Still Life

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Senior Thesis on Still Life Photography

I. Introduction

My objective for the Senior Thesis is to develop further skills in photography and to define my own unique style through getting inspiration from media and other works of art while having photo shoots on a regular basis to practice continuously. My thesis started off as commercial photography, specifically focused on foods and boutique cafes. Before the thesis, I previously finished the independent studies MAS 350 on creating an art book about ‘Boutique Cafes in Seoul.’ With my interest in photography and food, I wanted to further develop my skills in taking pictures and to define my unique style especially in still life photography. Every week, I came up with two to three pictures of different objects and themes to experiment with a variety of structures and lighting. Through trying out different ideas and getting feedback from my fellow senior thesis students and studio arts department faculty members, I went through three phases of progress throughout the year. I was able to slowly shift my focus and direction of the thesis towards still life photography, interpreting my life as a student and a photographer, as well as sending a message that I believe is important. As a Media Arts and Sciences major, I included the digital aspects. A lot of the inspiration and ideas are retrieved through utilizing digital and social media, as well as traditional media such as magazines and books. As a generation living in a digital age, the way artists promote themselves and their work has changed greatly. It is not bound by location or time. Below, I have described my inspirations and ideas and how I was able to reach the point of developing such inspiration into my own style and skills.

II. Biography

I was born in Evanston, IL in 1992. However, our family went back to Korea a year after I was born. Until my college years at Wellesley, I grew up in Seoul, Korea. I was exposed to
American media through television and Internet, but was mostly influenced by what was around me all the time, which was Korean media. Since I was young, I have travelled a lot and it has been one of the best experiences I have had. Exposure to different cultures was great in nourishing my creativity and imagination. Traveling to China, Japan, the Philippines, Cambodia, Jakarta, Canada, France, Switzerland, Italy, and so on, it was interesting to see how every culture had its own distinct features that defined its own unique qualities and fostered cultural difference. Even though I was born to native Korean parents, they also grew up in a multicultural environment. My grandfather was an ambassador in European countries and studied abroad in the US and the UK. So growing up, it was inevitable to be exposed to a multicultural environment. Such experience has helped a lot in forming my own style of photography. I was not bound by one type of culture or set of ideas. I have always been interested in photography. When it all started, it was more of a hobby to capture my everyday activities and life rather than a serious work of art. When I was at Gyeonggi Suwon International School, I used to work as a yearbook design editor from 10th grade to 12th grade. I did take few pictures for events such as varsity sports tournaments and fundraising club events that were going on, but mostly spent my time editing pictures and designing layouts using InDesign for the pages. The skills that I developed in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator during that period helped me a lot in utilizing those platforms for photo correction.

I started taking photography seriously from the first day I took Photography I class at Wellesley with Professor Kelly. Throughout my four years at Wellesley, I took photography classes and independent studies to steadily improve my skills and form my own style. I still am at a stage where I am experimenting with different styles because I do not have my distinct char-
actor. Through exposing myself to other people’s works of art, I have been trying out various paths to push myself to the next level.

III. Inspiration

III-A. from Media

Kinfolk magazine first introduced me to the world of art magazines. Launched in 2012 by Nathan Williams, Kinfolk pursued the slow lifestyle that promotes small gatherings and cultivates more community time among friends and family members. From cookbooks to events, Kinfolk is dedicated to various topics. I was mainly inspired by their photographic style. In every issue, they hire freelance photographers for their articles. Even though the photographers are always different, the magazine is consistent with its style, lighting, composition, and color tone, all of which are very distinct. From the three examples above, it is possible to assume that the atmosphere of the cafe is very calm and quiet. Whether of living people or just a background with bagels and furniture, the slightly dark moody lighting and limited color range set the overall feelings of the picture to be calm and silent. The people portrayed in the picture have limited movement and closed posture, which also sets a similar mood as that in the picture with inanimate objects only.
The most recent issue is about ‘Entrepreneurship.’ With a model posing in the picture, Kinfolk successfully portrayed their message through images of a model in a very simplistic yet toned down lifestyle. The outfits he wears, the furniture that he has at his place, the food that he eats, and the place where he works are all consistent with Kinfolk’s style. Such style is represented very well with its unique moody atmosphere, which Kinfolk has been presenting in their past issues.

