



Still Lives / Dead Games
Painting perseveres, flourishes, recurs, reignites.



Piero di Cosimo, *Venus, Mars and Cupid*
 c. 1486–1510, Oil on poplar panel, 72 x 182 cm
 Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



This lush, harmonious painting by Florentine Renaissance artist Piero di Cosimo (1462–1522) presents a Classical scene from Roman mythology, depicting Venus and Mars accompanied by their child, Cupid. The work is a prime example of High Renaissance innovation, with its secular subject matter and naturalistic perspective achieved through the intricate layering of spatial grounds.

Two nearly nude subjects recline in the foreground of an idyllic Arcadian landscape teeming with romantic and erotic imagery — myrtle bushes, a white rabbit, a pair of doves, butterflies — all traditional symbols of love and fertility. The God of War has been tamed in this scene — lulled to sleep by the Goddess of Love and stripped bare of his armor by the angelic *putti* in the background.

The painting exemplifies the amalgam of Renaissance influences, drawing upon both the extreme naturalism of Dutch painting as well as the idealistic beauty of Classicism. The debt to Dutch art is seen in the rich and realistic detail, indicative of Renaissance interest in science and nature. Piero in particular possessed a love of landscape and natural imagery, filling his paintings with plant and animal life. At the same time, the image is not without the soft, dreamlike atmosphere and elegant, fleshy figures of Botticelli — indeed, the painting was likely modeled after Botticelli’s *Venus and Mars* (1483).

Although the painting presents a static scene of languid idyll, the indecipherable gesture of Cupid, who gazes intently upwards and points at something unknown, introduces a narrative element to the image. This subtle suggestion of a looming presence or threat, unbeknownst to the other characters, links to a passage in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Venus’s husband, Vulcan, or Hephaestus in Greek mythology, catches the illicit lovers in the act and takes his revenge, trapping them in an invisible net to be scorned and mocked.

As John Gray’s 1992 book on modern relationship says—*Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Piero di Cosimo’s *Venus, Mars and Cupid* is a deceptively benign scene, but the artist is lulling us into a sense of false security, playing with the genre painting as a device. It is a symmetrically composed painting that is almost certainly a panel from a frieze or a chest “often commissioned in honour of weddings to reinforce values of patrimony, civic-mindedness and familial duty.”¹

Piero’s panel represents “a marriage of opposites, or *discordia concors*, of which Harmony was born.”²

There are portents of doom in the picture, in the harmony. The artist himself was known for alchemy and the *Danza Macabra*—his Florentine chariot of death performance art sounds like a Grand Openings performance. *Zombie Dance* and *The Calendar of the Dead* some 500 years apart, lunacy in the asylum, *The Cramps: Live at the Napa State Mental Hospital*.

The crisscross view depicts Mars sleeping in a contented postcoital scene. The birds in the foreground—the doves of Venus—form a unified heart shape. But the *amorini* are mischievous if not complicit in what will unfold. Not so stupid cupid is like the snake in the Garden of Eden and looks like he knows the (invisible) net is closing in. Vulcan will capture the lovers and will avenge their betrayal. While Piero allows Mars and Venus to be frozen in their revelry, puffs of smoke in the sky signify that the God of Volcanoes and Fire is not too far away; a volcanic mountain looms in the distant center of the frame. The *amorini* have Mars’s armor. Venus is awake, sitting up slightly, whereas Mars is fully reclined—he has lost his focus and strength, and old man Vulcan is coming.

¹ Dennis Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 92.

² Ibid

³ In 2011 at MoMA, the New York-based artist collective Grand Openings—of which Jutta Koether is a part—staged a performance entitled *The Calendar of the Dead (Lee Williams Version 1 & 2)* (together with Daishiro Mori and Sen Uesaki). The work was a part of their greater commissioned program “Grand Openings Return of the Blogs.”



Frans Snyders, *Still Life with Dead Game*

Oil painting, 119,4 x 202,6 cm
Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery,
University of Glasgow



Opulence and luxury — in his cornucopian subject matter and meticulous technique — are hallmarks of the work of Frans Snyders (1579–1657). Known as the greatest Flemish Baroque painter of still lifes, Snyders created highly naturalistic and exquisitely balanced compositions, instilling still life objects with High Baroque monumentality.

His true forte was the depiction of animals and dead game, and his legacy is that of the first *animalier*. This expertise meant that he often carried out the still life and animal elements in works by fellow Antwerp artists like Peter Paul Rubens — such artistic collaboration being common practice in the Flemish art scene of the time.

