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INTERVIEW

An Interview with Artist Beth Lipman

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Featured in *The Golden Age for Whom?*, **Beth Lipman's** *Scale and Gazing Ball* draws on centuries of still-life traditions while exploring questions of material culture, history, and human experience. In this interview, Lipman, reflects on the symbolism embedded in objects, the influence of the Dutch Golden Age painting, and the role of glass in her artistic practice.

How did you get involved with *The Golden Age for Whom?* exhibition?

I got a phone call from my gallerist, Leslie Ferrin with [Ferrin Contemporary](#), and she told me that Joshua, one of the Figge's Co-Senior Curators, expressed interest in having my work in the exhibition. This is completely my wheelhouse, and part of the impetus for getting involved with the still-life genre began with the Dutch Golden Age and paintings specifically from that time. So I said, "Please, I would love to be a part of it." After sending a list of available works, he expressed interest in *Scale and Gazing Ball*.



Can you tell us a little bit about your artwork in this exhibition?

Scale and Gazing Ball is a sculpture with cultural objects and biomorphic forms that are protruding from a Haarlem style laid table composition. Those forms are disrupting the traditional still life.

The work includes cultural symbolism that has been used over generations and also has evolved over time. There's a nod to commerce and equality issues represented by the scale. The gazing ball is omnipotent or omnipresent; the viewer can see themselves within the gazing ball. It was also a symbol of God, historically. There are books, garlic or bulbs, picture frames, rock formations, and ropes. It's firmly in keeping with my continued curiosity of material culture, belief systems, and history. I'm juxtaposing different points of time in history and pre-history to the current moment.

I started working on *Scale and Gazing Ball* in August of 2019 and finished it in December. It was just before the pandemic started. There was talk of Covid-19 in November, and it was just coming into everyone's consciousness as I was finishing this work. It became contextualized around the pandemic unintentionally.

Since *Scale and Gazing Ball* was made at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, did this impact the work at all?

Artists make things all the time and they have a specific intention that they're aware of, but that's only 10% of what informs the process or the conceptualization of a work. It became apparent towards the end of making this work that it was really coinciding with this potentially catastrophic event in human history. In the past, I've spent time researching the plague and the 1918 influenza pandemic because of my interest in growth and decay—life processes. Was it directly informed by the pandemic? Not consciously. But my entire practice has been about capturing a moment in time between an exuberance of the moment and the next moment of decay. It's very embedded in still-life tradition as well, as you can see in



both *The Golden Age* and *The Golden Age for Whom?*

What originally inspired the artwork?

This is a continuation of my studio practice. I'm investigating still-life tradition and exploring material culture, and the way in which objects are surrogates for ourselves. My practice involves two different complementary strains. I create site-specific response works with institutions or individuals, and I work with similar concepts on a macro level in my studio, where I explore the themes that continue to drive my work. *Scale and Gazing Ball* was the next obvious iteration of what I needed to do at that time in my own studio.

The large biomorphic form in the middle was the genesis for this sculpture. I was working with the team at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, WA and we were making these very large human-scale chalices. And this form got away. It hit the side of the hole, and they were going to throw it away. I intervened and took it home to my studio.

I had a table from another sculpture, and I decided to just pierce the table with this form and create a composition around it. These moments become essential for the work.

How did you get interested in the Dutch paintings and still life?

I grew up going to museums with my mother, and she was essentially a self-taught artist. My grandmother also created textiles, both sewn and embroidered. It was very much a part of our family environment. Additionally, we were the kind of family that was planning the next meal as we were sitting down to eat the meal on the table. There was both an obsession with food and depictions of food in still life. At **Tyler School of Art** (Temple University), I started researching the symbolism and universality of food.

My mother was a folk artist, and she painted depictions of fruit and vegetables in a Pennsylvania Dutch style. She had a multitude of books of still-life images and theorem paintings (an early American tradition of painting on velvet). So the intersectionality between domestic arts, decorative arts, and fine art were all blended in my house.

Actually, the first still life that I directly responded to was a still life by Severin Roesen, a German immigrant whose still lifes are somewhat stylized and are firmly in an American tradition. Afterwards, I began researching the history of the Dutch Golden Age, its economy and art. Still-life paintings were hung in domestic environments and would signal to guests the homeowner's status or class aspirations.

Haarlem style laid table still lifes are fantasies in a way because everything depicted was not available and accessible. One would never be able to find all of those kinds of food or objects on the same table at that time. Today we could go to the market and get everything to create a similar composition on a table. But at that time, all of those objects together on one table was a fantasy. The paintings were depicting theological symbolism, medicinal applications, and temporality. It was a language; one could read the paintings like a story.

