

DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

Guy Diehl

Art About Art: A Luminous Pursuit

As art about art, Diehl's paintings explore different artistic movements across recent history, often by referencing other artists within the composition itself. The still-life format, a rich tradition in its own right, allows Diehl to set up relationships between art historical references and carefully chosen everyday objects, encouraging viewers to draw their own connections and conclusions.

Although Diehl's style can be described as realist, he creates paintings that reflect a highly personal interpretation of reality. Having studied with first-generation Photorealists Robert Bechtle and Richard McLean while a master's student at San Francisco State University, as a young painter in the mid-1970s, Diehl made work that was arguably more closely aligned with a strict application of photorealism. However, a turn toward still life and an interest in creating art that meditated upon art granted him a new way of seeing that championed the freedom of the untethered interpretive eye.

Diehl draws inspiration from his surroundings, absorbing and collecting as he moves through his daily life. *Still Life with Stuart Davis* (2017), for example, features a work he encountered at a recent exhibition about Davis at the De Young Museum in San Francisco. Around his rendering of Davis's energetic and graphic red-and-black painting—depicted as a postcard pinned to a wall—Diehl arranges everyday objects and curiosities to create a dynamic whole. Unlike Pop artists, who also culled from the quotidian, but who leaned toward branded consumer goods such as Coca-Cola bottles and mayonnaise jars, Diehl prefers to work with more generic items. By avoiding objects already inculcated with cultural and historical meaning, he can instead focus on combining shapes together in light to create a scene in which the elements resonate with each other and underscore the painting's art historical reference.

The paintings typically reference art from Post-Impressionism to mid-twentieth-century abstraction. A recent work titled *Still Life with Watteau Nude* (2017), however, breaks with this focus on the modern by featuring a small-scale, little-known painting by French Rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau. Completed in the early eighteenth century, the Watteau features a fleshy nude who lounges on a plushly dressed bed. As in his other works, Diehl's postcard rendition of the painting within the painting is the anchor around which the other objects coalesce and derive meaning. To the left of the Watteau, a shell, a symbol of female sexuality, mimics the nude's curves as it sits atop a white plinth, a proxy for the bed she's draped over. The shell is balanced by a white sphere to the right, whose hardness complements the figure's soft form. In the back, a package wrapped in parchment and tied with string alludes to the act of unwrapping or undressing; at the same time, with its contents unknown, it also establishes an air of mystery. Finally, the transparent marbles serve as a cunning foil to the package, which remains opaque and impenetrable.

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Some of the paintings seem to be absent of any overt reference to art history, such as *Still Life with Glass Marbles* and *Still Life with Glass Marbles #2* (both 2017). These paintings, Diehl explains, are indebted to the Italian still-life painter Giorgio Morandi: "I make these studies to see if I can approach the kind of simplicity that he achieved." While Diehl's works do exert a strong affective impact through an economy of form and color, they also exhibit immense complexity. Unlike Morandi's paintings, Diehl's are replete with reflective surfaces that introduce a drama and dynamism. Light, in general, plays a more central role for Diehl. Over the past several years, he has collaborated with other visual artists, including a photographer friend who has helped broaden his understanding of how light, particularly daylight, impacts his compositions. Armed with this knowledge, he carefully arranges his still lifes before waiting patiently for the precise moment when the light brings everything to life. "If it doesn't come alive," Diehl explains, "you have to keep pushing the process. The process is where the inspiration comes from."

Light, too, acts as a relief to tension within the composition. The majority of Diehl's still lifes are centered and arranged into pyramidal clusters. However, his use of daylight, which often filters in at a strong diagonal, helps offset this symmetrical structuring. This is especially evident in *Still Life for Fixing a Hole* (2017), whose flawless symmetry is dramatically shifted by the light. The painting is a reference both to a Beatles song—the title of which appears here on the spine of a book—and to the artist's current circumstances. Diehl notes that he has recently begun to address different areas of his life that have needed fixing, a sentiment reflected in the lyrics "I'm taking the time for a number of things / That weren't important yesterday." The composition thus reflects a working through of obstacles, which, for Diehl, means embracing minimalism and locating balance and order. Order is essential to his creative act and endemic to his process of making. Once the raw materials—light, form, color—have been sorted through and arranged, however, he must then transform them into art. It is at that point that order, Diehl observes, is superseded by a decidedly allusive alchemy.

Guy Diehl was born in 1949, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He earned his BA from California State University Hayward in 1973 followed by his MA from San Francisco State University in 1976. In addition to exhibiting extensively across the United States and at select international galleries, Diehl was featured in the acclaimed 2014 exhibition "Realism, Really?" at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art. His work can be found in the permanent collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the San Jose Museum of Art, and the Oakland Museum of California. This will be his fourth solo show at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.