Cereal magazine is a travel and lifestyle magazine started by a married couple, Rosa Park and Rich Stapleton. Even from the cover of the magazine, it is possible to tell that the magazine pursues simplicity. With its monochromatic website and minimalistic cover photos, the photographs in Cereal magazine utilize white space as much as possible. I was intrigued by its minimalistic style of photography.

Whether it’s a still life or a landscape, the photographs are simple and clean to the point that only the tip of the object that the picture is trying to portray is displayed. The pictures are not taken to show where the place is or what the product is about. Just the tip of the object is enough
to convey the message. It is not only visually pleasing, but also very intriguing as it makes the audience curious about what the object would look like if they were to see the whole body or the entire scenery. Such curiosity encourages the viewers to engage with the photos. It is pleasant to stare at the picture for a long period of time. Such a clean and modern atmosphere helps the readers of the magazine to engage and focus more on the content as well. Typical travel magazines tend to cram their suggestions for places to eat and places to go into such a limited space that everything becomes crowded and chaotic. However, Cereal magazine is not afraid to leave the margins blank.

One common factor that these two art magazines have in common is that they are utilizing digital and social media very actively using their photographs as a source. They do not simply reside in print media. Both offer digital and print subscriptions for the readers. Also, they utilize social media platforms, such as Instagram, to promote their brand and image to readers around the world.

III-B. from Social Media

Due to my constant involvement with Instagram, I have become an expert in every detail of the application. Not only have I used the application to promote my work of art, I have also utilized it to get inspiration from other users. Instagram is a social media platform where you can manage and upload photos and create a website and an account that shows the collection of images of your work. Instagram can be accessed through iOS and Android applications, as well as from a Desktop as it automatically creates a personal website for the user. By setting up the account as public or by adding a hashtag on comments, users can show their work or access other users’ pictures freely. One feature that allows the users to interact with each other is the ‘like’
button that gives other users the freedom to show interest in the picture. A lot of artists and companies have started to upload their works of art onto their Instagram accounts, similar to a portfolio. Unlike usual digital portfolio websites, it has become a platform for artists to actually promote their works and engage in a conversation with the audience, as they would instantly give ‘likes’ and comments under the picture to appreciate or express their feelings about the work. It is amazing that such a social media platform has become a tool for artists to give direct and instant feedback from people around the world. It is not limited by location or time. This aspect of engaging art work with social media attracted me a lot. With no cost, it is possible to show the world what you have and what you can make and then receive feedback on it. As mentioned above, a wide variety of businesses are utilizing social media to promote their image and work. Kinfolk has accumulated 596,000 followers and Cereal has 355,000 followers. Their accounts do not focus on delivering the content, but rather focus on appealing to the readers about their brand
through the images that they present in the magazine. Instagram has become their portfolio for their works of art. A lot of the followers consider the pictures that they upload works of art, as they deliver high quality images that please a wide audience.

