essay: critical writing at pomona college

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 6

2018

# Food Fight: Violence and Exploitation in Fruit Still Life

Aidan Maurstad

# **Food Fight:** *Violence and Exploitation in Fruit Still Life*

BY **Aidan Maurstad**

Ori Gersht's *Pomegranate* opens on several fruits arranged to mimic Juan Sánchez Cotán's *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, with Cotán's quince noticeably replaced with a pomegranate. Then, in slow motion, a bullet pierces the pomegranate, ripping it nearly in half. It is clear how the beginning of the video resembles still life: the fruits are physically 'still' and unmoving. However, the end of the video also resembles a still life, though it uses a different effect to create its 'stillness.' The video ends when the pomegranate is at the highest point on its pendulum swing, the moment perfectly between ascent and descent. In this way the pomegranate exhibits the *vertige* effect often found in still life paintings, in which fruits are suspended in some way so that, if time were allowed to move forward, they would fall. This is how the end of the video creates 'stillness': rather than the kinetic stillness of not moving, the end invokes a temporal stillness of being frozen in a single moment. Indeed, while the slow downward trickle of the few pomegranate seeds that remain at the video's end might seem to negate the *vertige* effect, they in fact only add to it: the seeds give proof to the pull of gravity that the pomegranate is defying.

While both the beginning and end of the video cultivate a sense of 'stillness,' the video's use of sound sets up the end as the 'true' still life. For while, kinetically, the beginning of the video is perfectly still, it is accompanied with a low rumbling. This audio, preparing the viewer for the incoming bullet, gives the video a nervous animation, sabotaging its stillness. On the other hand, the end of the video is silent, a silence made conspicuous by the loud 'whoosh' of the bullet that precedes it. In this way, the beginning of the video feels like a pimple about to be popped, full of pressure and anticipation, while the end feels like a popped pimple, full of relief and stillness. The beginning still life then becomes what Harry Berger Jr. defines in his

Ori Gersht. *Pomegranate*, 2006. Video. The Jewish Museum.

book *Caterpillage* as a "McGuffin…a particular event, object, factor, etc. initially presented as being of great significance…but often having little actual importance" (2). Berger then borrows a metaphor from T.S. Eliot to compare the McGuffin to the "bone" thrown to the "watchdog of the mind" to distract the viewer of the painting from its "deeper business" (2). If the video's beginning is its "McGuffin," then the ending must reveal its "deeper business."

The most convincing evidence that the end of the video is the true still life and the beginning is a "McGuffin" (2), and the evidence that reveals the "deeper business," is the placement of the pomegranate. At the beginning of the video, the pomegranate is hung to the right of the cabbage. This is incorrect going by the model of the Cotán piece, as Cotán's quince was hung to the left of the cabbage, forming a perfect downward arc through the fruit. The pomegranate, however, does assume its 'true' position at the end of the video, at the top of the pendulum swing created by the gunshot. Therefore, it can only be reasoned that the final frame of Gersht's piece is the real still life, and the moments leading up to it are the still life's creation, making the piece a sort of fruit-based snuff film. In this way, Gersht is saying

that fruit still life is built upon violence, that it is only through an act of overt violence that a still life can be made. Indeed, the snuff film aspect also gives the piece an air of voyeuristic exploitation, the idea that pleasure is being derived from the violence visited upon these fruits. This is the thread that runs through the paintings in this collection—violence is perpetrated on fruits so that they can be exploited for voyeuristic pleasure.

In contrast to the overt violence in the Gersht video, the violence in the Cotán original is much subtler. Indeed, at first glance, with a color scheme of mostly dull yellows and greens set against a black background, the piece looks a bit dour, even drab. The most obvious instance of violence can be seen with the slice of melon placed next to, assumedly, the melon it was taken from. This placement echoes something that Frank Palmeri identifies as a marker of violence in game still life paintings in his essay *A Profusion of Dead Animals: Autocritique in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Gamepieces*. When describing one painting, Palmeri points out how a dead boar exists "at the stage where the recognizable form of the animal coexists with the cuts of meat it is becoming" (1). It is easy to see how the melon and melon slice can be viewed in the same way as the boar and the cuts of meat, as, while many would identify a melon as food, slicing indicates that it was prepared, butchered even, and turned into a more recognizable food product.

