



SHERRIE WOLF To InStill Life

June 6th–August 5th, 2023



Sherrie Wolf  
*Kitchen Matisse*, 2018  
 oil on canvas · 45 x 60 in.

Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation,  
 from the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Collection  
 Image: Aaron Wessling Photography

Sherrie Wolf  
*Self-Portrait in Rosa Bonheur's Studio*, 2023  
 oil over acrylic on canvas · 70 x 95 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Russo Lee Gallery, Portland, OR

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Early in my college art education, I was lightning-struck by a retrospective in San Francisco of Georgia O’Keeffe paintings. Her huge, boldly beautiful still-life images inspired my belief in a life as a successful woman painter. Around then, historians began revealing many women artists that had been overlooked throughout history. Successful careers of artists such as Rosa Bonheur, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun provided needed role models for me.

I paint in oil on canvas, and emphasize still-life objects interacting with references to historic art. Lately (since 2012 and through the decade) I have made large-scale self-portraits to see myself as a “woman in history.” I have substituted myself for Courbet in his allegory *The Painter’s Studio* (with a nude man in place of Courbet’s muse), for Charles Willson Peale in his museum self-portrait, for Velázquez in

*Las Meninas*, and most recently for Rosa Bonheur in her studio.

My vocabulary of visual images is personal and intimate, and began with lingerie, the ultimate feminine apparel, as a familiar subject linked to the female body: my body. In the late 1990s I started to use works by Artemisia Gentileschi as a backdrop for plates of fruit and other still-life material. The voluptuous curves of fruit created poignantly ironic juxtapositions against paintings like her powerful *Judith and Maid servant with the Head of Holofernes*.

Women persist to defy the boundaries set by family obligations and bias in exclusionary environments where male artists have historically achieved more success and exposure. Artistic expressions viewed as “feminine” or un-masculine sometimes elicit disrespect. Beyond gender identity, I look to all my artistic predecessors for the fluidity of creativity which knows no sex or gender; and I have been finding other prejudi-

cial boundaries such as race and class to probe, perhaps somewhat subliminally while distracting the viewer with emphasis on unapologetic lushness.

Struck by the current phobic reaction to immigration, my painting *Sea of Tea* references my mother’s post-war voyage by ship from her New Zealand homeland to the United States. As with all my work, I employ personal symbolism, with a collection of inherited teacups to represent my family history. The dark-blue satin fabric, like the vast ocean, serves as an undulating unsteady ground: an immigrant’s doubt. There could be concern that beautiful, large scale images of tea cups, tulips and other “feminine-identified” objects might cast me as a dilettante who paints pretty pictures. I am undaunted by this, with O’Keeffe at my back.

— Sherrie Wolf



# Sherrie Wolf's Grand Ambition

by Sue Taylor

ABOVE:

Sherrie Wolf  
*Tulips with Book on Manet*, 2017  
oil on canvas · 36 x 54 in.

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer  
Image: Aaron Wessling Photography

With spirited forays into an ingenious kind of self-portraiture, Sherrie Wolf (b. 1952) remains first and foremost a painter of still life. Her elegant depictions of glossy-skinned fruit and vegetables and gorgeous flowers celebrate nature's bounty, while dense arrangements of figurines, vases, and dinnerware revel in tasteful domesticity. Given the abundant pleasures on offer in these pictures and the innovative formal devices Wolf deploys, it is easy to forget the vexed status of still-life painting in the history of Western art. Still life only arose as a discrete genre around the seventeenth century when, with the rise of a middle class in Holland, it created and capitalized on a demand for pictures of goods newly available through Dutch global commerce. Nevertheless, with the founding of national academies of art over the following two centuries, still life was relegated to the lowest rank in the curriculum: non-narrative and putatively non-intellectual, it lacked the grand potential of history painting, landscape, or portraiture. Unsurprisingly, the unheroic category of still-life painting was deemed appropriate for women.

Wolf came of age as an artist in the mid 1970s, just as second-wave feminism was beginning to transform art history—questioning the canon, reassessing genres, exposing gender biases. A number of notable women artists accordingly took up realist still life in proud defiance of the old hierarchy. Audrey Flack (b. 1931) revisited the *vanitas* tradition—reminding viewers of the transience of beauty, wealth, life itself—with dazzling paintings of dressing-table tops overcrowded with cosmetics and jewelry. Sondra Freckelton (1936–2019) excelled at floral painting, Janet Fish (b. 1938) at rendering sparkling glass jars and crystal, Jeanette Pasin Sloan (b. 1946) at shiny silver cups and ewers. Equal in skill and ambition to all these feminist still-life painters, Wolf is unique among them for her thoroughgoing engagement with art history itself as subject matter.