The sniffing dogs and the spread wings of the parrot add a hint of action to the work, but otherwise the scene is still, laid out purely for visual consumption. A table laden with riches — a sprawling array of hunting trophies, a plethora of fruits and ornaments — all carefully arranged in precise diagonals and towering upwards, reaching a pinnacle atop which the two brightly colored birds perch. In addition to the rigid composition, Snyders brings order to the scene through his harmonious repetitions of color, with tones of red and green echoing throughout. Such mirrorings and reflections between individual elements create an overall stability, tying the entire image together.

Less concerned with the vanitas symbolism that was typical of Dutch still lifes, Snyders's works were rather odes to the material riches of the world and to the capacities of artistic creation. The extreme detail and precision with which he depicts textures and forms, seen particularly in the soft fur and feathery plumage of his animals, endows his representations with a vivacity that seems to surpass reality itself. The birds in this work highlight Snyders's technical skill, recalling Pliny the Elder's story of Zeuxis, an ancient Greek painter whose grapes appeared so realistic that birds flew down to peck at them.

The eye is inexorably drawn to the ass of the dead stag. It is a tiny abyss that is replicated in the snout of the boar. The dog almost touching the stag's hind leg is foregrounded, but it is the ass that is centrally dominant.

The posterior is every bit as bright white as the one in Koether's *Berliner Schlüssel # 1* from 2010! Koether also centrally locates an ass, one of a young man, a catamite, channeling the subject from a Francis Bacon painting—hunger and lust amidst the inherent contradiction of a nature morte. The red-redder-reddest of certain Koether works can be seen in the cloth, the lobster, and the fruit of this Snyders painting. The cloth underneath the subject matter could be a forebear to Koether's masque of the red stones covering the entire floor of the Bortolami Gallery in New York in 2012.

This Flemish Baroque still life of animals and fruit is gamey and bawdy and is clearly aimed at the opulent market. There is definite ribaldry in the noses, beaks, claws, and paws controlling the composition as episodic vignettes. Snyders, friend and collaborator with Peter Paul Rubens, was known to have painted animals and still life elements in Rubens's work. The living animals confuse this scene. The dogs look listless in comparison to the convulsed stag, the livid lobster, the broad grinning boar. The second dog looks shyly away from the scene—uncomfortable in this frenzied chamber—in fact, the dog looks like it has been chastised by the lobster. The stag and heron reappear in Joshua Reynolds's *The Archers* (1769, Tate Collection, London) over a century after Snyders has died.

We are in a network of paintings, painters, and their studios. Rubens / Snyders / Fyt / Reynolds. If Reynolds can adopt so exactly from Snyders, then Koether is entitled to appropriate as she sees appropriate.



Jan Fyt, *Still Life with Fish and Fruit*

1654, Oil on canvas, 119,5 x 153,5 cm
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



A selection of still life elements is carefully balanced in this work by Flemish Baroque painter and etcher Jan Fyt (1611–1661). Fyt was a student of the renowned Frans Snyders, whose technical manner he inherited, and like Snyders, Fyt too became known particularly for his ability to paint animals, his realism arguably surpassing that of his master.

Here, decadent garlands of fruits and flowers are strung above a plate of glistening fish, adorning a green velvet-clad table. It is an image of luxury and splendor — not only in terms of its concrete subject matter, which serves as an indicator of material wealth, but also technically, in the artistic handling. With his painstakingly meticulous brushstroke and intense hues of gold and emerald, Fyt's objects are given a polished sheen and rich luster, evident most powerfully in person. The work is a symphonic constellation of color and form, with repeating notes of ruby and emerald, and swooping arcs that echo throughout, the curves of the floral arrangements mirrored in the arching fish and the sweeps of tablecloth. In Fyt's hand, earthly objects are endowed with a solemn grandeur, elevated to works of art.

The symbolism in the work is not explicit or didactic, but by presenting objects that carry symbolic weight, meaning is implicit. The fish are traditional references to Christ, while the grapes suggest Sacramental wine, and apples imply knowledge as well as temptation and vice.

At the very bottom of the painting, a monkey can be made out, barely visible in the shadows as it emerges from under the tablecloth. It is an out-of-place presence, mysterious and mischievous as it looms in the dark, seemingly incongruent with the domestic Western setting. Equally a formal disturbance, disrupting the otherwise harmonious scene by causing disarray in the carefully draped fabric, the monkey underskirts a play within Fyt's oeuvre to remove the still life from simply allegorically clad imagery — confronting the immediacy of life.

