ZEUXIS
An Association of Still Life Painters

The Stuff of Life

with

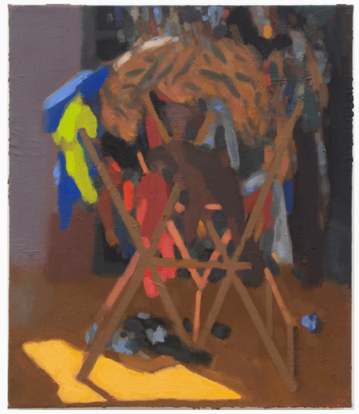
Aubrey Levinthal & Andrew Shea

by

Patrick Neal



Aubrey Levinthal *Laps Around the Square*
oil on panel, 49 x 37 in, 2024
Courtesy of the Artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh



Andrew Shea *8 a.m.*
oil on canvas, 14 x 12 in, 2025
Courtesy JJ Murphy Gallery

This conversation unfolded by email over the course of several weeks.

Patrick Neal: In considering all three of our work, none of us are exclusively still life painters, yet still life is an important part of our oeuvre. Can you talk about how still life waxes and wanes throughout your careers and how it materializes from one body of work to the next?

Aubrey Levinthal: It's funny because I do think of myself as a still life painter even though the majority of my paintings have a figure in them at this point. But I think about some of my favorite painters and they are also sort of made of this—Winifred Nicholson, Gertrude Abercrombie, David Park, Biala, Fairfield Porter, Gwen John, Mary Fedden it's the stuff of life, and figures and objects enter and exit. I don't know that you could say they are figurative or still life painters, maybe some lean a little one way or the other, but "stuff of life" painters isn't a convincing category.

For me though, the way I use still life is most essential to my practice in a way. When I am starting a new body of work or confused on what to do, I return to still life as a source of both a sort of comfort and a vehicle to take more risk. I learned to draw and paint from life so returning to direct looking, (and usually that looking is at my things: my plants, flowers), is a way to recenter and have the space and freedom to mess around and see what comes up. To look closely and observe, especially these objects which I feel I know so intimately, brings back a more present way of being and releases some of the control which is probably what got me stuck and floundering in the first place.

Andrew Shea: I feel much the same way as Aubrey—the "stuff of life" feels like a better term for what I'm interested in. I want to record my experience in an inclusive way, taking in everything around me, sidestepping the divisions implied by genres like "still life," "landscape," "portrait," etc.

That said, I do think about what different subjects offer, formally and metaphorically. In addition to their cultural and historical associations, each gives the painter a different challenge. I also learned to paint by working from observation, and while I don't usually paint directly from life now, I do often derive my works from sketches and watercolors done on site. Still life objects are a natural subject for this way of working because they don't move so much, which makes the job of translating them into paint somewhat more straightforward (and counterintuitively freeing, it seems you agree, Aubrey?). When I paint people, they tend to move around (eating, drawing, typing, watching TV, etc.) as I look, which forces me to invent in order to "fix" them in place. Memory plays a bigger role, and the figures can feel abbreviated, sketchy, or hazy as a result. Still life offers a chance for the eye to pause and linger on something more concrete and specific.



Aubrey Levinthal *Studio Desk*
oil on panel, 31 x 40 7/8 in, 2025
Courtesy of the Artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh



Andrew Shea *A Cleaner Table*
oil on canvas, 12 x 14 in, 2024–25
Courtesy JJ Murphy Gallery.

I'm currently most excited when both things happen in the same picture. By including still life elements alongside a figure, for instance, I'm able to get different senses of speed and stillness within a single painting—the feeling that one thing (the figure) is in motion, while another (the can of seltzer, the fork, etc.) isn't. Because paintings are about relationships, these moments of stillness tend to set into motion the things I want to feel active, and vice versa. And, by lingering on a single object or cluster of objects, I find I can better activate the tactile sense that's latent in seeing—the feeling that by looking at something, you might also reach out and grab it. Which is something that I think has drawn me to painting from the very start

