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Laura Letinsky
Untitled, #49, 2002
Chromogenic print, 18 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches
MIT, List Visual Arts Center

Against an expanse of softly mottled sea-foam green, a white cotton covered ledge projects across the bottom third of Laura Letinsky's color photograph, *Untitled, #49* (Fig. 1). A bowl of massed peaches—pink, yellow, and dusty violet—holds forth from this background, elevated in a translucent bowl, whose repeated, rounded leaf-like forms indented by their central veins, echo the bulges and clefts of the supported fruit. The warm jade-white of the Pyrex contrasts with the cool-white, gritted, plastic cutting board upon which the bowl stands, and into which the golden juices of the peach flesh and violet dye of their cochineal pits have been ground. These stains traverse onto the woven tablecloth that covers the support for these remnants of repast, culminating in a radiating mauve spray of juice. This color is mirrored in a rust-hued ring inside the bright-white porcelain cup, whose celadon-hued interior glows with the diffused light absorbed from the modest surroundings of the room.

At about three-quarters scale to life size, the photograph provides the viewer with an intimate glimpse at what could be the leftovers of a dinner party. The image evokes a memory of a moment just past, the post-prandial subjects metonymically standing in for an event beyond the confines of the image's framing. Yet the scene is definitively not a snapshot, an interrupting capture of an instant. Rather it is of a stilled-life, temporal though unmoving. The rotting of the two top-most peaches is externally indicated by the darkening flesh, waxing from right to left within the fruits. On the cutting board, the pulp

surrounding an excised pit has spoiled to gelatinous yolk, while to its left, the soft fuzz of a bit of peach skin—an earlier attempt, perhaps, to remove a bad spot—has dried and curled up on itself, mildewed to inky black. The mauve residue of the pit stain on the tablecloth has dried to matte dust, while the dark shadows of the unkempt creases of cotton appear hardened, stiff and unbending. Within the cup, the brackish streak of red hints at abandoned coffee—now dumped out, but left standing long enough for particulate to crust along its undrunk level.

While such temporality indicates neglect, these objects have not been carelessly left to rot. Letinsky has arranged her objects architectonically, perilously positioned to the point of just-balanced. Straddling the indentation of the cutting board and perfectly sized to the board's outer edge, the visible right leg of the tripedal fruit bowl points precisely to the precarious intersection of background, ledge, and cutting board, while the unseen third foot stands planted beyond the ledge's boundary. To counteract this weight imbalance—and one must not neglect the pyramid of fruit, the largest one of which seems velcroed to the others through the surface tension of the fruit's downy skin—the cutting board is laid at a diagonal to the ledge, projecting toward the viewer, a gesture that also bridges the spaces without and within the photograph.

Despite the control taken by the photographer to keep the objects in stasis, the shifted points of view of the image—Letinsky shoots from a natural vantage point of the table at hip level, though the photograph hangs at eye level—further disorient the viewer and accentuate the potential energy of the arranged objects. The foreshortening of the front edge of the cutting board visually shifts it horizontally to the background. But against the flattened green walls, whose only indication of space is a slightly darkened

line of shadow and a glimpse of a white windowsill, the cutting board appears to rise vertically. Thus, the cutting board simultaneously moves backward where it will be unbalanced by the bowl of peaches, and upward, tilting and toppling the fruit toward the viewer. In this confusion, the precipice is no longer one of balance, but of anticipation. Through Letinsky's careful arrangement of objects within a compressed space, *Untitled, #49* performs an infinite moment, in which the viewer is forever witnessing the split-second before the scene collapses and the objects plummet.

Iconographically, *Untitled, #49* gives the impression of a seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* painting, in which artfully arranged material reminders of the passing of time have a symbolic message. For example, rotting peaches are meant to evoke the ephemeral nature of life, the inevitable transition from the ripeness of youth to the decay of old age (Fig. 2). Yet, Letinsky's overall selection of objects and color palette do not share the moralizing sumptuousness and richness of the Dutch. Instead, her simple selection of everyday objects—mass-produced cotton, plastic, Pyrex, and porcelain—bears inheritance from the eighteenth century and the still-life paintings of artists like Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin whose careful kitchen arrangements and richly-detailed textures lent ordinary household items a monumentality that elevated the “lowly” genre of still-life for visual contemplation (Fig. 3). Letinsky likewise fully exploits the potential of her medium to give visual and textural grandeur to her subject: her lengthy exposure time and color-saturated chromogenic printing highlight the tactile reality of her objects, while her diffusion of light lends a painterly softening and sanctified glow to the overall composition.

Composition and attention to materiality are not the only features derived from the eighteenth century. The pastel palette is decidedly rococo: the colors recall, for instance, the peaches and pale greens of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (Fig. 4). Letinsky exploits this historical association to also bring to mind attendant notions of femininity and interiority, assumptions called into question by the represented contradictions of ripeness and decay, delicacy and disgust, intimacy and entertainment. More subtly rococo (though no less subversively) is the conflation of visual and physical experience. While much still life painting has historically attempted to evoke smell, taste, and texture through superbly rendered detail, rococo artists frequently tried to manipulate the viewer's sense of self-awareness through visual and structural cues that would lead the viewer (often unconsciously) to physically respond. In *Untitled #49*, physical-visual unsettling occurs through the viewer's heightened awareness of time and movement within the work, prompted by the composition's suggested narrative and the arranged object's perceived disobedience to the laws of gravity. The vacillation between the unmoving representation and the viewer's constitutional knowledge of space and gravity results in an anxious recognition of the immanent crash of the objects over the edge, inciting an ocular *appel du vide* in the viewer who experiences an urge to visually lurch with the peaches.

In *Untitled, #49*, Letinsky confounds traditional concerns about media and genre specificity: interpretation takes place not just on the wall, but in the viewer's physical space as well; the subject recalls modest genre compositions, but evokes sensuous pleasure and disgust; Letinsky utilizes the full technological capabilities of contemporary photography, yet addresses a larger history of art with painterly effects. But *Untitled, #49*

is best understood through the notion of persistence, or fixed continuation. Though a still-life, *Untitled, #49* is in temporal flux compositionally and art-historically, forever vibrating between the analytical spaces it occupies.



Fig. 1. Laura Letinsky, *Untitled, #49*, 2002. Chromogenic print, 18 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches. MIT, List Visual Arts Center.

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Fig. 2. Willem Kalf, *Still Life*, ca. 1660. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
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Fig. 3. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Fruit, Jug, and a Glass*, ca. 1726-28. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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Fig. 4. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767. The Wallace Collection, London.

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