Masterworks of the past feature in various ways in Wolf's pictures. In an early painting in this exhibition, a postcard image of John Everett Millais's drowned Ophelia (1851–52) emerges from a swirling river of deep-mineral-green drapery, upon which floats a scattered arrangement of peaches, poppies, and lilies. Here Wolf subsumes a Pre-Raphaelite icon conflating woman with madness and death within a virtuosic display of her own mastery and rational control—of deft illusions of light and shadow, of transparent glass and shimmering lemon-yellow satin. The aerial view, moreover, is a highly unusual approach to still-life composition, perhaps even original to Wolf herself. *Ophelia* oscillates between an homage to Millais and a bold demonstration of one-upmanship.

A similar ambivalence towards an artistic predecessor informs *Kitchen Matisse*. Amid this countertop assemblage of purple tulips and perfect fruit appear three postcard reproductions of Matisse paintings, souvenirs or *aide-mémoires* for the artist whose formal preoccupations exceed those of the great twentieth-century colorist. Wolf's concerns include a hyperrealist optical play of reflected and refracted light as well as tactile impressions of various kinds of surfaces—obdurate, tender, silken, pliable. She is likely the only person ever to link the two terms of her title; more than just descriptive of the image, "Kitchen Matisse" domesticates the master, just as the picture itself absorbs his figure paintings and seascape into the ostensibly humbler realm of still life.

For a long time, a certain anxiety about the "feminine" spaces of still life haunted art history.<sup>1</sup> Because the kitchen, the boudoir, or, more generally, the home were considered women's domain, table-top still lifes produced by male artists had to be interpreted as something loftier, not domestic but purely aesthetic. Thus when Cézanne depicted a vase of tulips or basket of apples, when Manet took up flowers in his art, critic Emile Zola insisted that their subject matter was of no signif-

icance at all, merely a pretext for painting.<sup>2</sup> Although Wolf's still lifes are generally studio rather than kitchen affairs, the objects she selects conjure the comfortable upper-middle-class home. They are submitted to a series of artistic decisions and transpositions: extracted from the real world, whether for their physical properties and/or emotional resonance, then judiciously arranged and lit, photographed multiple times in various close-ups, and finally scaled up and transferred from the chosen digital image to the canvas.

The two quotations in this exhibition of Manet's floral paintings appear in pictures with open books rather than postcards. Upon the two-page spreads that reproduce Manet's lilacs and mixed bouquets, Wolf places vases of flowers, bowls of cherries, and bits of surrounding drapery, outdoing him with the greater complexity of her compositions while honoring him as still-life exemplar. In a pair of paintings dedicated to Vermeer, Wolf stations large reproductions of his famous *Letter* and *Music Lesson* behind her still-life objects, parallel to the picture plane. In each case, a single tulip in a clear glass bud vase occupies the foreground; we see through and beyond this vase to a portion of Vermeer's interior. The studied refractions are a nod to the optical devices Vermeer likely used to transcribe his scenes onto canvas, the flowers to the tulip mania that had gripped the Dutch Golden Age during which he painted. A seascape on the rear wall in *The Letter* and the mirror reflection of the woman at the virginal in *The Music Lesson* are pictures within his pictures; Wolf adds yet another level of mediation, creating her paintings from photographs of reproductions of paintings that contain yet other representations.

Adopting artworks by male painters as backdrops for her still-life set-ups is perhaps Wolf's most intriguing gambit to date. In this exhibition, she incorporates portraits, landscapes, and history paintings by artists from Ingres to Ruisdael, proving in the process her impressive capacity to work in any of these genres—plus animal painting, as in her self-portrait homage to Rosa Bonheur. As Wolf herself has noted, placing a vast Bierstadt landscape behind her fruits and flowers has the effect of monumentalizing the still life.<sup>3</sup> This strategy also establishes the possibility of a continuous pictorial space, imaginatively unifying foreground and background, present and past. Different types of "dialogue" develop between the two registers from one painting to the next. The witty and wonderful *Parrot Tulips with Paroquets* juxtaposes Edward Henry Murphy's nine-

teenth-century painting of macaw, parakeet, and cockatoo with a foreground still life of cognate objects: an egg, a ceramic parakeet who appears nonplussed by his ostentatious kin in the background, and the eponymous tulips that seem even more colorful and alive than their nearby namesakes.

*Still Life with Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Satyrs* is of an altogether different order, with a stunning still life upstaging a multi-figure mythological scene by Rubens from the Prado Museum. In the Rubens, male appetite and aggression is incarnate in the satyrs (half men, half beasts) who attack the nymphs in their sylvan retreat. Starting with the leftmost invader, a sweeping propulsion of bodies across the clearing reaches its crescendo at the goddess of the hunt, whose fatal arrows—note the dead game at lower left and right—will terminate the lascivious assault. The contrast with Wolf's foreground still life could not be more jarring, yet the relationship between the two registers is evocative. Although the tulips seem empathically to mimic the agitation of the nymphs, the hallucinatory fruits remain static, countering the chaos that reigns in the background. Unusual in Wolf's oeuvre, a tangerine is partly peeled, as if echoing the theme of violation in the Rubens. The apple is also an unexpected addition among Wolf's more habitual motifs; in classical myth it is a symbol of love and erotic desire. The stemmed silver bowl of apple and peaches, positioned directly in front of Diana, reads like votive offering to the goddess in her act of repelling the bestial ambush. Wolf created this magnum opus at a time when revelations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse of women began to come to public consciousness in the U.S. Her painting is a brilliant artistic response to a subject that's topical yet apparently timeless. The impressive size of this canvas (four by ten feet) may be apposite for history painting—indeed, it matches the dimensions of the Rubens original—but for still life it is truly astonishing.

