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## **The Art of Silence and Reverence**

The Still Lives of James Gillick 1996-2015

Introduction to the 2015 Catalogue by **Dr Timothy Kelly**

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There was a time when philosophers, theologians, and poets would marvel at the most humble of objects. For them, even the lowliest of things were objects of contemplation that could sweep the receptive mind into rapture. For the wise men of antiquity, as for the great teachers of Christendom and the poets of Romanticism, the very existence of a thing —be it Blake's 'grain of sand' or Wordsworth's 'meanest flower'— was an invitation to wonder. They were convinced that hidden within all earthly things, beyond the phenomena that stood in the range of their senses, deeper than a thing's textures, colours, and shapes, lay a reality that no eye or magnifying glass could reach, but which only the perceptive intellect could see.

This first and most astonishing of realities was the perfectly obvious truth of a thing's *being*, the bare yet wonderful fact of its existence. Such a commonplace observation was, for them, not the dull banality it may seem for us today, who have replaced the surprise of existence with the assumption of brute fact. That a thing existed, possessed its own being was, whilst being the plainest of truths, also the most mysterious, the most unaccountable, and a fact which provoked in them a genuine awe, even a kind of reverence. This primary *act* within all things conferred on each and every one of them —whether natural or artificial, inanimate or animate— a certain intrinsic luminosity and a fundamental dignity, and thus a fittingness for the attention of philosopher and poet alike. According to such thinkers, therefore, one did not have to go far to unlock the great secrets of our universe. The greatest of them continually deduced ultimate truths from the smallest of things, "to see", in Blake's words, "a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower" or "hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, / And Eternity in an hour". Within the least and most commonplace of things was contained a secret which testified to the highest of things, and each could bear witness to a Presence at once deeply imminent to them and far beyond them. Such is "the truth that dwells in the core of all things", wrote Anselm of Canterbury, a truth "which none but the few do contemplate".

For the last twenty years, James Gillick has been inviting his audience to take another look at the simple objects of the world. Like those philosophers, poets and theologians, Gillick has seen something of high importance within ordinary things that needs to be communicated in our own time. It is this that accounts for the first and fundamental character of his still lifes: his chosen objects of reflection, his pots, bowls, vases, fruits and flowers, are all presented to us in solemn, unadorned truth, without need of

embellishment or commentary. Unlike most creative artists of our time, Gillick does not aspire towards cleverness or novelty, nor does he resort to the sophisticated symbolism or allegory of his great 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch predecessors. Rather, he seeks to perform an act of simple disclosure. This essential feature of his work is a consequence of a certain artistic modesty that underlies it. We have in James Gillick an artist who does not set out to impose himself upon his audience but to achieve something more difficult and spiritually enduring: to expose these simple, domestic artefacts in their first and original dignity, as though in a state of nakedness. It is this underlying intention and attitude that gives his works their two principal attributes: a serene objectivity and an uncommon sense of calm.

We will be able to understand these special qualities of Gillick's still lifes once we recognise the exceptional level of proficiency that underlies them. It is the mastery of his technique that gives Gillick the freedom to communicate his chosen objects so truthfully. The impeccability of his craftsmanship (which unites him so reassuringly to the great and past masters of this genre) means he is never tempted to distract us by flippancy or self-conscious originality. A lesser craftsman could not easily set out with such purity of intention, such simplicity of purpose. This is the basis of an important and somewhat paradoxical feature in Gillick's still lifes, namely, that their spiritual intensity is largely a consequence of their intense clarity and sense of palpability. In every Gillick still life, the observable texture, line, shape, weight, light and colour of the object of his contemplation is rendered not only in the sincerity of natural light, but with exquisite accuracy and tremendous concentration of attention.

Yet, as I have said, all this is at the service of something greater. Paradoxically, it is Gillick's ability to express the palpable materiality of his objects with such intense clarity that enables his still lifes to have such a pleasingly metaphysical impact. This is because the sharp, empirical concreteness of his objects actually bears witness to something greater and more imminent to each artefact than its own contours and textures: the forthright objectivity of its existence, the marvellous truth of its being. It is indeed a paradox that such intense fidelity to the surface of a thing should serve to bear witness to its invisible and luminous interiority, but this is the very state of affairs recognised by those philosophers and poets we mentioned. Gillick's treatment of texture, contour, weight and light are the outward signs —the beautiful and noble outward signs— of an unadorned fidelity to the truth of things, the truth both visible and invisible to our bodily eyes. In other words, this is a truth not exhausted by, or even subject to, empirical verification, but Anselm's deeper truth "in the core of all things that none but the few do contemplate".