Neal: The "stuff of life" category you both speak of is very exciting. Not only for its potential as a loaded psychological field and the variety of motifs it offers, but also for the painterly challenges it affords, for example the possibilities to teeter between abstraction and representation. You both have a lot of facility with paint, and it's enjoyable to witness how you wield the brush and structure your compositions. Everything from impastoed, stippled and veils of paint, to flattening of the picture plane, areas of congestion, and wide-open expanses, or maybe rhythmic glyphs and patterns backgrounding very specific visages. Could you both discuss in more detail the nuts and bolts of how you conceptualize and execute your paintings, the planning, process and routine, and maybe how you became the painters you are? Aubrey's list of favorite artists is inspiring and Andrew's comment that "paintings are about relationships" is very true. A host of artists might be in the back of one's mind offering guidance at any given moment.

I'm currently thinking about Dawn Clements, Adrian Berg, Hurvin Anderson, and most importantly Lois Dodd. Can you talk a bit about your relationship with art history, and how it may undergird individual or broadly referential aspects of your practice?



Andrew Shea *At the Blue Window*
oil on canvas, 9 x 10 inches, 2025
Courtesy JJ Murphy Gallery

Levinthal: The way I get to a finished painting is kind of a mystery to me, and that searching in the process is always what drives the painting forward, but it makes it a bit of a ramble to try to explain. I let my eye guide me always, it's a visual language so if I see something in the world, in a museum, in a book, in an old painting of mine, I make a note to myself. That can be in the form of a note on my phone, a sketch or a photo or, in the case of still life, sometimes dragging the object in to the studio—usually a combination of those. I don't think any source should be off limits, but I also don't like to rely on any one way of working too heavily. I always like to feel as though I'm throwing wrenches in my own way that I need to figure out how to synthesize. Sometimes I work on a white gessoed panel with a direct composition in mind. But more times than not I like to work on them sort of independently of any preconceived painting thought. I use the beginning as a time to just think about color, shape and surface. So usually a relationship between a few rectangles of color, overlapping and scumbled. Then I'll try to sort of marry those two things, that scumbled ground and a compositional thought. As it develops, I'll find something is needed formally and that will suggest what needs to happen in the painting. The painting needs something small and dark in the corner, maybe it could be a sock. Or that cup feels too solid and bright, I'll just put a shape of transparent blue over it. So it flows both ways from form to image, image to form, always in trying to find a resonant mood and a compositionally sound painting. So working this way, a lot of the time it can all fall apart, that's the thrill I guess, and I'll put down a glaze of color that reunites things a bit and work back into it, often moving into an entirely new composition.



Aubrey Levinthal *Counter with Lisianthus*
oil on panel, 30 5/8 x 24 7/8 in, 2025
Courtesy of the Artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh

To me, the importance of art history cannot be understated. Not just for my work but for the joy I get from it. When I was in school and started to be able to see how form was used by painters to create meaning, I felt like a code was unlocked. It is so satisfying to be able to be moved by a painting and then spend time understanding how the thing was constructed. Especially with work from artists that died years ago. It feels a bit like a conversation with the painter, like, "I see what you did there", and that connection to a person I never met, often have very little other insight into their life, feels like poking a tiny hole in time. To be able to feel close to and learn from these painters just by looking carefully deepens my feeling of being a person and being part of the world.

Shea: Bonnard said that he felt "weak" when painting directly from his subjects, preferring instead to work from memory and quick sketches. I do occasionally work from direct observation, but I get what Bonnard means, and most of my work aligns with what I think he was up to—taking note of an experience, then reprocessing it later in the studio, allowing memory, bias, and problems of translation to seep in. So, like Aubrey, I also tend to work from a synthesis of sources: pencil sketches, watercolors, the occasional bits of photographs, etc.

But I think what really drives the painting process are not these image sources, so much as the work's emerging surface and its specific material qualities. Sketches or watercolors are used and abandoned according to how they "lock in" to the painting. Sometimes I might like an image, but it slides off the canvas. Getting the image and the surface to talk to each other in some surprising way is what I'm after. It can take a while, and the paint can become quite dense, but against that sense of history and effort I usually want the paintings to carry an opposing sense of ease, immediacy, and naturalness—to seem not willed, but found.