In her grand ambition for still-life painting, Wolf has produced compositions of increasing intricacy and scale, culminating in recent triumphs such as *A Few of My Favorite Things*, more than seven feet long, replete with vessels of many shapes, books, plates, tear-inducing onions, fruits, and postcards of paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe. Wolf's signature tulips are here, as is the globular copper-toned vase from *Diana and Her Nymphs* in its lower-left corner. The knife and pencil protruding over the table's edge refer to the convention in still life of displaying one's skill at foreshortening, creating convincingly three-dimensional objects in space; the mirrors evoke the age-

old idea of art as a reflection of reality as well as tropes of vanity and of introspection. Above all, Wolf's unrelenting focus on the particularity of everyday objects, like her minute study of paintings from the past, exemplifies a type of attention that runs counter to the ricocheting distractions of contemporary life amidst ubiquitous screens. Elevating still life, making it relevant and perhaps even urgent, Wolf secures a distinguished place for it among the other genres—as first among equals.

*Sue Taylor is an art historian, curator, and critic and Professor Emerita of Art History at Portland State University.*

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1. See Norman Bryson, "Still Life and 'Feminine' Space," in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 136–78.

2. Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life," in *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 16.

3. Sherrie Wolf, "Artist Talk," Portland Art Museum, Oregon, 14 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mT6M1kKDZxg&t=1269s> (accessed 15 March 2023).



Sherrie Wolf  
*Fruit Plate at Yosemite II, 2005*  
 oil on canvas · 36 x 36 in.  
 Collection of Jordan  
 D. Schnitzer  
 Image: Aaron Wessling  
 Photography



Sherrie Wolf  
*Parrot Tulips with Paroquets, 2009*  
 oil on canvas · 24 x 18 in.  
 Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer  
 Image: Aaron Wessling Photography

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

1. *Peonies*, 1993  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 53 x 42 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
2. *Ophelia*, 1998  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 48 x 36 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
3. *Tulips and Fruit Plate after Bierstadt*,  
 2003  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 24 x 36 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
4. *Peonies after Ruisdael*, 2004  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 60 x 48 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
5. *Fruit Plate at Yosemite II*, 2005  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 36 x 36 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
6. *Still Life with Diana and Her  
 Nymphs Surprised by Satyrs*, 2007  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 48 1/4 x 120 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
7. *Courbet's Allegory*, 2008  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 12 x 20 ft.  
 Courtesy of the artist
8. *Parrot Tulips with Paroquets*, 2009  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 24 x 18 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
9. *Tulip with the Letter*, 2012  
 Oil over acrylic on linen  
 24 x 18 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
10. *Violet Tulip with Music Lesson*,  
 2012  
 Oil over acrylic on linen  
 24 x 18 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
11. *Self Portrait with My Museum*,  
 2014  
 Oil over acrylic on linen  
 90 x 61 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
12. *Cascade*, 2016  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 72 x 48 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
13. *Tulips with Book on Manet*, 2017  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 36 x 54 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
14. *Kitchen Matisse*, 2018  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 45 x 60 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
15. *Plums with Compote*, 2018  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 21 1/4 x 16 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
16. *Dahlias with Cherries and Manet*,  
 2020  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 16 x 24 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
17. *A Few of My Favorite Things*, 2021  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 51 x 90 in.  
 Lent by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His  
 Family Foundation, Portland, Ore.
18. *Portrait of Madame Moitessier*,  
 2021  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
19. *Cabbage on Blue II*, 2022  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 12 x 12 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
20. *Oranges with Spoon*, 2022  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 12 x 12 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
21. *A Pear*, 2022  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 10 x 10 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
22. *Still Life with O'Keeffe and Bazille*,  
 2022  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 36 x 72 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
23. *Tomatoes on Vine*, 2022  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 12 x 12 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.
24. *Self Portrait in Rosa Bonheur's  
 Studio*, 2023  
 Oil over acrylic on canvas  
 70 x 95 in.  
 Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery,  
 Portland, Ore.



Sherrie Wolf  
*Still Life with Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Satyrs*, 2007  
oil on canvas · 48 1/4 x 120 in.  
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer  
Image: Aaron Wessling Photography

**ON THE COVER:**

Sherrie Wolf  
*Still Life with O'Keeffe and Bazille*, 2022  
oil over acrylic on canvas · 36 x 72 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Russo Lee Gallery, Portland, OR

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Sherrie Wolf  
*Ophelia*, 1998  
oil on canvas · 48 x 36 in.  
Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer  
Family Foundation  
Image: Strode Photographic