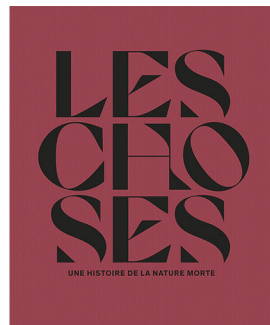
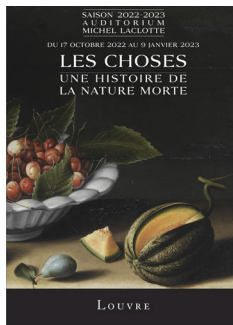
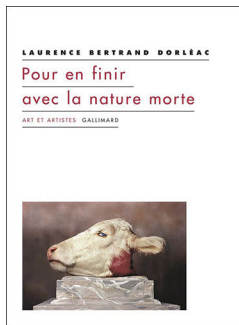


# ON THINGS (AND THEIR REPRESENTATION)

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Collection Arts et Artistes, Paris: Gallimard 2020, 376 pages with ill., ISBN 978-2-072-88609-6 (Paperback).

*Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte*, exhibition curated by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 12 October 2022–23 January 2023.

*Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre), ed. by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, with the collaboration of Thibault Boulvain and Dimitri Salmon, Paris: Lienart/Musée du Louvre éditions 2022, 448 pages with 240 ill., ISBN 978-2-359-06383-7 (Paperback).



Reviewed by  
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Words can both make visible and conceive. Still life, as well as its French (imperfect) equivalent, *nature morte*, has been the prevailing filter through which Western culture has referred – at least since the seventeenth century – to the depiction of “things”, be they natural, such as flowers, fruits, and animals, or human-made. In an ambitious intellectual project, art historian Laurence Bertrand Dorléac offers a fresh reassessment of what is at stake in looking at still lifes and their established narratives of silence, immobility, and death in an era – ours – marked by ubiquitous consumerism, impending environmental crisis, and the ongoing rethinking of the

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human relation with other species. The author, professor of art history at the Institut d'études politiques in Paris, has deployed her investigation into a book, published by Gallimard, an exhibition, held at the Louvre Museum, and in its corresponding catalogue. As in a multifaceted prism, the same concerns appear refracted in each of these outcomes with some different emphases and nuances.

The first to be published, the book *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (*The End of Still Life* would be a fairly free translation) stems from the author's impatience with the French trope of *nature morte*, seen as "une expression fâcheuse [qui] ne rende nullement justice à tout ce que recouvrent les choses représentées, qui ne sont ni mortes, ni mineures, ni innocents".<sup>1</sup> As Théophile Thoré wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: "Nature morte est absurde [:] tout communique avec tout et participe à la vie solidaire. Il n'y a pas de nature morte."<sup>2</sup> In the *Prologue*, Bertrand Dorléac situates her project at the crossroad of the current renewed interest in things, their status, and patterns of interaction with humans. From philosophy to anthropology, from semiology to material culture, the reflection on things and objects (and the often-blurred lines between these concepts) has brought forward multiple ways for dealing with the excess of meaning that they are able to enhance. Like things themselves, "l'art agit largement autant sur le monde et sur nous que le contraire": by studying the different articulations and bias of the genre of still life, the aim is thus "de reposer la question du statut des choses et donc du notre".<sup>3</sup>

The reader soon finds the reference and homage to Charles Sterling, author of the pioneering 1953 Paris exhibition *La Nature Morte* at the *Orangerie* in the Tuileries Gardens, which was followed by a book of the same name.<sup>4</sup> But the intentions behind the two projects are different: whereas Sterling argued for the primary role played by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian art in the rediscovery of the Graeco-Roman engagement with the depiction of things, Bertrand Dorléac advocates for a more extensive consideration of other cultural traditions and historical trajectories. This is reflected in the book in the early chapters devoted to the representation of objects in prehistoric times and in ancient civilizations, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, as well as in the pages devoted to

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Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Paris 2020, 20 ("an unfortunate expression [which] does no justice to all that is involved in the things depicted, which are neither dead, nor minors, nor innocents"; all translations into English by the author of this review).

