elements of the still-life as a genre is the lack of narrative. Moreover, the still-life radically questions the world's ability to excite any narrative interest in itself at all. The premise of narrativity is a pointing to the unique, to the different deeds of the subject. The still-life, on the other hand, rejects the event as a whole, turning instead to minute reality by abandoning discourses that vie for *grandeur* and distinction. The term 'rhopography' has been used to describe an art form that tends toward such minute reality. Rhopography takes

up the anonymous everyday existence of people, overlooked by an eye seeking uniqueness and magnitude. Megalography, looking for special activities, is hierarchic and selective; rhopography, to the contrary, levels hierarchies. The everyday procedures of rhopographic interest, such as eating and drinking, are common to all people. Rhopography therefore attacks the depiction of the human as a subject embodied in, and imposed by, megalography: eventfulness, individuality, heroic narratives, and a striving for grandiosity. By placing in doubt the value and prestige of the human as the ultimate subject, the still-life balks at the anthropocentrism of the higher genres. Not only is human presence avoided in the physical sense, the still-life also forgoes the values established by man; it shows the futility of human endeavour.

Especially since 17th century Spanish still-life painting (e.g. Bodegón), a kind of megalomania-averse pathos has piqued the interest of artists with religious backgrounds. The still-life for Olav Maran is at once an exercise in Christian humility and a meditation. Bringing to the forefront minute reality reveals how addicted the usual viewer is to the existing ideology, a laziness, fuzziness, lability and entropy towards everything not presented by the megalographic discourse. Like the Spanish or Dutch Golden Age painters, Maran's strategy is to overcome passivity in hyperreality. The perceptual influence of normal realism is not intense enough to save the eye from its ordinary inattentiveness to minute reality. The unobtrusiveness inherent in the miniature world is responded to with a sharpened focus, idealized form and balanced composition. This function of still-life painting is what Bryson calls

apotropaic: by making the focus firmer and sharper, the artist tries to free the eye from unworthy distractions, and raise it to the level of self-reflection. The passivity and lability of the ordinary eye makes it a toy of desire. It lacks the inner strength to fight back, and hence becomes only a silent partner in the presentation of the world. So, the purpose of the still-life's concentration on a segment of reality is to cultivate the observer's hectic, confused eye, to deconstruct culturally nurtured routine, to introduce the revelation of genuine seeing. Congruently, the multiplicity of simple forms filtered out by the lazy eye from a painting are replaced by a few singular, highly articulated forms, creating the impression of an assiduous scrutiny of the scene. The resulting refined corporeality can be so dramatic and visionary in its hyperreality - and subsequent paradoxical artificiality - as to make the beholder unable to describe why it seems inauthentic. This kind of purification from the trivial gives an apprehensive and poignant air to depicted items. As a consequence, instead of seeing simply the things depicted in an image, the viewer sees a relation to himself as a human being: the items' asceticism is absolving.

While steering clear of great narratives, Olav Maran's still-lives do not include child-like, or even infantile, aspects. Loneliness is already inscribed in the specific nature of the still-life as a motionless art. Similarly to the 17th century Spanish old masters, Maran prefers austerity and mental contentment to sensuous pleasure in still-life painting. As an artist, he is an unwavering eremite and introvert; although his still-lives mainly render tableware and fruit, they lack the elements of the sensuous and social opulence of the feast. As with the

word 'still' in still-life, Maran's works are largely an homage to stillness, both in the sense of inertness and silence.

As someone leaning towards the analytical, Maran cogently recreates the forms visible in the conception of the work of art. Although the analytical method inevitably coincides with the retreat of visual impression, he keeps some of the imperfections time and use have cast upon the items. Maran's approach is somewhat closer to Platonic than to Impressionistic truth: objects are portrayed not as we see them, but as we know them. Giving intellectual truth the primary place in a work of art distances it from both the motive-induced carnal zeal and creative significance of the artist. Responsibility for the forms represented in Maran's still-lives lies not in his imagination as an artist, but in real mathematical truth. Instead of registering the random configurations of reality, this kind of painting suggests the ability of perfection to stand the test of time. Uncompromising devotion to his creation also involves the artist's self-sacrifice; it is an exercise in humility. In his work, Maran, on the one hand, rejects romantic discourses that give too much credit to fantasy - the pretension of creating new forms would be hubris, disobedience to God's design. On the other hand, Maran also avoids brandishing the awareness of the medium characteristic of modernism. In the latter, he goes far into the past, before the modernist still-life painters Paul Cézanne, Giorgio Morandi et al. By painting commonplace items with care and precision, Maran declares the moral superiority of craftsman-like order over flashes of talent and intellectual grimgrubber.

