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## Vanitas: The Art of Death and Decay

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# vanitas

THE ART OF DEATH  
AND DECAY

Kristine Somerville



Audrey Flack, *Wheel of Fortune (Vanitas)*, 1977–78, © Audrey Flack, photograph  
courtesy of Louis K. Meisel Gallery

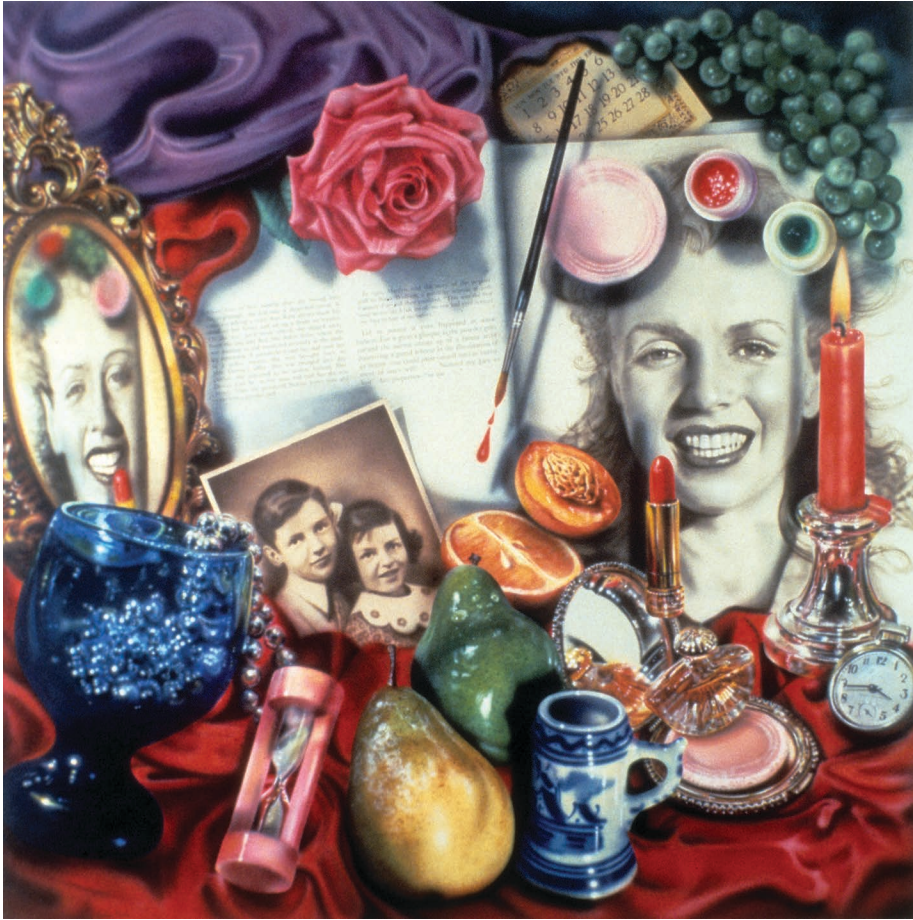


Audrey Flack, *World War II (Vanitas)*, 1976–77, © Audrey Flack, photograph courtesy of Louis K. Meisel Gallery

Last fall, while driving home for lunch, I turned a corner and spotted a dead raccoon on the side of the road at the edge of my neighbor's yard. I retrieved a shovel from my garage and, along with my neighbor, who had just stepped out his front door, moved the raccoon to an empty lot across the street. We laid the animal to rest in a tangle of withering wildflowers and tall grasses. As if on cue, the wind stirred, and leaves fell around us in a pageantry of fall colors. I stood beside my neighbor for a serene moment before we turned and went our separate ways.

Two days later, a wake of buzzards encircled the carcass, feasting on it, and by the third day, its body had been picked clean. An intact skeleton remained, nested in tufts of black and gray fur. And then, in short order, its bones were dragged off, too, leaving behind only a skull.





Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, 1977. © Audrey Flack, photograph courtesy of Louis K. Meisel Gallery

Against the backdrop of fading fall flowers, nature had offered up a wild version of vanitas—the art of death and decay. Flowers and skulls are two of the most poignant symbols of life’s cycle. The skull evokes life’s transience in an immediate and primordial way, while flowers mark its most significant passages: birth, marriage, and death. Combined, the symbols convey a powerful image of the fragility of beauty and the brevity of human existence.

In this small woodland scene, I was thrown into a meditation on life’s fleeting nature. Or perhaps I had been thinking about it already. I had taken a keen interest in the raccoon’s decomposition because, it seemed, I needed to come to terms with death. In youth, if we are lucky, loss is infrequent, but it is no surprise that as we age, loss happens more often.

