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‘William Bailey: Looking Through Time’ Review: Realism Reimagined

While abstraction dominated the art world, the painter continued to make representational works drawn from his imagination that moved beyond the everyday or mundane.



William Bailey’s ‘Still Life—Table With Ochre Wall’ (1972) PHOTO: WILLIAM BAILEY/ARS, NY/YALE

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

By

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We don't often think of time as being integral to painting. Music, movies and other art forms unfold over hours and minutes, and even sculpture takes at least a few moments to experience in the round. But paintings are static, so we sometimes feel we can grasp them in a second. To be sure, this isn't the case, but it's an idea constantly reinforced by our addiction to instantaneity in our daily lives.

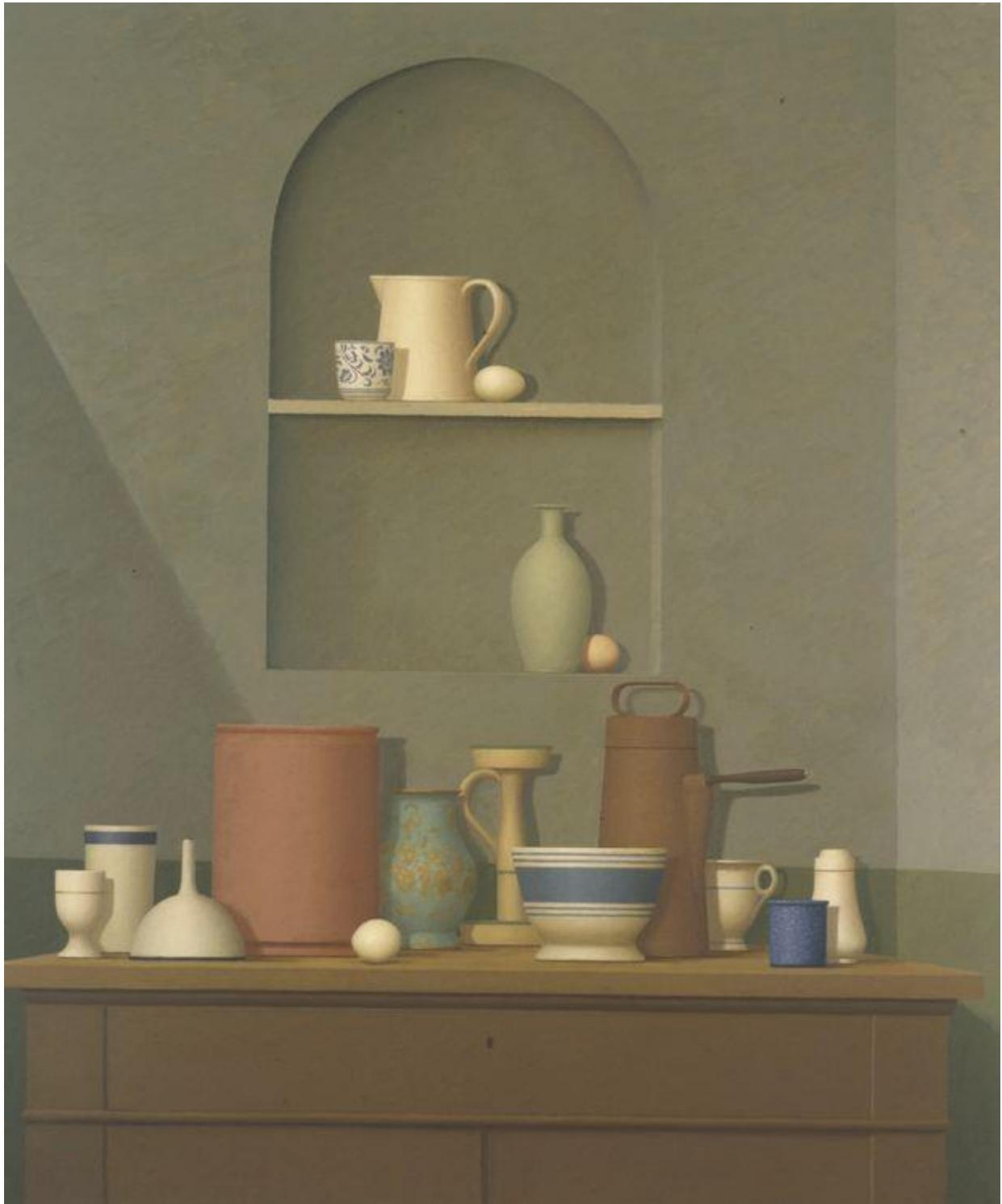
Fighting against this inclination is the painter William Bailey, whose art commands us to slow down. Now, an exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery examines his uniquely contemplative, gradual and deep-reaching work. Curated by the museum's Mark D. Mitchell, "William Bailey: Looking Through Time" includes 17 oil paintings and 21 works on paper made over the course of his six-decade career. It is thus a rare and welcome opportunity to view a body of work that fights against the attention deficit disorders of the moment.