Olav Maran uses both variety and reproduction to compose a pleasant

arrangement. Variety in his works is achieved by contrasting stable forms to unstable, large to small, hollow to solid, flat to elongated, and natural to artificial. Juxtaposing different materials (ceramics, metal and glass) and functions (e.g. a book with vessels) is also used to that end, as is the contrast between bright and dark, by painting one or more white spots in a dark background. Reproduction is exemplified by the function (several hollow vessels in an arrangement) and shape (reordering of oval forms) of the object; this is also true in the recurrence of an item (an egg or an apple) or material (metal and ceramics). To enliven the composition of an arrangement, Maran has often added the odd overturned, or in some other way unstable, item - a disturbed object in the normally steadfast world of the artist's still-lives is bound to induce perceptual vigour and informal homeliness.

The backgrounds of Maran's still-lives are usually dark, the absence of a background space creating the effect of closeness. None of his still-lives has enough depth for the eye to get lost in the vanishing point. In this way, the artist keeps the focus on the items presented in the foreground. Frequently, the arrangement of the items forms a mental circle, around which the eye can wander without straying from the surface of the painting. Maran likes to render oval and cylindrical objects, making the eye glide around their perfectly geometrical outer surfaces. Most of his still-lives are in a horizontal format, and the glimmer reflecting from the copper-ware seems to lead the eye helpfully along that horizontal. As Olav Maran himself explains, the light 'penetrates the dim room, but also our very being, illuminating us as objects. This is how I imagine humanity,

penetrated by a divine light and showing us the potential of peace and harmony’.

Items in Maran’s still-lives are arranged in a spatial manner, partly blocking one another, and viewed from slightly above. The group of items touches on the frame, and the brink of the painting never cuts into anything; the objects agglomerate in the middle of the picture, leaving some space to the sides. The composition tends to be pyramidal, with the higher objects in the middle and lower ones at the sides. The deliberate, pre-meditated nature of the composition is clear: the scene is seemingly aware of the viewer’s presence. Moreover, the tubs, vessels and fruit of differing sizes and characters bring to mind parallels with the family.

The food-related domestic world has traditionally been a part of the feminine sphere. As a consequence, there is a danger that the male artist painting homely still-life scenes will be estranged from his subject matter. All the items depicted in Olav Maran’s still-lives function domestically; yet by taking them out of their function and adding them to an arrangement, Maran turns vegetables and tableware completely into objects of existential contemplation; from the traditionally feminine domestic sphere, they move to the traditionally male studio. Although his still-lives concern the world of the small, they do not concern the world of the soft. The polarity between soft and hard does not exist in Maran’s paintings - all his objects are patently hard.

To conclude, Maran’s still-lives depict an ascetic and introverted, if homely, world. From an historical perspective, his still-lives seem more unpretentious than the works of the ascetic-religious artists of the Spanish Golden Era, but

unlike, for example, Chardin, Maran lacks the dimension of social enjoyment and intimate body memory. Maran and Chardin are, however, connected by loneliness, elevated and revelled in. According to Bachelard, the charm of loneliness is the intuitive knowledge of the creativity of one’s spaces of loneliness; the places where we have suffered from loneliness, enjoyed it, and reached a mutual agreement with it will not be lost to us. People do not want to abandon these spaces, according to Bachelard. However, it is not the home-based intimacy and security that is the object of contemplation and source of happiness for Maran. Rather, it is the perceived consistency and harmony of the objective world, the guarantee of purpose that the artist has found in God.

*Translated by Raiko Aasa
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