



## Elements

In a new series of still lifes, Conor Walton puts the focus on the staples of life in opposition to the excesses of the Celtic Tiger, writes **Jane Humpries**

Conor Walton's illusionist *trompe l'oeil* style harks back to Pliny's tale of Zeuxis' painting that tricked the crow into thinking the grapes were 'real'. Indeed the artist has continually used the motif of grapes, referring to Jonathan Richardson's 18th-century treatise *Theory of Painting*, that: 'Pictures must be like a bunch of grapes' in that grapes tested a painter's ability to master *chiaroscuro*, colouring and realism, especially in rendering their translucent, textural surfaces.

These Renaissance principles are rooted in the painter's technique, despite the ongoing debates over representational painting's survival in the contemporary world. Unlike some painters of his generation, he refuses to paint from a photograph, but insists on painting the object directly from life.

The seeming simplicity of these new

works, which have been pared down to the bare essentials, in title, content and form, belie the intellect and technique which has led to their making. 'I think of the new work as attempting monumentality on a small scale. The objects are mostly food and drink (nothing too fancy) with an emphasis on dietary staples and are intended to appeal to the viewers' desires and appetites. They are painted straightforwardly and entirely from life but treated with a seriousness and a concentrated attention that I think gives them a sacramental quality.'

Creating a concentrated sensory tactility that stimulate a desire in the viewer to marvel at the skill in capturing the likeness, especially as the scale is to life, these paintings could also be read allegorically, especially in relation to his exhibition's title, 'Elements'. Pertaining to the funda-

mental, essential or irreducible constituency of a composite entity these works are certainly that. The word offers multiple possibilities from the scientific, to the classical elements of earth, air, fire and water, to parts of the Eucharist.

Indeed, the work could be read as an allegory for painting itself, but when considered in relation to earlier works, especially *Happy Days* (2008) (Fig 1) they appear to represent a significant philosophical departure. In *Happy Days*, made just before the Celtic Tiger started licking its wounds, Walton's composition echoed the great Spanish and Dutch still-life painters such as Juan Fernández, El Labrador and Jan Davidz de Heem, but amid the *vanitas* iconography, the skull, the hour-glass, he placed the deflating plastic globe and a pile of books that considered 'the end' of Art, (Donald Kuspit); History (Francis Fukuyama); Nature (Bill McKibben); and Science (John Horgan); which, by his own admission, echoed this 'cultural pessimism'. 'Happy Days', a particularly Irish colloquialism much used in the boom, lent a sarcastic menace to the imploding economic bust. That the



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rise of Dutch still-life painting accompanied a period of unprecedented economic growth did not escape Walton's notice, as he stated: 'The Dutch were among the first to enjoy the fruits of Europe's 500-year boom; I suspect we'll be among the last.'

And yet, these new works appear to be more optimistic, literally freer in their compositional simplicity of singular subjects. Working at arms length, painting quickly with a constrained

palette, of black, white and earth colours, using oils 'because they are suited to the textures of the materials in the work such as the butter, milk and water' these lifeless forms are brought to life by the play of light.

A compositional drama on how the light moves, reflects, and glistens through the tonal arrangement, is a deliberate ploy to create a strange shimmering boundary. The absence of the line, the presence or not of 'the

edge' suggests an uncertainty, an unresolved boundary where the eye fills in the missing components. This gaze is on the threshold, exploring the unity of perception as a struggle to articulate the relationship between background and foreground.

Placed in the foreground, quotidian 'things' lead the eye to gaze desirously for basic essentials, which may have been 'overlooked' in the times of plenty. Far from the 'cultural pessimism' of the past, they act as totems of thanks for what you have, rather than what you have not. The bread looks good enough to eat, the wine to drink, things, which the artist states he can 'believe' in. For Walton, these are as much icons as religious ones of the past, or the new systems based on fame, celebrity and money.

Endorsed are a love of nature and humanity but also the artist's pursuit of something noble. Walton has also included works, which demonstrate a greater complexity, for example *Veiled* (Fig 2). Perhaps this is to establish for viewers unfamiliar to his work, that they have evolved from a deeper place. ■

Conor Walton 'Elements,' Beaux Arts, Bath, England, 2-23 February, 2013.

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