One of the most inspiring users is Tofurier. She experiments a lot with her subjects and composition. Sometimes she would go for theatrical composition where it almost feels surreal. Sometimes she takes candid shots that still have a mystical atmosphere to draw the attention. The picture to the left gives an atmosphere as if it is touched with a Photoshop to the point where it feels magical. The dramatic contrast of green tea ice cream that resembles a spaceship and green tea powder forming a pyramid gives the photo a theatrical quality. Even the dripping ice cream adds motion to the picture. The second picture gave me the most inspiration as it used the white fabric with rustic orange boxes. Because of its monochromatic background and subject matter, I was fascinated by the use of orange as the point color. Reminiscent of Dutch still life paintings, the photo contains flowing fabrics with other still life subjects such as fruit and glassware. Such a use of fabric reminded me of those paintings, which will be described in more detail in Section III-C. Using fabrics and monochromatic tones of materials inspired me in the process of coming up with ideas and taking my own photos.
Another platform where users can access a lot of great works and spread their work of art is Pinterest. It is a website where users can upload their pictures, retrieve images from any websites, and pull the images to their account from another user’s account. Such images can be stored in a separate container, like a folder or a board. The basic idea behind Pinterest is to pin images digitally like pinning physical images onto the board to store and organize them. Like Instagram, it is possible for the users to follow another user’s account or like the images. The image above is from one of the user accounts that I visit the most. It shows how Pinterest works and how her account helped me to access a lot of great pictures as a resource. I was able to follow and access her works of art as well as those that she chose to keep on her board. Most of her composition is consistent. A lot of her pictures are taken above the table level. Her pictures are used on her blogs to show the recipe and the process of making them. However, her pictures focus on limited ingredients or a part of the process. Like Cereal
magazine, she chose to eliminate some elements and show only part of the whole process that would represent her idea and message. The deep dark wooden table sets the overall moody atmosphere of the photo. The light creates great contrast between the background and the objects on top of the table. However, because of the vertical angle of the shot, the focus is evenly distributed among all the objects. It almost looks Two-dimensional even with its deep contrast in light. There are tools, ingredients, messy crumbles, and prepared food, altogether on the table, but not one single object has more attention than another. Such perspective encourages the viewers to focus on all of the items and engages them to identify what is going on in the picture. The aspect of allowing the viewers to have the freedom to identify the situation makes the work interesting and intriguing.

III-C. from Art history

The Art of Still Life by Norbert Schneider gives the history of still life paintings during the period from the Middle Ages to the 17th century. Even though it dates back to the 17th century, a lot of the composition and the mood that was created in the paintings are reinterpreted and recreated through a new medium, photography. From the works of art that were listed in the book, few of them resonated with me or stood out more than others. Still Life by Jan Davisz., de Heem attracted my curiosity about the whole composition and the objects that were displayed. Just the texture of the cloth itself had so much volume to it that it added dimension to all of the props. A half peeled lemon seemed to add a sense of curiosity as to why the lemon was not fully peeled or whole. It led me to more questions, ‘Why is the other peel dangling on top of the prop on the back?’ The fact that there was not much on the background and had the items laid in the front resembled and reminded me of the work of the user ‘Tworedbowls’ that I mentioned earli-
er. The barely visible skeleton of the table legs implies that the table exists. It makes the situation more realistic as it suggests that the props are not floating in the air. Such a moody atmosphere was also present in *Slaughtered Ox* by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn in 1655. It has a rough texture with rough strokes. The background is blurred and dark, having more focus on the slaughtered ox. Such a technique could be recreated in photography by adding a vignette to the edge of the photograph to make the picture more focused on the object in the center. In terms of composition, *Still Life* by Pieter Claesz in 1633 gave me many ideas for displaying items. The composition was linear without much depth of field. The objects that were displayed had different textures; a glass cup, a silver cup, a lemon peel, bread, oysters, and silverware. The color scheme was similar, but there was a great range in the material of the items.

Another book that I was able to reference was *Pop Art: A Continuous History* by Marco Livingstone. There were two works of art that resonated with me the most, *Supermarket Shopper* by Duane Hanson in 1970 and *Casserole et moules fermé* by Marcel Broodthaers in 1964. The fact that they were trying to work with art and reality inspired me the most. For Hanson, the sculptural human is fake, but the clothes, the objects, and the shopping cart are real. Mussels are the national dish of Belgium. Belgians cook them on a stove. However, the way Broodthaers stacked the mussels on top of each other does not reflect the traditional way that they serve the mussels. Therefore such a presentation has a surreal quality. This idea of playing with reality gave me the idea to push my work to a different path.
IV. My Work and My Progress

A lot of my works were inspired by the digital media users that I have described earlier. The modern and clean style resonated with me even more as I started practicing photography in a way that represented minimalism. The earlier stage of the Senior thesis research was limited in colors and objects. I was fascinated by the marginal space. Crowding the picture with many objects or colors did not appeal to me at all. When I first started taking pictures, I focused more on how it feels and how it looks. I was inspired by the work that Kinfolk and Cereal magazine created. Their clean and minimalistic look resonated with me very much to the point where I was intrigued to pursue my style of photography in such a manner. Their purpose was to make the objects look as beautiful as possible to attract the readers’ attention. The mood of the picture was focused on calm and serene ambience.