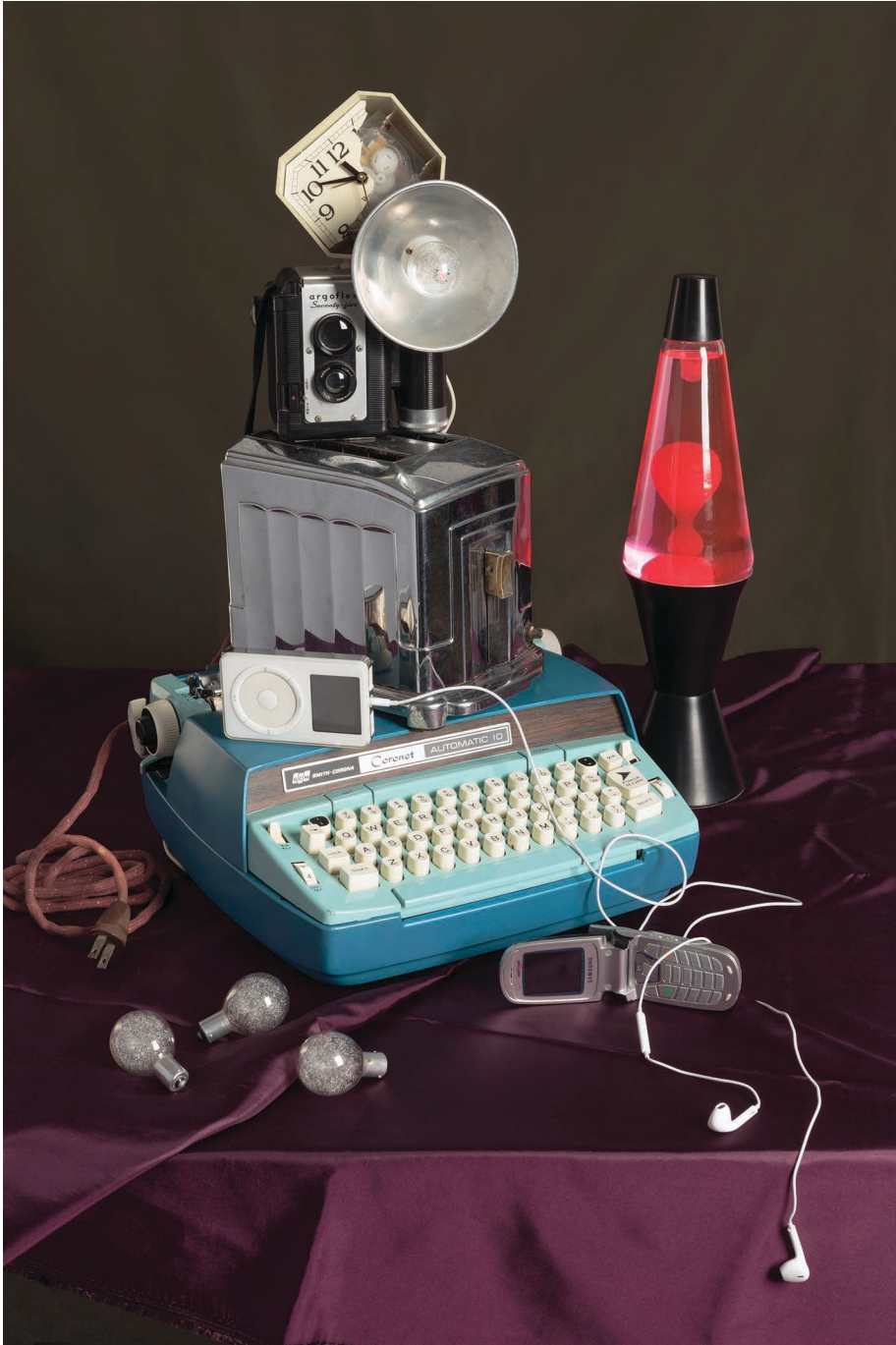


Dan Bannino, *Elvis Presley, Cause of Death: Heart Attack, Last Meal: Four Scoops of Vanilla Ice Cream, Six Chocolate Chip Cookies, Neon Vanitas*, 2019, courtesy of the artist





Dan Bannino, *Marilyn Monroe, Cause of Death: Barbiturate Overdose, Last Meal: Stuffed Mushrooms, Meatballs, Champagne, Neon Vanitas*, 2019, courtesy of the artist



Jeanette May, *Blue Typewriter*, *Tech Vanitas*, 2015, courtesy of the artist, [www.JeanetteMay.com](http://www.JeanetteMay.com)





Jeanette May, *Pink Sewing Machine, Tech Vanitas*, 2015, courtesy of the artist, [www.JeanetteMay.com](http://www.JeanetteMay.com)





Jeanette May, *Reel to Reel, Tech Vanitas*, 2017, courtesy of the artist,  
[www.JeanetteMay.com](http://www.JeanetteMay.com)



Paul Béliveau, *Vanitas*, 2019, courtesy of the artist





Paul Béliveau, *Vanitas*, 2022, courtesy of the artist

Of course, there is the death of grandparents and then parents but also, more stunningly, of siblings, friends, lovers, colleagues, and pets. Facebook updates now keep us aware of friends and the loss of their loved ones, too—sometimes, most sadly, their children. Even the death of celebrities and public figures has an impact, though we are often too embarrassed to admit it.

