

# ARTWORKS LONDON



## Exhibition Review

### *A still life by Chardin*

By Philomena Epps

Lisson Gallery, Lisson Street, London

Fri 7 July – Sat 26 August 2017

Lisson Gallery's summer group show has been organised by Maxwell Graham, founder of New York's Essex Street Gallery. Titled *A still life by Chardin*, the premise of the exhibition is to explore the influence of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French court painter, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, on contemporary artists. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the hierarchy of the painting genre heralded history and portraits. Chardin's artistic pursuit - the still life - ranked the lowest. In addition to this, Chardin sought to record the mundane and the quotidian, prioritising crockery, wicker baskets, tablecloths, over the quintessential, sumptuous bowl of fruit. Cited as 'irrefutable witness', this unconventional, modest, and subtle approach meant Proust, and later Malraux, posthumously lauded him as one of the greatest artists. 'In France, nothing can rival his work, from the death of Watteau to the Revolution'. This impression of modesty also feels crucial to the show. The pace is slow and gentle - often a rare experience in the contemporary gallery. There is an evocative stillness, and a generosity of space that allows for the viewer to pause and think. In fact, Graham himself references Chardin 'as his yoga' - akin to an out of body experience.

Dan Graham's *Model of Triangular Pavilion with Shoji Screen*, 1990, an emblem of Zen meditation, is a reminder that patience and reflection is key. The following works linger in the mind long after leaving Lisson Street. The exhibition at large seems to be a successful embodiment of a Chardin still life. The artist's humble spirit is revived through a careful selection of artists who have focused on the minutiae of everyday objects or commonplace materials - wood, cardboard, postcards, paper. True to conceptual form, these are not materials free of critical associations. Engaged with the ethics of recycle and re-use, B. Wurtz puts the discarded on a pedestal. Metal from a stereo system, or old shelf brackets, become beautiful - familiar and strange. Cameron Rowland's *Loot*, 2013, is a cardboard box filled with broken copper pipes, however, Rowland is engaging in a furious critique of the material, in relation to sociological and economic arguments concerned with the selling of public art services to private corporations.

A series of A6 archival photographs are tacked to the wall by reception. Excluding a photograph by Jef Geys, the rest are archival documents from two exhibitions in Lisson Gallery history. An assemblage box from Audrey Barker's 1967 exhibition, and an intervention in 1973, when Michael Asher cut an architectural reveal into the gallery wall. *A Box for Nicholas Roberts*, 1967, from Barker's same exhibition appears further into the exhibition - a pared back, mixed media exploration of assemblage. Concepts of physicality, disability, access, and the anti-institutional run through the show. Barker took a ten-year break from making art in the 1970s due to a severe illness; in the 1980s she began working on installations that explored both

physical and intellectual accessibility, famously rejecting a show at the ICA due to their lack of disabled access.

The artist as activist, social practitioner, or teacher is another nexus of the exhibition. To return to the idea of the modest artist, these are individuals who are engaged with life outside the art world bubble. Much of Geys' work is invested in a critique surrounding the conditions of the art trade. Standing outside from his role as 'artist', Geys worked as a public school teacher in Balen from 1960–1989, and since the 1960s he has been the editor and publisher of his local newspaper, the Kempens Informatieblad. Laurie Parsons only made art for a short period between the late 1980s and early 1990s before choosing to dedicate her life to advocacy and social work: working with the homeless, and children and adults with mental health problems. *Box of Photos*, 1991, is akin to something one might find under anyone's bed, a cardboard shoebox filled with personal letters, photos, and notes. In its initial showing, exhibited in tandem with a work by Félix González-Torres, the spectator was invited to rifle through, and take something away with them. The idea of the personal continues to filter through the exhibition. Maud Sulter was a Ghanian and Scottish artist, poet, curator, and active feminist. Her folded card work, *The Alabama Branch of My Family Tree*, 1986, was one of several which used burnt paper, and produced during the critical decade that she lived in London and was engaged with the seminal Black Arts Movement.

Other artists engage with their own private vocabularies or creative significations. Hanne Darboven's two works from 1985 are emblematic of her practice, which engaged with seriality and minimalism, often creating deeply complex hand-drawn numerical or visual systems. The notion of the index, or categorisation, is crucial to Pati Hill's *Untitled* series, 1977-1979, in which she used an IBM photocopier to create a visual record of objects - from the commonplace; paper bags and shirt sleeves, to paving stones, and even a fragment of dust from the Grand Trianon in Versaille. An image of fruit is printed onto one of these paper bags. Here, we find the most opaque reference to Chardin - an unconventional, unostentatious still life - but conceived through the technology of the twentieth century. Zooming in and framing the unnoticed details of everyday life is also unveiled in the photographs of Moyra Davey. *Hoboken*, 1999-2017, is an intimate portrait of her studio. Profiling old tubes, this is another realisation of Chardin's messy kitchen table. When Davey sends her photographs to be exhibited; she folds them up and mails them. They are affixed to the wall like that, complete with the fold creases, handwritten address, stamps, and ad hoc bits of tape. Our perspective, what we expect to encounter, what we deem art, and who we deem 'Artists', is challenged.