2

Théophile Thoré, *Musées de Hollande*, Paris 1860 ("Still life is nonsense[:] everything communicates with everything else and participates in a shared life. There is no *nature morte*"), quoted in Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir*, 271, n. 1.

3

Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir*, 7 ("art has as much effect on the world and on us as the other way round"; "to revisit the question of the status of things, and therefore our own").

4

Charles Sterling, *La nature morte. De l'antiquité à nos jours*, Paris 1959.

Chinese depictions of objects. At the same time, Bertrand Dorléac is particularly interested in the complex interplay and dialogue between contemporary art and the history of the portrayal of things. This is undoubtedly the most characteristic of the critical choices made by the author, whose intention to revisit the still life genre and its very premises occurs “à la lumière de notre sensibilité actuelle”.<sup>5</sup> Reproduced on the cover of the book [Fig. 1], Andres Serrano’s *Cabeza de Vaca* (1984) highlights one of the vital cores of this reflection: the conflictual status between thing and non-human being that the animal has held in the history of still life and the ongoing contemporary treatment of it. The vitriolic yet seemingly still-pulsating eye makes Serrano’s decapitated cow a modern-day Medusa capable of paralysing viewers by interrogating their own condition. Bertrand Dorléac combines this inquiry into the animal question with an exploration of artists’ confrontations with the shifting boundaries between the living and the inanimate. As well, she focuses on art-makers’ ways of coping with the proliferation of things and objects since the early modern period, pointing to the various forms of their creative appropriation, which became particularly challenging in times of their (industrial) standardization.

The Louvre’s exhibition *Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* took place, as has been customary for the museum’s shows since the 1990s, in the underground spaces near the Pei Pyramid. The exhibition display was designed by Guicciardini & Magni Architetti, who in recent years have been responsible for the remarkable renovation of the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo in Pisa. While they managed to break the monotony of this hypogeal location (severely constrained by the narrow corridors that link two larger exhibition areas), a certain lack of space was felt in more than one part of the exhibition, due both to the number of works on display and to the large attendance that characterizes most Louvre shows.

Divided into fifteen sections, the exhibition drew on the extraordinary collections of the Louvre Museum, intelligently integrated with loans from more than seventy institutions and private collections. The sections, each revolving around a topic, followed a loose chronological order, from antiquity to the present day. But just like in the book, the inclusion of contemporary artworks punctuated each section, at the same time amplifying and challenging visual and symbolic narratives brought forward by historical works. Such a transhistorical dialogue started from the very first room, whose title *Ce qui reste* (Remains) advocated the intertwining of the “petits restes de l’histoire individuelle et collective”,<sup>6</sup> and the dialogical mirroring of past and present. Encompassing sculptures, paintings,

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir*, 11 (“in the light of our present-day sensibility”).

<sup>6</sup> *Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre), ed. by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Paris 2022, 36 (“small remains of individual and collective stories”).

**LAURENCE BERTRAND DORLÉAC**

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**Pour en finir  
avec la nature morte**

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ART ET ARTISTES GALLIMARD

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[Fig. 1]

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Paris 2020.

photographs, assemblages, and videos – a curatorial stance informing the exhibition as a whole – the room spanned Neolithic artefacts to Mesopotamian and Egyptian bas-reliefs depicting offerings to the dead, to Christian Boltanski's spectral visual inventories of things, to a sequence from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), where objects seem to be moved by the power of thought. Rooms devoted to "l'art des choses" in classical antiquity,<sup>7</sup> its supposed eclipses during the Middle Ages, and then resurgence in the fifteenth century, were followed by sections devoted to the "nouveau statut en majesté [qui] s'impose pour les choses ordinaires".<sup>8</sup> The section *Accumulation, échange, marché, pillage* (Accumulation, exchange, trade and pillage) looked at the emergence of the still life as a genre during the early modern period, while Errò's gigantic *Foodscope* (1964) rendered in a modern supermarket-like setting the panoply of goods thematized by the three market scenes by Joachim Beuckelaer on display (1568–1570). Sam Taylor-Johnson's video *Still Life* (2001) pitilessly portrayed the physical decline of a basket of fruits (or rather their constant mutation of states), providing a compelling commentary in the *vanitas* mode to the apparent perfection – at times metaphysical, as in Juan Sánchez Cotán's *Window, Fruits and Vegetables* (ca. 1602) – that the rendering of things often enjoyed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, at the height of the Western still life tradition.