However, the simple slicing of a melon is not an especially conspicuous or out of the ordinary instance of violence in fruit still lifes. The more interesting instance of violence can be seen when looking at the melon slice in relation to the cucumber. Both are placed perilously far off the edge of the niche which contains the fruits. This placement is an example of the *vertige* effect. If time moved beyond this moment, the pair would plummet into the unknown depths beyond the frame of the painting. The hung fruits also look to be on the precipice of falling. While they may appear to be safe at first, suspended in a way which is not gravity defying but instead readily physically explainable, this notion falls apart when examining the way the strings are tied around the fruits. On the quince, the string is only tied around the

Juan Sánchez Cotán. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, 1602. Oil on canvas. San Diego Museum of Art.

quince's stem. The stem is uniform in thickness throughout—there is nothing stopping the stem from sliding completely through the knot. On the other hand, it is impossible to tell how the cabbage is secured by its string, as all we can see of the string is the knot. It is just as possible that the string is safely wrapped around the entire cabbage as it is that the string is tied around a single leaf. Indeed, it is even possible that the string does not secure the cabbage at all, and the cabbage would fall uninhibited if time moved forward. Moreover, the conspicuous downward arc formed by the fruits gives the whole of the piece a feeling of downward motion.

The drama in this piece, then, comes from the fruits on the verge of falling. Indeed, everything about the piece's composition seems to point to an impending 'splat.' The temptation here may be to read this as a *vanitas* painting that depicts the triumph before the fall and the dangers of overabundant riches. However, this painting is

conspicuously lacking in overabundant riches. Indeed, the grey-yellow color scheme and imposing black background convey a sense of sparseness that, if anything, conflicts with the typical *vanitas* narrative. A better explanation for the fruits' impending fall can be found by turning back to *Caterpillage*. When discussing flower still lifes, Berger points out that the "posing" of flowers in flower still lifes is "imposed," that "flowers don't come willingly to their pose" (89). This is just as true of fruits. While it may seem perfectly obvious, fruits do not have the ability to place themselves on a ledge, or hang themselves from a string. This begs the question, how did the fruits assume these poses? Indeed, Berger's assertion that the posing is "imposed" necessitates an 'imposer:' an unseen entity that actively and intentionally placed the fruits to assume these poses.

The necessity of an imposer then suggests a narrative for how these fruits came to be posed, an 'occasion' for the painting. While there are certainly possible readings in which the imposer is not intentionally malevolent, one aspect of the painting negates those readings and reveals the true intentions of this imposer: the fact that the fruits are in a niche. This means that, even in the world of the painting, the fruits are on display, an ornamental, decorative one at that. And the fact that this is an intentional display by the imposer means that the *vertige* so heavily present in this painting is also an intentional effect by the imposer. The painting is so wholly compositionally geared towards implying a tantalizingly close fall that it is impossible that the fall is not the deliberate focus of this display. Moreover, the fact that this is being displayed in a decorative way implies that one is supposed to take pleasure from viewing it. This is reminiscent of the "snuff film" voyeurism in Gersht's piece. However, here the pleasure is not taken from the performing of violence, but rather from the threat of it. The occasion for this painting, then, becomes a wholly exploitative one. The imposer intentionally placed these fruits on the verge of falling and intentionally threatened them with a form of violence that would result in their destruction, solely for the purpose of displaying them and taking voyeuristic pleasure from their peril.

While the previous works have only presented fruits as victims of

violence, Alejandro de Loarte's *Still Life with Game and Fruit* presents other victims as well—namely, the 'game.' At first, the 'game' may even appear to be the primary victims, as they take up most of the space in the painting. The game depicted is not anything out of the ordinary for game still lifes: a fish, two hares, and five fowl. Four of the foul and two of the hares are hung from the top of the frame. One hare in the process of being butchered is turned toward the viewer, so that the cut in its belly can be seen, the fur surrounding the slit tinged red with blood. The piece demonstrates Palmeri's concept of "recognizable animals" being seen alongside the food they are becoming, not only with the butchered belly of the hare, but also with the huge rack of meat hung in the center of all the "recognizable forms of animals." In other words, the violence done to the pieces game subjects is readily apparent, easily recognizable.

