

Willa Wasserman: *Purple apple*

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When I visited Wasserman's studio two days before her departure to São Paulo, she told me the story of a friend who left some lock picks behind. Slender and delicate, they found their way into her still life paintings, alongside flowers and apples. Lock pickers seek entrance without license. The practice is most commonly associated with theft—condemned by society, yet the foundational logic of nations. Wasserman believes in a transgressive kind of access. Her interest extends beyond door locks to resistance movements, trans DIY healthcare, reclaiming housing—translated here into the medium of painting.

Wasserman picks at the lock of painting, hoping to enter not by force but through patient attention—learning where the medium resists and where it yields. In her work, monastic discipline meets disruption: drawing equally from the formal austerities of early seventeenth-century Netherlandish still life and the political urgency of punk album art.

For several years now, Wasserman has sustained an engagement with still life. In her words: "still lifes feel closer to thinking for me than even language—than poetry or philosophy. Still life just feels like arranging ideas, grammar-less, within the space a person has just left." She paints flower arrangements, ordinary objects from daily life, often rendered on metal. A skilled metalworker, she works on copper, bronze and brass. Here her investment in lock picking—what she calls "unlicensed use"—moves beyond metaphor into formal strategy. Her surfaces carry the luminosity of prepared metal: scratched, marked, oxidized. On them, she renders delicate still lifes, often beginning in silverpoint. They possess a ghostly quality, images emerging from or receding into the metal itself.

In some still lifes, the objects are specific to a trans life, a life structured by transgressive access. Still life has always operated through coded recognition—symbols that signify only to those positioned to read them. Trans identity shares this logic of legibility: not everyone will parse the grammar. The reflective surface takes on additional resonance here. Lacan's mirror stage theorizes identity as constructed through identification with an illusory coherence—the promise of a unified self that the mirror appears to offer. This founding fiction can take on a different valence when the mirror's promise never quite coheres. Wasserman's reflective surfaces refuse that false unity. The image and the reflection cannot be separated; they remain in perpetual negotiation.

Still life has always been in conversation with reflection and access. Several Dutch and Flemish masters embedded themselves into their paintings through the illusion of reflective surfaces—painting their own reflections in polished metal and curved glass. In a 1622 vanitas, Pieter Claesz painted himself reflected in a glass sphere, his monochrome technique promoting bare sufficiency as the Dutch grappled with anxiety around newfound luxury—the artist identifying with restraint rather than excess. Clara Peeters, one of the few known female Flemish still life painters, painted herself dozens of times, always as reflection: in goblets, knife blades, the convex surface of a teapot. Peeters' repeated self-insertions insist on her presence in a space largely closed to women—claiming access to artistic identity. For Wasserman, the relationship shifts. The reflective surface isn't an illusionistic device within the painting—it's the literal material condition, the ground itself. For the old masters, reflection was content; for Wasserman, reflection is structure. The two can't be separated.

When Wasserman works on linen, she often sketches first in silverpoint, so the metal quality persists even without the metal ground. Some still lifes are all haze and atmosphere—pinks, greys, yellows bleeding into each other. At center: an apple. A recurring motif in her work, though its significance remains unspoken, even to the artist herself. Often purple—bruised, or nearly. Of course, the apple is never just an apple. Eve knew this. Newton too.

Wasserman's paintings hold onto moments already dissolving on a planet slowly coming undone under environmental precarity. She calls it "this-ness"—the irreducibly present. Virginia Woolf called it "moments of being." A devoted observer of still life, Woolf was obsessed with capturing the precise quality of a moment. In *A Sketch of the Past*, she writes of "moments of being" as those sudden shocks of reality where something becomes intensely, almost unbearably present. She describes it as "a sledgehammer force" revealing "a token of some real thing behind appearances."

The large-scale drawings I saw in Wasserman's studio that have traveled with her to Brazil occupy different territory. Rendered in charcoal on light-weight linen, they show ghostly silhouettes of people engaging in direct actions ranging from food distribution to targeted property destruction. The latter is meant to evoke the high-profile activities of UK-based Palestine Action activists. The roofs belong to factories supplying military components to Israel. By cutting holes in the roofs, the activists disrupt production. Transgressive access becomes political resistance, material rebellion. Here Wasserman aligns herself with Leon Golub, who confronted viewers with state-sanctioned violence. But where Golub forces entry—scraping and scratching his surfaces—Wasserman picks the lock, seeking to confront

viewers with ordinary people who are resisting the same system. Her figures emerge and dissolve into shadows, with a haunting quality that recalls Goya's black paintings.

Kathy Acker argued that Goya's Black Paintings represent a radical refusal of conventional communication—paintings rejecting language itself, never intended to be shown. Acker wrote:

"I see what I see immediately; I don't rethink it. My seeing is as rough or unformed as what I'm seeing. This is realism: the unification of my perceiving and what I perceive or a making of a mirror relation between my world and the world of the painting." She situated the paintings within Goya's exile under Spanish Bourbon oppression—exile as the ultimate restriction of access.

Like Goya's figures emerging from darkness, Wasserman's drawings of human figures carry the quality of still life—bodies arrested mid-action, their gestures suspended. Still life never excluded the human figure—it traced human presence through objects. The genre has always held this tension: between the arrested moment and the hands that arranged it. The apple didn't jump onto the table. Someone placed it there. Someone chose this knife. Someone killed this rabbit. Someone's hands touched these things. Someone will eat the apple. And somewhere, someone is cutting a hole in a roof to stop the production of weapons that will turn other someones into still lives.

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