As for art history—for me, I think it's always been a basic curiosity. I liked painting, and I wanted to learn how it had been done, and what was possible. More broadly, studying art was a way of better understanding myself, by better understanding how I fit into the world. I grew up outside of Baltimore, and the Baltimore Museum's Cone Collection of early French Modernism, with its extraordinary Matisses, was deeply influential. I spent college making wannabe Catherine Murphys and Lois Dodds. Moving to New York, with regular visits to the Met, expanded things tremendously. Albert Pinkham Ryder was a later discovery. More recently I've been interested in Sienese painting, as well as medieval stone sculpture from Europe and elsewhere.

Just as important to me, though, have been other forms of creative activity that shaped my sense of what art can do. I became obsessed with James Joyce in high school, around when I began drawing and painting. I've played music my whole life, and discovering John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus at the same time raised the bar and made me feel sure that what I was doing mattered. I felt that these were artists who were saying powerful, urgent things not through words, but through the polyphonic forms of their layered compositions. Thoreau's *Walden* helped clarify the role of an artist in society—how retreating to a cabin (a studio) to practice attentiveness was actually a social and political (rather than escapist or solipsistic) act. Fairfield Porter's writings (as well as, of course, his paintings) likewise express the importance of attending to material facts: how an artist's focus on the particular, the contingent, and the diverse can counter a technological culture built on order, control, and uniformity.



Andrew Shea *Studio Table*
oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in, 2024
Courtesy JJ Murphy Gallery

Neal: You both have touched on it, but I'm curious to hear more about your educations and how you gravitated toward a formal, painterly way of working rooted in observation/working from life (the art schools you orbited toward and who you studied with). We live in a very atomized time for artmaking where all possibilities are accepted, but there are still factions centered around conceptualism vs. formalism, or progress/innovation vs. tradition/mastery. Specifically, arguments around whether to prioritize ideas and deemphasize skill, or conversely to gain in mastery of a medium in order to invest it with gravity, as opposed to treating it as just another vocational school practice. Neither one of you seems to eschew beauty or sincerity in favor of (the often default positions of) irony, cynicism, or ideology, and painterly process and materiality are a big part of what you do. I'm curious how you make sense of our open-ended present moment and the challenges of navigating the art world.

Shea: I feel lucky to have begun studying drawing and painting with no expectation of a career in the arts, and little awareness of the art world. I had an incredible teacher in high school who set up a curriculum of working mostly from direct observation. From the start I was attracted to the challenges implicit in that task. Each drawing was a puzzle: how do the parts relate to each other, and to the whole? How does the whole shift as the parts lock into place? A simple prompt—Draw what you see, not what you think—opened up drawing as a means of processing experience. Drawing offered the chance to consider what I saw and how I saw, while simultaneously deepening that experience, allowing me to see more clearly and fully. Finally, I began to understand how the simplest of drawings and paintings, the physical traces of that experience, were really asking quite large questions: What is the world like? How do I relate to it? So art began to connect with my other academic interests: literature, philosophy, religion.

Looking at colleges, I briefly considered art school but decided against it after an awesome summer at MICA pre-college. The intensity and rigor of nine-hour studio days painting the figure was thrilling, but I realized I didn't want to be surrounded only by other artists. That led me to Dartmouth, where painting remained an interest and curiosity rather than a potential career. After spending half the week in the library writing essays, I liked going to the studio. The slow looking and the engagement with physical materials activated a different part of my brain: less cognition, more consciousness. I had fantastic professors who rarely told me what to do, but instead challenged my ideas and showed me what art might do, looking to history and to living artists, as well as to literature, politics, critical theory, music, etc.



Andrew Shea *Morning Coffee*
oil on canvas, 43 x 47 in, 2025
Courtesy JJ Murphy Gallery

Encountering this wide-open world forced me to ask why I was making the work I made. It was discombobulating at times—that infinitude of possibility—I think this is what you're talking about. But I think because the basic problems I cared about had been tied, from the outset, to the unanswerable big questions, I never doubted their seriousness or relevance. So, I don't think I felt like I had to plant my flag in one of the opposing camps you describe above. I generally think artists join factions (stylistic, conceptual, etc.) or "take positions" as a marketing tactic, since it's easy to talk about, whereas what really matters in art happens on a more internal and metaphorical level, which can't be simplified by categories.