In a civilisation based upon technology and the limits of empirical sciences, this art has simultaneously a special timeliness and timelessness. Every viewer of these still lifes intuits something greater, nobler, more beautiful and mysterious in the ordinary things of the world than before, and they propose to him a way of perceiving things that his schooling never taught him, and from which his culture relentlessly removes him. This partly accounts for the sense of repose, and even the nostalgia for something lost, that are experienced by the viewer of these pictures. Such an unusual impression is due to their capacity to awaken in the observer a forgotten though essential dimension of human life: that man is ordered first not to action, but to contemplation. This capacity of man to perceive the truth and thereby to reach out to it in love is what distinguishes him from the lower animals, and the still lifes of James Gillick bring every viewer back to this basic human vocation and, in a certain sense, momentarily satisfy it. Thus, they are able to bring a certain unexpected repose to the minds of those who view them. In the naked dignity of these pots, vases, bowls, fruits, where we are confronted with a renewed sense of the noble objectivity of things, every viewer is prompted to perceive their truth and, moreover, summoned to recognise the existence of truth *per se*. It is due to this serene

depiction of reality, of things as *they are*, that these paintings reawaken in the viewer that primary human capacity: to be still, to behold, and to contemplate.

The peculiar atmosphere of seriousness that characterise the still lifes of James Gillick is a further consequence of this. A high sobriety, even an austerity of tone, is born of the very attributes we have been examining: the unadorned truthfulness he seeks to disclose in the things themselves, and the rigorous lack of sentimentality with which he proceeds artistically. As we have observed, what was once commonplace and prosaic in our eyes assumes under the brush of Gillick its proper nobility and dignity, but part of this disclosure consists in rendering his objects with a new gravity, even a disconcerting austerity. Such austerity, though, is not unwelcome but strangely compelling. One understands that the seriousness and silence of these pictures is not the expression of melancholy but of depth: the unexpected profundity we are suddenly glimpsing in ordinary things and the corresponding profundity of their treatment. It is that quality of concentration and intense fidelity that that results in the grave, even ascetical quality, of many of these works.

For this reason we find Gillick's interest in presenting the *mortality* of creatures entirely unsurprising and in keeping with his general approach to still lifes. A flower losing its first petals, the ripe fruit about to yield to the hard steel of the knife, or the lifeless fish prepared for table, do not imply a fascination for the macabre but are inspired by the same wonder which provokes him to illuminate the dignity of all his artefacts and creatures, and the same desire to disclose truthfully. After all, the very fragility of a thing's being, its inescapable transience, and even its capacity to be sacrificed to and assimilated by a higher being, serves to amplify the wonder of it; the vulnerability of things, soon to pass out of existence, gives the viewer a heightened sense of their fundamental contingency, that all things possess their existence as a marvel *received*, and as an offering to be made over and returned. As Gillick shows us, not one of these beautiful objects *has* to be; all of them *came* to be and all will eventually pass out of being.

"The contemplative is not one who discovers secrets no one knows, but one who is swept into ecstasy by what everyone knows". These words of an old Carthusian monk are intelligible to those who have come to know and admire the still lifes of James Gillick. The ecstasy of which he speaks does not have to involve a dramatic swooning but the simple and unexpected elevation of the human mind to something nobler and loftier. And it is a great secret, and a fitting paradox, that the ordinary things of the world have the power to provoke this movement; or rather, man has the spiritual capacity to perceive visible reality as it truly is, in all its intrinsic mystery and dignity, and this bears fruit in a new serenity and joy. Thus, we have observed that part of the greatness of these paintings consists in the fact that they ordered not to action or speech, but to stillness and contemplation. Their abiding impression will always be one of deep silence, but it is a silence not of resignation and still less of despair. It is the silence of reverence. For James Gillick, as it was for Wordsworth, "the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears".

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