The room titled *La bête humaine* (The human beast) featured Serrano's *Cabeza de vaca*, here involved in a close visual dialogue – among the most intense in the exhibition – with works by Zurbarán, Rembrandt, Goya, Géricault, Courbet, and Buffet. Located at about the middle of the exhibition and emphasized by the choice of black for the walls, this section echoed the assumptions of the closing chapter of Bertrand Dorléac's book, entitled *Cas de conscience* (A case of conscience).<sup>9</sup> From Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655), in which the quartered animal is exposed to the beholder in all its visual salience, to Goya's *Still Life of a Lamb's Head and Flanks*, and Courbet's depictions of dead trout (1872–1873), these works question today's viewers for their empathetic rendering of dead animals and their latent humanity. In a twist of sorts, Géricault's *Study of Limbs of Human Corpses* (1818–1819) pointed instead to the latent thingness of the human body. An admirer of Chardin, who featured in the exhibition with such important works as *La Tabagie* and *A Rabbit, Two Thrushes, and Some Straw on a Stone Table* (ca. 1755), Edouard Manet claimed to want to become the "Saint Francis of still life", pursuing simplicity in his way of painting things. The intense wall dedicated to Manet in the section *La vie simple* (The simple life)

7

Les Choses. Une histoire, 50.

8

Ibid., 74 ("the new centrality given to ordinary things").

9

Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir*, 201–252.

assembled works that appear as a testament of this desire to “établir un régime d'égalité entre les choses ordinaires et les êtres”.<sup>10</sup>

The last rooms, dedicated to the art of the twentieth century and the new millennium, were characterized by spaces gradually increasing in size and volume, as well as being provided with brighter lighting. These sections dealt with themes ranging from the modern incommunicability between things and humans, as in De Chirico's *Mélancolie d'un après-midi* (1917), with the two artichokes towering over an urban landscape, to the conflicting stances of (industrial) alienation and re-enchantment of the object, as in Duchamp's *Ready-Made*, where the serialized object is appropriated by the artist. While the section *Choses humaines* (Human things) offered a detour into the liminal ontological status of dolls and puppets, *Métamorphoses*, the last section of the exhibition, explored the “uncertainty” – both visual and ethical – characterizing the renderings of things in contemporary arts.<sup>11</sup> At a time when beings and things are increasingly hybridized, the show closed with a photograph of a blurred, fading bouquet of flowers by Nan Goldin, taken during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, paired with the final sequence of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), where the cloud-like explosion of material goods powerfully embodies “le dynamitage des fétiches de l'Amérique du capital”.<sup>12</sup> Antonioni's excerpt was also looped on two huge symmetrical screens in the entrance hall of the exhibition. This last circumstance did not fail, in its own way, to give regular Louvre visitors pause for reflection about the “power” of things, since this now empty area usually housed the stand with exhibition-related merchandising – this time positioned more discreetly along the corridor connecting with the *Pyramide*.

