

After the Hunt

Emily Jan

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After the Hunt is Done

Janna Hiemstra

Emily Jan's work, *After the Hunt*, with its placement and juxtaposition of handmade, found and imitation objects, is as multilayered in meaning as the installation itself. An experience of decadence, laced with kitsch and detritus, brings attention to an inherent contradiction in expectation. On the one hand, it appears as though a lavish banquet is set out across the span of a 20-foot table. The title, *After the Hunt*, suggests that the bounty of nature has been hard-won for a feast. On the other hand, and upon closer inspection, the dissonant array of felted animal carcasses, artificial plastic bones, faux flowers and decomposing fruit create a sense of aversion to what is being offered up for human consumption.

The heart of this intricately composed still-life tableau is rooted in the hyper-realistic felted animal figures that are placed throughout the table. A gutted deer hanging by its leg from the ceiling takes center stage, while a hare, pheasant, osprey and boar's head are arranged across the table surface. In their presentation, Jan evokes 18th century Dutch still life paintings depicting hunted game, market and pantry scenes. The overall presentation of the work mimics a popular subject matter, which was sought out by an affluent clientele who were embedded in a fast-growing European economy based in colonial and emerging capitalist practices. Foodstuffs, game, serving vessels and expensive delicacies

like shellfish and lemons symbolized access to a privileged lifestyle. At the same time, the inclusion of decaying objects, such as fruit and flowers, served as a reminder about the transient nature of luxury and the moral imperative of moderation over greed.

In this sense, *After the Hunt* taps into the tradition of vanitas paintings, which were immensely popular in the Netherlands, and were not only created as valuable works of art, but also designed to give the viewer pause in considering the value of short-term gain in relation to the fact that all things must come to an end. As a still-life genre, vanitas paintings depicted an abundance of material goods in disarray. In a time when access to plenty was experienced as a new and disruptive social phenomenon, the emphasis on representing prosperity in an unordered state allowed for a self-reflexive guilt to manifest. In other words, the vanitas style both acknowledged and admonished participation in the accumulation of personal wealth. Jan's own composition carefully re-presents a version of this genre with a built-up surface of brocade, wine glasses, platters of plastic and real food, faux flowers, shells, lit candles, kitschy ceramic figurines, and of course, a requisite skull.

It is the combination of meticulously felted animal figures with mass-produced items that brings a contemporary twist to the imperative of acknowledging mortality and the precarious nature of worldly pursuits. Jan's overall practice involves an ongoing exploration of the animal kingdom, and our perceived relationship to nature. She uses materials such as wool, gut and reed to create life-sized portrayals of real, extinct and mythical animals in order to raise questions about the destructive ways in which humans operate on assumptions of value in relation to social structures and the environment. In the case of *After the Hunt*, each animal is primarily constructed from felt, which is the oldest form of textile practice in human history. The surface textures and dyes perfectly correlate with the nuances of fur and the contours of each body, and compel



the viewer to look twice in order to distinguish reality from artifice. Moreover, in engaging with felting as a traditional and labour-intensive craft practice, Jan makes the viewer distinctly aware of the difference between the animal figures and the plastic objects surrounding them, thereby raising the problem of what value to give to the abundance that is on offer.

In an analysis of how craft can be used as a reference point for meaning, Glenn Adamson states that the crafted object is often presented as "...shards of the 'real' – that penetrate the frictionless, normative qualities of a serially produced commodity".¹ In this way, Jan engages in a tactile craft practice using natural materials in order to differentiate objects that are rooted in a personal, hands-on and skilled processes of production from those that are machined, plastic, and ultimately bound for the garbage heap. In Jan's own words, "We live in an age of epic consumption... The Earth will never see an age like this again. It can't sustain it. When people talk about this era (of the 18th century still life), they talk about the embarrassment of riches. But in our era, those riches are mass production, material and commodity."²

Overall, *After the Hunt* presents the viewer with a visceral story that taps into our collective history of consumption, and what the implications of how we produce and engage with material goods today might mean for the future. Through an installation that is rooted in a contrast between its juxtaposed elements, Jan opens up a space for examining the separation between material and cultural realities, and to wonder just what exactly does happen after the hunt is done.

¹ Adamson, Glenn, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 35.

² Interview with Emily Jan, World of Threads Festival. www.worldofthreadsfestival.com/artist_interviews/034-emily_jan_11 (accessed August 2017).



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Emily Jan is a Montréal-based artist and writer. Originally hailing from San Francisco, California, Jan has traveled to 34 countries and lived in four, including South Africa and Mexico. As a wanderer, naturalist, and collector of objects and experiences, she is guided in her work by the spirit of exploration, kinship, and curiosity. Jan holds an MFA from Concordia University (2014), a BA with Honours from Brown University (2000), and a BFA with High Distinction from the California College of the Arts (2009).

Janna Hiemstra currently serves as the Interim-CEO at Craft Ontario, and has been with the organization since 2007 leading exhibition programming. With a background in philosophy and cultural theory, as well as two years of working as a ceramic studio assistant, she works to guide Craft Ontario's areas of focus to address member needs, educate the public regarding contemporary craft practice, and advocate for the craft community.



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