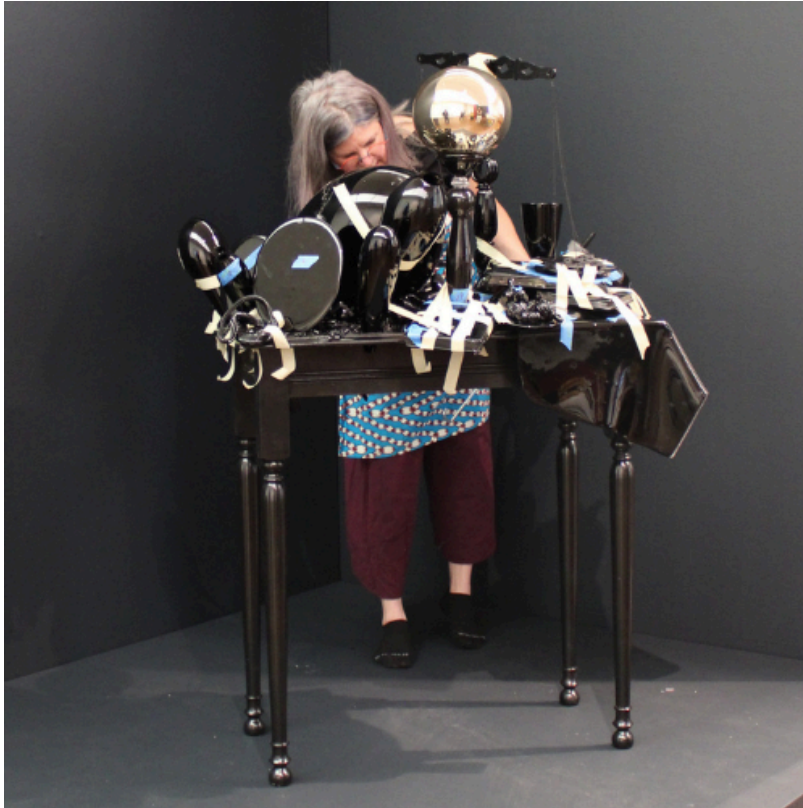
Taken one step further, one can see things are precariously perched on a table. Gravity would never allow objects to balance in that way, so it furthers a kind of illusion. The precariousness of life is just so embedded in these works.

What details or themes do you want to notice in your work?

Depending upon the visitor and what they're bringing to the table on that given day, people could take away a variety of meanings. It could be about late-stage capitalism. It could be about mortality and the fragility of the body. It could be about temporality. It could be the preciousness of the moment.

A lot of the meaning that was common in the 1600s is lost today. We don't know every single meaning that was associated with these objects in relation to other objects. They're artifacts that we can learn from, but they're not necessarily sharing all their secrets.

The 1600s still-life tradition was the first time that objects became predominant in painting. Before, they were subordinate to displays of the figure or landscape—to portraiture and genre paintings. That was the first time the material culture took precedence over all these other things, but the symbolism was still there, even though the figure was removed. So, it's like a reduction of the information that is even more powerful.



What is your relationship to traditional still lifes, like those from the Dutch Golden Age?

There's always a different angle of thinking about objects and what they say about the individual or society at large. We're demarcating ourselves by

everything around us, whether it's intentional or not. I think the discipline is timeless as long as there are humans.

What is the significance of the use of glass in your work?

The qualities of glass, its preciousness and fragility, are important. Also, its ability to reflect and refract optically, so your view of the object is constantly being renegotiated. It can be frustrating to visually understand or take ownership over what you are seeing.

I use the process of making the compositions as a metaphor for the process of capturing a moment in time. Instead of creating something mimetic, I'm letting the kiln or my hand or someone else's hand dictate what that object is, and that object embodies what is possible in that moment in time. Hot glass process is a combination of intention, control, and letting go. It's all time-based. You have a certain amount of time before the glass cools to create an object, and you are constantly going back and forth and reheating that object. Whatever you're feeling that day, wherever your skills are that day, whether you're distracted or focused, whether you're at the beginning of your career or the end of your career, it's all recorded in the making of

the object. I almost always use the first attempt at making an object because I am not concerned with mimesis. I'm more concerned with it as a representation of that moment of time. In that way, it's also a part of the still-life tradition.

The process is conceptualized in a way that is very specific to hot glass. You can repaint a painting or remodel clay, whereas glass is less forgiving. When glass breaks, it shows the potential mortality, and that potential is similar to the human condition.

What is the process for installing a work like *Scale and Gazing Ball*?

It takes several days. It's not constant labor, but everything comes apart for traveling, and then I reassemble with adhesive that can be removed or cut apart every time the sculpture is installed.

How to travel a work informs how the work is built. I've installed *Scale and Gazing Ball* in multiple institutions, so I had to make sure that it could travel without being damaged.

What do you want people to remember about your artwork?

I'm more curious about what people bring to the work. All of the things that I think about are the things that drive my process, and that's why I make the work. It's like an investigation. It's understanding something new every time you make something. Then it goes out into the world. It's not a linear communication.

You're one of the featured speakers for the Celebrating America 250 American Art talks in July? Would you be willing to give a brief overview of what you might be talking about?

I will probably be presenting on the trajectory of my practice and what drives the work. I'll most likely be sharing some images of new work that I am just finishing right now in the studio. I might focus on what it means to be an American artist right now and the ways in which the American story or mythos inspires my practice.

Image Credit

Beth Lipman (American, born 1971), *Scale and Gazing Ball*, 2020, Glass, wood, metal, paint, and adhesive, 64 x 42 x 32 inches, Loan and image courtesy of the Artist and Ferrin Contemporary, © Beth Lipman