And yet, the staging of the subjects pushes against this reading. While the hanging animals may initially imply that this food is being stored for later consumption, closer inspection proves this is not the case.

Alejandro de Loarte. *Still Life with Game and Fruit*, 1623. Oil on canvas.

All of the game in the painting forms a symmetrical pattern, with the basket of quinces and pomegranates on the table serving as the axis of symmetry. The animals and meat hung from the ceiling are not only symmetrical around the fruit, but also form a triangle that frames the fruit basket. Moreover, the bird and fish on the table both lie at an angle so that their heads are pointing towards the fruit. All the game in the piece is serving to draw the viewer's eye to the basket of fruit in the center of the table. The fruit is the literal center of attention.

Therefore, like in the Cotán, the posing of these animal corpses to perfectly frame the fruits suggests that this is a display put together by some imposer. After all, just like fruit and flowers, dead animals do not have the agency to pose themselves, and certainly not to pose themselves in such an artistic way. The question then becomes, "Why deliberately frame the fruits in this display?" This question can be answered when looking at the violence enacted on the fruits. Like the hare, the pomegranates have also been 'butchered,' their blood-red seeds lying exposed. Indeed, the parallel between the rabbit and the pomegranates is furthered by the fact that the color palette for the pomegranates is nearly identical to that of the rabbit: The pomegranate seeds match the rabbit's bloody insides, the white inside of the peel matches the white belly, the yellowish brown outside of the peel matches the rest of the rabbit's fur. Moreover, the bodily way in which Loarte painted the seeds makes them look like intestines: not only do they have the color of innards, but they also have the mushy, almost liquid texture. Indeed, some rows of seeds strongly resemble the coiling tubes of intestines. By appropriating the visual language of violence in game still life, Loarte makes it clear that, in terms of the violence done to them, the fruit here is game. But the fruit is not *just* game. The lavish display made by the profusion of dead animals makes it clear that this basket of fruits is a trophy. The fruits are the 'prize kill' that the imposer is most proud of. Here, the voyeuristic pleasure is not being derived directly from the violence done to the fruits, but from the aesthetic beauty of their mutilated bodies.

One thing that has been lacking from the instances of voyeurism in the previously discussed paintings is, ironically, the voyeurs. While

we are shown the displays, there has not yet been a depicted audience taking pleasure from them. This is different in Blas de Ledesma's *Still Life with Cherries and Flowers*. First, let us look at the yellow flowers. Their bright color makes them stand out against the black background. They are placed high above the cherries, and they very noticeably lean in over the basket. They look like they are watching the cherries, leaning in to get a better view. Why? What is it that they are trying to get a better view of?

Blas de Ledesma, *Still Life with Cherries and Flowers*, 1620. Oil on canvas. High Museum of Art.

The answer becomes clear when looking at the cherries. The basket is filled to the point of overflowing with cherries. There are cherries shown at all stages in this overflow: some cherries are safely confined within the basket, others have been shoved out and are lying on the table, others still are clinging with their stems to the rim, almost as if they are holding on for dear life. A note about these cherries is that their hanging on is only accomplished by the fact that they are connected to another cherry at the stem. As a result, they are pulling another cherry down with them. Indeed, the two pairs of cherries lying on the table imply the probable end for these hanging pairs.

Violence in this painting, then, looks like cherries being pushed out of the basket. Importantly, the painting is showing this instance of violence as it is still going on. The viewer does not see the bloody aftermath like in the Loarte, but the act itself. The cherries being pushed out of the basket is an event that can be watched, like a fight in an arena. The basket itself emphasizes this reading, as its wide, cylindrical shape strongly resembles that of an ancient Roman arena. This resemblance can be seen when comparing the basket with Jerzy Strzelecki's picture of the Colosseum titled *Colosseum*. Indeed, change in the wicker pattern on the basket from the bottom to the top mirrors the change in the pattern of the Colosseum's façade from the bottom to the top. If this basket is a colosseum, then that makes the cherries the gladiators. Moreover, the arena theme can be seen again when looking back to the flowers, as the flowers are arranged in rough rows that resemble arena seats. It now becomes clear why the flowers are leaning in: They are the audience to this battle. They are the voyeuristic spectators taking pleasure in watching the cherries shove each other out of the basket, and they are leaning in so that they can get the best view.