The challenge is that our culture, because of its addiction to speed and efficiency, values the former over the latter.

Levinthal: That's so beautifully said Andy! "What is the world like? How do I relate to it?" Fundamental and deeply complex. I also always seem to be asking "And who am I in relation to the world? What is my interior experience of this exterior existence?"

I do remember feeling that duality of camps of conceptual or technical artists in school. I came to painting out of an interest in working from observation and then felt some pressure to figure out what my work was saying or have it say something more overt. But whenever the idea preceded the making in my work it felt so contrived and really not like my own work. So I decided to just really tune into observing, and trusting that what I notice, out in the world, in the making of a painting, is worth examining. I also gave myself permission to work in any way, not trying to know what category the work is in, instead trying to push out of the work being cohesive and trust where that leads. If something is of interest, it's worth digging down, and using the language embedded in painting and form can get at those things that feel really urgent for me. I think it's a bit of an alchemy really, there's no formula even though the art world and people generally think we would feel so much better if we could figure out a plan, a formula, something concrete. I like to think in the creative parallel of authors sometimes, when a novel resonates it's got a unique voice that has been forged out of the author's experience, the way they engage with the discipline itself, and then there's the matter of the reader bringing whatever they might. So being sincere and discerning about looking at myself and my experience and studying all I can about art history and the things that interest me, that seems like many lifetimes of work and trying to figure any of that out feels like plenty to worry about.



Aubrey Levinthal *Reanimator on Wharton St.*
oil on panel, 48 x 48 in, 2023



Aubrey Levinthal *6th Floor Studio*
oil on panel, 36 x 36 in, 2025

Neal: In hearing your responses, I keep coming back to a phenomenological approach to artmaking, where cerebral, pictorial challenges are sorted out in relation to a sensual bodily connection to the outside world. Circling back to "stuff of life", I often say I build my own painting and writing in an impressionistic manner, gathering thoughts and images incidentally as they pass by on a day-to-day basis.

You both discuss a rich list of influences in the literary, music and visual arts as well as optical, auditory, tactile and atmospheric triggers that act as thought starters or challenges lending themselves to the physical process of making a painting. My final question would be to ask if you could speak some more to this connection to the outside world and the five senses. Also, where your work is going, what topics, subjects or projects are on the horizon?

Levinthal: If I think about moving around in a dark room with my hands outstretched looking for the edge of the bed and the lightswitch, painting is sort of like using the eyes in place of the hands in that scenario. It's a searching, feeling, roaming but careful sort of looking at things, and beyond that, it's my perception of my experience of those things. I tend to follow the things I find interesting and the feelings of spaces I find interesting. I do think my work has something to do with accumulated memory, the certain kind of light in a room, the way a certain pillow feels, the smell of a cold day. I want to make paintings that somehow touch those things and the way they make me feel.

I've been working on these same sorts of questions for a long time. But I guess recently I've been thinking about what happens when a more deliberate layering of those accumulated perspectives happens. For example, imposing two large figures onto an overhead view of a city block (*Laps Around the Square*, 2025). I'm still taken with the figure, but I do think of myself as a still life painter, and so I think maybe I'll finally let still life lead for a bit while I'm coming off my last show and thinking through new painting questions as I work toward a solo with Marianne Boesky in 2027.

Shea: I never know how to predict where my work is going, so I think I'll use your question to say a few words instead about the recent past. I just had a show at JJ Murphy Gallery that included paintings of daily subjects, mostly pulled from the apartment I rent in Providence, or from my studio nearby. Art, through its power of presence, can compel us to see differently: to pay more attention, focus, slow down, and notice what we wouldn't otherwise. For me, I'm trying to use painting to concentrate on particular qualities—qualities of light, surface, shape, scale relationship, etc.—that kind of spring out from the typical and surprise us. Whether these particular moments originate in the outside world or in the painting itself is almost beside the point. What's important is that they contribute to a feeling that the paintings are individuals and alive. I hope that paintings might thus make the case for noticing other such instances of wonderful, quiet mystery that happen all around us, all the time.



Patrick Neal *Bronze Dahlias*
oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in, 2025