

American Arts Quarterly

Summer 2012

Christopher Stott



Christopher Stott,
The Boy Next Door, the Girl Next Door, 2012
Courtesy of the Artist

It's not likely that any one of us has recently dialed a rotary phone, composed a letter on a manual typewriter, consulted a grammar textbook from 1920 or checked a steamer trunk through at the airport. And yet most of us have an intimate familiarity with these objects, no matter what our age. We know what these things look like because they have been a part of our industrial-consumer culture for so long, even if they have been wholly replaced by newer technology. The Canadian artist **Christopher Stott** looks long and carefully at these and other objects we have moved on from—windup alarm clocks, flashbulb cameras and Polaroids, metal-blade fans, penny bubble-gum dispensers, children's tricycles. Twenty-four of his new paintings were on view in June at the **Elliott Fouts Gallery** in Sacramento, California.

For Stott, who lives and works in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, such prosaic objects are sculpture. He depicts these items alone or in groups, configured, often, as melancholy still lifes. A simple wooden chair might be stacked with jacketless old books, whose titles are actual, but somehow, when we read the words on the spines, they assume an existential resonance. They emerge like mystical messages. Suddenly, titles that we would merely glance over on the shelves of a used bookstore or in cartons at a flea market take on a lingering import—Only *the Stars Know*, *Manual of Ethics*, *What Next?*, *Strange Fruit*, *Our Inner Conflicts*, *The Silent World*, *It's Story Time*. In his compositions that feature books, we crave to own a library that would include such titles. Somehow, we know, looking at the books in his paintings, that they might provide the answers we want in life. The books he chooses to include in his oil canvases have that power; they portend as much. And Stott does something else, too, with many of these books he paints—he takes these

decidedly minimalist sculptural objects and fashions them into larger sculptural works. In *The Boy Next Door, the Girl Next Door* (all works 2012), for instance, he has assembled his still life of books so that, when taken as a whole, they become an elongated construction, each book as much an item of support as it is an object to depict. Each volume has an integrity as a shape, but when combined with others, they become the elements and materials of a larger sculpture.



Christopher Stott, *Kodak Trio*, 2012
Courtesy of the Artist

From his home and studio in Saskatoon, Stott admits that many people ask him the rhetorical question: Why not just photograph these objects rather than paint them? He responds: “That’s like saying, why use a typewriter when you can write on a computer? Photographing is a mechanical process. Painting has a transformative power over the object. If you look at a photograph of a typewriter, you’ll look at it very fast. When it’s painted, however, you start looking at the details inside of the object. You start seeing the structural integrity, the gradations of color and

paint, you look at it slower and longer, and then that object transforms in your mind. Looking at a painting is about a slower, closer examination. A photograph captures a moment in light.”

And that is what makes the viewing of a Stott painting so mystical. Prior to viewing one of his canvases, you might think, why would I want to look at a pile of battered, out-of-print books or the accordion-like folds of an old camera, the metal ribs of an Olivetti? But when you see them rendered in paint, close-up, with no detail too complex to be captured, you realize that, when such objects were commonplace in our lives, we lived with sculpture. We used sculpture.

Although Stott is only 36, he has had a long acquaintance with objects that predated him. While growing up in rural Saskatchewan, a landscape he describes as one of “vast distances between towns and cities,” Stott recounts visiting an assemblage of old buildings that had been moved from various locales into a single place. “These buildings had been saved and moved there by a group of people in an antiques association and they re-erected them into what was a kind of Main Street of a century ago,” he says. “There was—and still is—a doctor’s house, a country schoolhouse, a church, town hall, blacksmith’s shop and other buildings. As a kid, I would go and play around these buildings and peer into the windows. I’d look into the schoolhouse, for instance, and see the old globes and atlases and piles of books, and each of these interiors became a kind of mystery to be solved. To look inside these buildings was almost like a haunting.” When the buildings were