And yet, as Berger points out, the cherries do not have the agency to shove each other, or at least not to 'willingly' shove each other. Indeed, the 'shoving' is due to a lack of space, which the cherries cannot control. But this is exactly the point. For the same lack of agency that prevents the cherries from committing this violence also prevents them from not committing the violence. They are forced by the physics of their own bodies to take part in this battle. The unwillingness of the cherries makes the gladiator narrative of the painting even more appropriate. So, in this posing, the cherries are being doubly exploited. Not only are they made the victims of violence, but they are also forced to be the unwilling perpetrators of violence on other cherries.

Jean-Siméon Chardin's Basket with Wild Strawberries, obviously visually similar to the Ledesma, presents a slight variation on the violence seen in Cherries and Flowers. While the damage done to the fruit in Cherries and Flowers is caused by fruits forced out of a space, the damage done in this painting is caused by fruits forced into one.

Jerzy Strzelecki. *Colosseum.* Wikimedia Commons.

Jean-Siméon Chardin. *Basket with Wild Strawberries*, 1761. Oil on canvas.

Chardin depicts a massive heap of strawberries piled into a wicker basket. The heap is even more overpowering in this painting, as the berries tower high over the top of the basket, whereas only the very highest cherries were visible in Cherries and Flowers. However, no strawberries are being pushed out of the basket, instead they are being pushed further into the space that is too small for them. And the effects of this pushing can be clearly seen in the strawberries. There are small places on the edge of the basket where strawberries are being crushed into the basket and the wicker is beginning to be stained by strawberry juice. The strawberries themselves look mushy, like they are losing their solid shape, slowly congealing into a jam. This calls back to Palmeri's idea of seeing the "recognizable body" transitioning into a food product. Indeed, the liquid blurriness of the strawberries is made apparent by the defined solidness of the peach and the cherries. Even the water, an actual liquid, has definite crispness to it, further emphasizing the transitional state of the strawberries. So, while the cause of harm is slightly different, it would appear then that the strawberries are like the cherries in action along with appearance, unwilling perpetrators of violence against themselves. They are crushed by their posing, unable to counteract the force of gravity.

And yet, there is another key difference between this painting and *Cherries and Flowers*: the action of the flower. In *Cherries and Flowers* the flowers represented voyeurs, hungrily leaning over the violence below them. But here, the flower is turned away from the violence. Indeed, it is almost falling off the table, and would fall off if it were not tethered to the basket. The flower here looks not only disinterested in the violence, but as if it is actively trying to escape it. If the flower cannot be read as a voyeur, then how can it be read?

The flower's affixation to the strawberries is key here. For this means that, in terms of the "occasion" of the painting, the flower was not merely placed on the table, it was attached to the strawberries, fixed to them so that not even gravity, which is crushing the strawberries, could tear it away. Indeed, this is a painting in which Chardin could not have simply dangled the flower off the edge of the table, invoking the *vertige* effect, as the role of gravity is defined and made explicit

by the fate of the strawberries. This means that the flower is for the strawberries. Looking at the flower, with its ghostly white petals and green stem, it looks funereal. Indeed, as Berger points out, this flower's status as being 'cut' makes it emblematic of death—death is inherent in its existence. The flower, then, is not meant to mark the pleasure taken in this violence, but rather commemorate it solemnly, even regretfully. So while this piece is very similar visually to the Ledesma, its treatment of its main fruit subjects is completely the opposite. It presents an alternative to the voyeurism and exploitation that Ledesma's cherries were subjected to. Indeed, Chardin, like Gersht, is picking up on the idea of violence being necessary for the creation of fruit still life, but pushing against the idea that this violence must be flagrantly exploitative.