Western culture is not particularly good at normalizing death. Each of us must find our own way to handle it. Over the years, art and literature have provided me with moments of comfort and insight. The awareness of the inevitability of death has spurred the creativity of artists for centuries, and the tradition of vanitas still-life paintings in particular offers a way to grow accustomed to periods of mortality and darkness.

The theme of vanitas in art first developed in Holland and Northern Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. In early vanitas tradition, this genre of still life was considered an object of beauty and a sign of status and wealth. But the composition of iconic memento mori symbols was intended for spiritual contemplation. Viewers were to meditate on the impermanence of life and earthly pleasure in the face of the unavoidable and definitive nature of death.

Playing on the Latin word “vanity,” vanitas became a metaphor for the ephemerality of worldly riches and sensual delights. As the tradition



Paul Béliveau, *Vanitas*, 2022, courtesy of the artist

developed and broadened in purpose, taking on more secular functions, the images became increasingly complex, rich, and varied. The most immediate and universal symbol of mortality in the tradition is the human skull, but other objects hold significance as references to time passing and the fragility of human existence. A catalog of recurring symbols, such as books, candles, hourglasses, calendars, mirrors, flowers, insects, and shadows, is used to evoke themes of death but also of materialism, spirituality, pleasure, temptation, and beauty.

The vanitas still-life tradition has continued to be relevant for contemporary artists who choose to take stock of the human condition. The works of the five artists showcased here have updated the genre with themes of modern maladies, such as rampant technology, consumer culture, and our vain quest for power and status. At the same time, these artists evoke the age-old theme of life's great mystery: death.

Groundbreaking painter of photorealism Audrey Flack uses traditional iconography from seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas still lifes as a starting point in her explorations of death, luxury, and consumption. The imagery in *Wheel of Fortune* conjures the world of the fortune teller. Traditional vanitas imagery commingles with the ephemera of gambling and mysticism. A skull appears prominently in the foreground, with a mirror reflecting its empty eye sockets and toothy grimace, but





Paul Béliveau, *Vanitas*, 2023, courtesy of the artist

a scattering of tarot cards and dice suggests that chance and fate dictate when death visits us. *Marilyn*, a lushly textured and colorful painting, is densely packed with traditional vanitas imagery as well, but what dominates the still life are the contemporary accoutrements of glamour: a gold compact, lipstick, pearls, and perfume. This shrine to young Norma Jean with her girl-next-door beauty takes on an ominous message when we remember the tragedy of Marilyn Monroe's life and its testament to the fleeting value of celebrity and the deceptiveness of the Hollywood fantasy.

Internationally known Italian photographer Dan Bannino also interrogates the hollowness and temporality of celebrity in *Neon Vanitas*. This series of brightly lit still lifes in saturated color depicts the last meals of celebrities and historical figures. In *Elvis*, a skull is centered against



Liz Obert, *Vanitas 14, Modern Vanitas*, 2022, courtesy of the artist

a blue satin backdrop. Served in gaudy gold goblets and plates, an assortment of the singer's favorite late-night snacks—a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich, vanilla ice cream, and chocolate-chip cookies—clutters the table. *Marilyn* features a scattering of colorful pills, an empty champagne bottle, and a half-filled glass, symbols of the excess that led to her premature and tragic death.

The three pieces from Jeannette May's *Tech Vanitas* photography series feature beautifully designed, obsolete technology—flip phones, alarm clocks, sewing machines, car stereos, reel-to-reel recorders, and typewriters—arranged in arresting still lifes where objects pile up and teeter on top of each other. May's vanitas emphasize the ephemeral, forgotten quality of must-haves from another era and the anxiety surrounding our ever-increasing dependency on technology and its all-encompassing power.

French artist Paul Béliveau began his vanitas painting series in 2001. Working in photorealism, he depicts lifelike books of literature, art, music, history, wine, and food as if they are aligned on a shelf, the spines facing outward. We are to meditate on these books, for they offer a way to cope with the struggles of the world. Photographer Liz Obert's *Modern Vanitas* series questions consumerism and its consequences. Rather than meditation, her work is a call to action to change our ways. Her





Liz Obert, *Vanitas 7, Modern Vanitas*, 2022, courtesy of the artist



Liz Obert, *Vanitas 4, Modern Vanitas*, 2022, courtesy of the artist

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still lifes feature tables strewn with unappealing fast-food burgers, fries, and fish sandwiches. The branded packaging of McDonald's, Burger King, and Starbucks disrupts traditional vanitas trappings, begging the question of whether our current habits might be hastening our need to consider the end.

In his 49 AD essay "On the Shortness of Life," Roman stoic philosopher Seneca wrote, "You are living as if destined to live forever; your own frailty never occurs to you; you don't notice how much time has already passed but squander it as though you had a full and overflowing supply." Vanitas still lifes also remind us that our time on earth is finite and that the worldly experience of reality is nothing more than vapor, shadow, and smoke. He warns, "You act like mortals in all that you fear, and like immortals in all that you desire." Yet we may occasionally pause so that we fear less, desire less, but contemplate more the nature of death as a means of acceptance and wonder.