I would go to a grocery store and look around for an object that had the most interesting feature or shape that would catch my eye. Farmers markets and grocery stores were where I got my inspiration and ideas for the photo shoot. Most of the photo shoots included one or more items with much focus on having marginal space to create the calm and clean atmosphere that I love. My main focus was the ambience that the lighting creates, and the clean and simple structure that the composition creates. The picture above shows how I was focused on the overall warm and quiet atmosphere that the dim lighting generated. As I was eating cereal in the morning, the lighting felt perfect. Because I was shooting all the photos from my apartment, I was not bound by time limits of when I can shoot. I focused on shooting with natural light. I believe natu-
nal light brings out the genuine color. My initial proposal for the Senior thesis was commercial food photography. My objective was to have the most beautiful picture that looked more delicious and beautiful than it already was in real life. My focus was centered on making the objects desirable to the viewers. The picture to the left with a cracked egg was focused on the background pattern and the smooth and shiny texture of the egg. The white background and the way the egg was cracked visually appealed to me a lot. As in the previous photograph, this photograph used the same technique of limiting color tone with as few objects as possible. However, I deviated from the original plan in order to push myself to the next level.

One of the most frequent comments I heard from the first critique was that it was too beautiful and too clean and that I should think outside of the box to challenge myself. I needed to create more complex pictures that would engage the audience, instill curiosity, and induce a desire for its viewer to create their own story that explained the image. My second phase was geared towards creating more stories through pictures. This is when I started referencing the user ‘Tofurier’ from Instagram and ‘Tworedbowls’ from Pinterest. Unlike Kinfolk and Cereal magazine, they preferred dimmer light with much more complex ideas. The surrealism that ‘Tofurier’ created from her works of art inspired me to focus on the shapes and lines that the objects created. The picture on the right is a leftover from a lobster feast. It is not edible and makes the viewers not want to have the lobster in any way. It is even surrounded by a trash bag. However, because of the hard texture and the
dynamic size, the shapes and lines that the leftover lobster created were mystical and visually appealing. I was fascinated by how such a weirdly unexpected object could create a story. The way I came up with the picture was out of the blue. My best friend and I prepared for lunch with lobsters we bought from the grocery store. After we finished eating, we focused on cleaning up and dumping the inedible parts that remained. Right before we were about to clear out the table, the idea that I should challenge myself and think outside of the box struck me. Because the food in my pictures was too pretty and delicious, I thought of going the other way. I wanted to make something gross into something visually pleasing. After my friend left, I took out the garbage bag and displayed the lobster shells and guts on top of the dark table cloth. I wanted to minimize the details of the background since the shapes and lines created by the lobster were chaotic enough, similar to the Slaughtered Ox. Also, the strong red color of the shells contrasted with the garbage bag made the overall look intense and bold.

I also took another approach by adding more objects inside the frame to increase the complexity of the overall composition. The user “Tworedbowls” and Dutch still life paintings both inspired me to create a story within the picture instead of focusing on one or two objects. In the picture to the left, I created a scene where I am in the process of baking. I was very much intrigued by the ambience the dark background and dim light created. It still had the serene atmosphere I wished to portray, but it was a lot different from the pictures that I shot during my first phase. The image was not necessarily determined to display a delicious finished product but rather fo-
cused on utilizing the strength of the natural color and shapes of the ingredients in order to draw attention to the finer details. I found an order inside the chaos. Nuts were sprinkled on the table, egg shells were lying around, and the dim light produced a stale appearance with respect to the milk and butter. Nevertheless, the mixture of different ingredients across the table made the objects seem to have an orderly rule. I was fascinated by the mystical ambience that the darkness created. It was amazing to see how the inner part of an egg shell added a glimpse of light and lifted the whole atmosphere. I enjoyed the quality of having multiple objects with different textures and adding more depth to the photo. I tried to pull three-dimensional qualities out of the structure by creating a photo setting with much more depth. All of the objects were positioned in a way that looked more compositional. I attempted to create a scene where the stage is on the borderline between reality and theater by constructing a composition that encourages mysticism.