To sum up, each of the paintings so far has treated violence as an integral part of fruit still life. The Gersht even portrayed violence as necessary for the creation of still life. The Chardin too treated violence as necessary, though it eschewed the voyeuristic aspects of the other works. However, the question that has not been answered is, why? Why is violence so necessary to fruit still life?

Louise Moillon. *Still Life with Cherries, Strawberries and Gooseberries*, 1630. Oil on panel. Norton Simon Museum.

Louise Moillon answers this question in her painting *Still Life with Cherries, Strawberries and Gooseberries*. Evidence of violence is readily apparent in the painting. Several of the cherries, mostly towards the back edge of their bowl, are marked and bruised. Notably, one of the cherries on the front edge has a large hole in it, probably eaten away by some insect. The strawberries are also noticeably bruised, with one in particular marked by a large, white spot. These are certainly subtler markers of violence than in other paintings; however, they are still markers. Indeed, one cannot talk about bruised fruit without adopting a bodily, violent language. While the particular violence that caused these marks is not apparent, this issue will be resolved later. Most important for now is that the cherries and strawberries appear battered and bruised.

The gooseberries are different, however. They appear to be unmarked, unblemished, ideally perfect gooseberries. Indeed, a number of factors would make even spotting blemishes on the gooseberries difficult. For one, their dark brownish-green color is much more flattering than the cherries and strawberries' bright red. For, as bruises mostly manifest in dark brown spots, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish a bruise from the dark browns of the gooseberries. Moreover, the gooseberries are circled by large leaves. These leaves shield the gooseberries from the light that readily exposes the bruises on the strawberries and cherries. The gooseberries can hide in the dark, while the strawberries and cherries cannot.

Moreover, the gooseberries are contained in a wicker basket, while the cherries and strawberries are in porcelain bowls. Notably, these porcelain bowls themselves depict bowls of fruit. In other words, the strawberries and cherries, which are conspicuously not idealized depictions of fruits, are contained within idealized depictions of fruits. Not only can the strawberries and cherries be compared against the gooseberries, but they can also be compared against their very containers.

In short, everything about this painting makes the strawberries and cherries noticeably imperfect when compared with the idealized gooseberries. But what is even allowing the comparison between

the two groups in the first place? It is their segregation into separate bowls. If the fruits were mixed together, unsegregated, it would be impossible to get an idea of each group as a whole. However, because they are segregated, it is impossible not to view them as a whole, and judgments of individuals so easily become judgments of the whole.

Another effect of this segregation is the formation of sides. Note that the cherries and strawberries are segregated from each other as well; however, it seems natural, even necessary, to link them. For, as discussed earlier, they are very similar to each other and wholly the opposite of the gooseberries. The formation of sides necessitates the comparisons allowed by segregation. Viewers are invited to compare the gooseberries with the strawberries and cherries to see which is better. In other words, the same differences that allow the strawberries and cherries to be compared negatively with the gooseberries also force the strawberries and cherries into a sort of comparison-based battle with the gooseberries.

The main violence being depicted here, then, is not physical, but representational. Moillon has posed these fruits so that their representations are constantly being compared against one another. Moreover, she gives the losers of the representational battle physical scars, implying that a blow done in this representational battlefield is as damaging to the fruit as an actual blow. In this way, Moillon is saying that representation itself is violence, that the creation of still life is itself an act of violence. This is Moillon's answer to the question of why violence is necessary in fruit still life. The creation of a still life necessitates comparison of the real against the ideal, and this is an act of representational violence against the real.

Again, none of the fruits have the agency to actively take part in this battle. But also, this same lack of agency prohibits them from not taking part in the battle. They cannot escape their posing just as they cannot choose it. The gooseberries are being exploited here just as much as the cherries. Though the gooseberries are the representation of perfection, it is not through their will or consent that they are projecting this perfection onto the cherries and strawberries. No matter

what role they play, no matter what narrative is constructed, when fruits are posed they are exploited.

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Aidan Maurstad '20 submitted this piece for his ID1 course, The Problem of Form: Sonnet, Still Life, Life, with Professor Colleen Rosenfeld, in Fall 2016. It was selected as one of the three prize-winning papers.