The catalogue of the exhibition, in addition to the curator's introductory essay, the short texts introducing the different sections and the entries on the works of art, presents in its second half, with a play on words, what is called *le chosier*.<sup>13</sup> In this things' thing more than fifty authors – art and literary historians, philosophers, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, economists, and poets as well as artists and a botanist – have selected a “thing” each, and wandered through its multiple aesthetic, economic, political, cultural, emotional, etc. values and meanings. Their picks range from cotton to yo-yo, from egg to pillow, to the Internet of Things, giving birth to a list worthy of Francis Ponge's poems or Georges Perec's *objectographie* – both among the curator's favourite references. This collective outcome, which bears the trace of the seminar

<sup>10</sup>

Ibid., 170 (“to establish a system of equality between ordinary things and beings”).

<sup>11</sup>

Ibid., 250.

<sup>12</sup>

Ibid., 276 (entry by Thomas Ait Kaci), “the blasting of America's capitalistic fetishes”.

<sup>13</sup>

Ibid., 282–440.

on things that Bertrand Dorléac held since 2015 at Sciences Po, is a testament to the metaphorical power of the object, and its role as a springboard for the imagination.

In its unbridled freedom and diversity of themes and approaches, the *chosier* also offers a kind of counter-project to the exploration of objects and still lifes in Bertrand Dorléac's book and exhibition. Through its joyous and often unpredictable selection, the *chosier* frees itself from the pull exerted by still life as a genre and its interpretive traditions. It ultimately addresses what looks like one major, although almost subterranean, question of Bertrand Dorléac's project: what does the act of representation do to things? Indeed, the reader finds the term representation throughout the book and the catalogue, yet it remains, together with its theoretical thickness, in the background (representation is not mentioned, for example, in the book's thematic index). In this respect, moving away from *nature morte* as a trope seems less important than historically and culturally situating the ways in which still life as a genre has helped to frame the codes and regimes of representation of things and objects within Western art, and beyond. Even the linguistic shifts between silence, immobility, and death as characterized by Germanic and neo-Latin languages – still life vs *nature morte* – is like the tip of the iceberg of wider semantic transformations that, in Western culture, have taken place since the late Middle Ages, affecting the very definition and cultural agenda informing the depictions of things. As such, the genre and theme of the still life appear enmeshed in the tension between the richness and diversity of practices, and the often-schematic nature of the discourses which have been held about them. Bertrand Dorléac's multifaceted and sensitive treatment of the place of things in contemporary art convincingly shows, especially with her choice of including different forms of sculpture and assemblages, the potential of a narrative different from the one informing the tradition of the Western (painted) genre of still life. Following such an inclusive approach, however, might have led to consider further in the project aspects like the Western Middle Ages' lure of things and objects. Practices such as the inexhaustible experimentation with books' jewelled covers – a testament to the centrality of the book as a medium in monotheisms – or the highly refined framing of objects and human remains staged in Christian reliquaries, could then stand among the junctures in a medieval history of the (re)presentation of things.

Taking seriously the challenge raised by *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* also means looking for paradigms other than those of silence, immobility, or death traditionally mobilized in relation to the object and its representation. The trope of metamorphosis chosen by Bertrand Dorléac as the title for the last section of the exhibition makes it possible, for example, not only to address, as the author does, the theme of "uncertainty" and instability (aesthetic, political, ethical...) that are characteristics of many outcomes of contemporary art. It also brings to the fore the broader imbrications of subject and object, nature and culture that run throughout Western

culture. While *la nature mourante*, as we could call in French the representation of nature in a time of environmental crisis, reveals in its change of temporal tense the unexpected relevance of the despised *nature morte* trope, the *nature morte vivante*, to borrow the title of the 1956 canvas by Salvador Dalí,<sup>14</sup> stands for the premises and promises of *natura naturans*. With their interpolation of natural and artificial, Mannerist as well as Baroque precious mounts of shells, pearls, and corals are among the possible manifestations of such understanding of things-in-the-making. Drawing attention to these kinds of artefacts – clearly outside the Western narratives of still life – is one of the fruitful steps that can be taken to broaden further the discussion of the history of things and their regimes of visual representation.

<sup>14</sup>

The painting was displayed in section *Selectioner, collectioner, classer*: Les Choses. Une histoire, 105 (entry by William Jeffett).