Born in 1930 in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Mr. Bailey is among a small number of American painters who rejected abstraction, the dominant style of the mid-20th century. In 1953, after serving in the Korean War, he studied at the Yale School of Art under Josef Albers. Initially Mr. Bailey, like many artists at the time, worked in a gestural mode reflecting the commanding influence of Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning.

But travels to Europe in the 1950s and '60s led Mr. Bailey to look back to aesthetic ancestors as far-ranging as ancient Greek sculptors, Piero della Francesca and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. By the mid-1960s, against the strong headwinds of Modernist orthodoxy, he began to make representational paintings of figures and still lifes that took something from the mysterious clarity of classical form.

"Looking Through Time" begins here. Upon entering Yale's well-lighted exhibition spaces, we meet "Still Life—Table With Ochre Wall" (1972). It's an unassuming setup: five ordinary kitchen objects (a cup, a bowl, a bottle, etc.) and 10 eggs arranged casually, on a simple wood table, against a yellowish-brown wall. We look at the scene head-on, just above eye level. Mr. Bailey's handling of paint is similarly straightforward—delicate and sensitive, yes, but also candid and economic.

And yet, out of this commonplace view, we come to find an elevated vision. After more time with the painting, we begin to realize that Mr. Bailey's vessels bear no chips, stains, or other natural imperfections. Indeed, they seem enveloped in an aura of purity and certainty that removes them from everyday life. The same goes for the table they sit on, and for the ochre wall behind. Bathed in Mr. Bailey's quiet, soft light, the picture issues an almost dreamlike effect despite the tangible solidity of its forms.



William Bailey's 'Nocera Umbra' (1998) PHOTO: WILLIAM BAILEY/ARS, NY/YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Moving past this early example, we find that nearly all the works in this exhibition—which date from 1961 to 2012—maintain a similarly ethereal presence. It is for this reason that “realism,” a term often used to describe Mr. Bailey’s art, is inadequate. For while much realist painting (consider, for example, the late flower paintings of Édouard Manet) is about the vagaries of perception and the often unpredictable process of translating experience into oil, Mr. Bailey paints from imagination and memory. His goal is to supersede real life and to communicate instead an ideated world of purity.

Mr. Bailey’s pursuit of this goal has been steadfast. “Looking Through Time” conveys a certain single-mindedness, even, in his determination to reconstruct these inimitable still lifes, again and again, year after year. But important changes also occur. As the years passed he began populating his dramas with more characters, and he complicated their stages as well. Witness “Nocera Umbra” (1998), which, above a tabletop of a dozen or so objects, also includes an arched niche in which two more shelves of items sit. Other works feature corners, sophisticated decorative elements, as well as cast light from unseen windows. These more intricate settings allow Mr. Bailey to compose symphonic arrangements of form, color, mass and line that slowly unfold to the patient viewer.

Of a piece with Mr. Bailey’s still lifes yet undoubtedly different in effect are his figure paintings of women, which he has made throughout his career. These women are uncannily strange and loaded with a sort of cold emotional reserve. Also created from his imagination, they almost always contain elements of historical paintings. “Afternoon in Umbria” (2010), for instance, of two women lying in a grass field—one asleep, one in waking reverie—is a direct quotation of Gustave Courbet’s “Young Ladies on the Bank of the Seine” (1856-57).

These references make no overt commentary on their antecedents, but rather seem deeply subsumed within Mr. Bailey’s overall imaginative vision. By weaving the contributions of the past into the fabric of his own enduring project, he demonstrates, once again, his firm commitment to transcending time through paint.

—*Mr. Shea is a painter and the assistant editor of the New Criterion.*