My third phase came along after the winter break. Following the second critique, I still had comments about being too commercial. I was struggling to go for absolutely candid shots where it felt less staged and more natural. Instead, I took a step towards absolute staging and theatrical quality. I also wanted to reference my life as a college student who moved from South Korea. The photo on the left depicts mackerel hanging from the ceiling. In Korea, there is an ingredient called Jo-gi, which is a dried fish. People used to dry fish by hanging them from the ceiling to prepare food during the winter. I wanted to portray such a quality and history about Korea to reflect my origin. However, I also wanted to add a western quality to show my current situation. So, I de-
decided to hang mackerel from the ceiling using red and white thread that were used for wrapping Christmas gifts. During the shooting, the fish were constantly rotating in a different direction and speed, making it look as if they were swimming in the ocean.

Another reference to my life as a college student was through the picture to the right. It was taken during and after the unprecedented snowstorm that struck Boston this winter. I stocked my cabinet with Campbell chicken noodle soup and microwavable frozen meals such as Hot Pockets and pasta. The composition is a reference to the photo that I made previously during the second phase. However, I took it one step further. By showing the tablecloth draping under the table, I tried to create realism to show where the picture was taken. The falling white cloth was a reflection from the Still Life paintings of the 17th century. Having higher ceilings in the photo was an attempt to create a more vertical quality in the overall atmosphere. The title is Baby it’s cold outside. I tried adding humor, as well as a description of how my life is and what I’m eating with my status as a student, as well as the weather condition. It was an approach to the Pop art culture as well. Campbell soups and microwavable frozen meals represent the food culture of the younger generation. Also from a foreigner’s perspective, it directly relates to the representation of the American food culture. Low cost fast food. It reflects how my appetite is becoming Americanized as a student going to a college in the States. Even though I wanted to produce a work that reflected myself, the composition is highly staged, not
candid. The food that I am consuming is real and it is my reality, but the way it is presented is not natural. It was an idea that I got from Hanson.

I decided to take another step in reflecting my life through my work. The more I focused on taking photographs of food, the more I realized that there is a huge debate about whether pictures of food should be recognized as art. Many pictures uploaded on social media platforms include meals that the users had and what they were doing in their personal lives. Every day thousands of pictures are uploaded on the server, but they are not recognized as art. The subjective distinction between what is to be considered art and what is not intrigued me. It is impossible to define what art is. Just the attempt to define art would make the existing definition even more confusing and chaotic. More of the same, it is not so simple for an individual to define what is art and what is not. Just because it is not traditional or deep, does not mean it cannot be art. In regards to the debate, I’ve decided to send my message to the people around the world who disregard food picture, especially on digital media, and try to create a hierarchy on the art works. The title of the picture below is Because food is not Art. It is not just food. Some regard photography to be less important than paintings and sculptures. From Philosophy of Art class, I was able to learn about the debate regarding giving a piece of art a hierarchy and title, and whether it should be acknowledged as art or just an everyday doodle that should go in the trash. Through the photo shoot, I wanted to ask those who disregard food in pictures, and photography in general, if the dab of paint around the apple would be enough to make this picture be considered art. I wanted to focus more on posing a question to the world, while still
maintaining humor and my own unique style during the shoot. Unlike the first phase, I came up with an idea and theme before rushing to the grocery store for an inspiration. I first came up with the statement, “Because food is not art.” and then thought of a way to make something less of an art, into more of an art. My initial idea about what is representative of art required paint and a paint brush. By creating the pictures above, I wanted to challenge people to think about what art really is and whether it is possible to even make such a statement. As long as I put the question in the viewers’ heads, I can proudly say that my pictures achieved their purpose.

Throughout the year, I went through three phases of changes in terms of directing my process on how to create my own style of photographs. Whether it was influenced by a media platform, the culture of social media, or a critique, it is certain that such practice helped in shaping and forming my own skills and ideas to create something better every day.
V. Bibliography


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