occasionally opened to the public, Stott would wander through—literally occupying his subject matter. “The moment I first walked in, I had an epiphany about all of these objects. It all fell into place for me as an artist. It was all so poetic.” Stott incorporates that poetry in the very titles he ascribes to the paintings, especially for this show—often adopting the title of one of the books or the brand of product, including *Hawkeye*, referring to the make of camera. So detailed are his depictions of these industrial objects that they often anthropomorphize. Look long enough at the lenses, blue-iris-like flashbulb and focusing windows in *Hawkeye* and *Kodak Trio*, and you begin to see human faces and expressions—a realization that is both comforting and unsettling. These objects may be used to capture our images, but they, too, appear to have their own defined profiles. And while they may at first seem expressionless, Stott ensures that they do not remain so.

As if mirroring the care and time it took for these complex objects to be designed, for those books to be written, Stott, too, is a decidedly methodical, slow-paced artist. “It takes me three to four weeks to complete a canvas,” he explains. “With works that include books, I can spend an entire afternoon with a stack of twenty books moving them around and arranging them into some kind of sequence. I spend more time perfecting my technique of painting these things, such as the typewriters. The changes I’ll make are done at a glacial pace.” Stott admits to working every single day, often for several hours. Because he works in glazes, he is able to leapfrog among several paintings at once. As one layer dries, he can move to another work-in-progress. So, although he may be depicting different objects simultaneously, “I am always working on the same palette—I may be painting books one hour and typewriters the next, but the palette remains consistent.”

Stott’s work ethic makes for a lot of completed works. “But inspiration isn’t always there when I awake in the morning,” he says. “I have to go into a process, into a zone to get into the flow. Sometimes I really have to force it.” Some effective muses for him include deadlines for forthcoming exhibitions and the fact that he supports his family (his wife and two young children) as a painter. “I sit down every day and force myself to work. I find then that I eventually get into a quiet, meditative space.”

For his obsessively arranged, even mannered still lifes, Stott cites Chardin, Wayne Thiebaud and Vermeer as influences. Surprisingly, he cites Josh Keyes and Jeremy Geddes as contemporary artists who inspire him. Keyes, a Portland, Oregon-based artist born in 1969, is known for his hyper-realistic/Surrealist works that usually incorporate animals—polar bears atop New York City taxi-cabs, tigers feasting from dumpsters, foraging urban elk with antlers morphing into mallard duck heads. And Geddes, a young Australian artist, often depicts astronauts and cosmonauts floating in ruinous, abandoned urban settings. “With both Keyes and Geddes,” says Stott, “I like the way they’ve reimagined spaces, urban and pastoral landscapes. They both tell a narrative, stories in their works. There’s poetry behind what they do. But neither paints anything like I do.”

At first glance, it may appear as if Stott were showing an object on its own, with no attendant story, but as in any good still life, he is indeed, telling a story. In *Strange Fruit*, the alarm clock reads 3:12, but is that a.m. or p.m., and given the broken inner clock on the face, should we assume that

the clock itself functions or has stopped at the time indicated? The title of the conspicuous, namesake book tells the viewer that the scene is, indeed, a strange one. The grapes and goblet and foods included in a typical Dutch Golden Age still life may seem to be just an indulgence in painterly technique, but that assemblage of items tells an entire story about a civilization at a particular point in time. Stott, too, tells stories. His idea of the prosaic is heroic. Look at the hues of a fan blade, the intrinsic poetry of a textbook title, the byzantine complexity of the innards of a typewriter, the sinuous curves of a telephone cord, and you are being told a story about how we communicate and what we tell each other, how we prefer to live. Stott has much to tell us, and his story continues. The exhibition was on view June 2–28, 2012, at Elliott Fouts Gallery, 4749 J. Street, Sacramento, California 95819. Telephone (916) 736-1427. efgallery.com . Stott's work will also be on display in December at George Billis Gallery, 2716 South La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90034. georgebillis.com

—David Masello

American Arts Quarterly, Summer 2012, Volume 29, Number 3