Jan Fyt was once an assistant of Snyders and another member of the Guild of Romanists. Koether can visit this painting in the Gemäldegalerie in her current city of residence. The Gemäldegalerie represents a rearguard defense of deep looking and history in a city of surface and the present but with ghosts and vestiges if you are willing to look deep enough.

The atmosphere in this still life is damp and moldy. The fruit is suspended, chained up like a garland—a regular fascination for Koether in recent years. The table covering looks like stone, solemn as a deathbed. The fish form a kind of whirlpool—another abyss at the center of the painting. The white cloth underneath the central catch is practically the only lightness in the composition.

The monkey at lower left center takes this painting into the fantastical. Partly, it is due to the eccentric sight of the exotica of the monkey—Koether told us in her reading of the 1938 *Self-Portrait with Monkey* by Frida Kahlo that “in western art, the monkey symbolizes sin and vice.”⁴

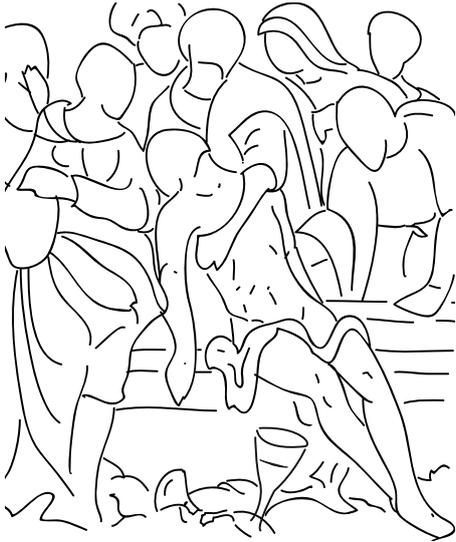
But behind the monkey is an apparition, a Bacon-esque grotesque monster. Do you see it? Am I hallucinating?

⁴ Jutta Koether, *Frida Kahlo* (Berlin: Taschen, 1991), 2.



Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Lamentation of Christ*

1654, Oil on canvas, 119,5 x 153,5 cm
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



In this work by Dutch Renaissance painter Maerten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) a traditional Biblical scene is endowed with a Classical theatricality and monumentality that is clearly influenced by his Italian contemporaries, and which made him one of the most admired Netherlandish painters of the sixteenth century. Heemskerck's Italian interest was initially spurred during his training under Jan van Scorel and was then fully developed during his Italian Grand Tour in 1532 — a decisive trip that provided him with source material for the rest of his career.

This is a traditional Lamentation scene, centered around Christ's dead body only just removed from the cross, with blood still flowing from the stigmata on his hands and feet and with his mourners surrounding him. The solid, full-bodied figures recall Classical Greek sculpture in style and pose. Heemskerck's mastery of anatomy is apparent particularly in the disrobed Christ figure, whose pale skin reveals chiseled muscles underneath. Although dead, his tense muscles make him appear capable of carrying his own weight as he reclines atop the marble ledge.

The emotional charge of the scene is made apparent through the still, yet emotionally expressive poses and expressions of the figures, which evoke their sorrow as a *tableau vivant*. There is no outward interaction between the characters as they react individually to the death of Christ, thereby centering the focus entirely on his body. The emotional intensity is also heightened formally through the highly compressed composition, where the figures are crowded into a flattened space in front of an indistinct dark background. Similarly, Heemskerck's use of stark juxtapositions in light and color add dramatic intensity and emotional impact.

To visit this work, we now enter Cologne, the city of Jutta's birth and upbringing. This Lamentation features a muscular, still taut Christ. The stigmata is a red dot, not the sign of a sale but another hole.

The nature morte of the dead Christ is always alleviated by the fact that he will come back in the Resurrection. At the time, the disciples must have been upset, but we know he will come back. The gathering does not seem despondent in the Maerten van Heemskerck work.

The most compelling and passionate action is the breaking of the glass in the bottom center of the composition. I cannot help but think of the signage found in many public buildings, which read: "In case of emergency break glass." The emergency in Jerusalem is that the Romans have crucified the Son of God, yet the scene is quite calm and composed. I time-shift and make the association to another empire and another persecution and the infamous Kristallnacht—the night of broken glass on November 9th / 10th, 1938—seventy-five years to the day that I am writing this.

I am interested in how Mary Magdalene holds the crown of thorns and especially in how John "the beloved disciple" holds Jesus. John's interlocked arms form the truly intimate heart of the scene. This is a painter who put an erection in the Resurrection.⁵

In the same Cologne museum as *The Lamentation*, I am drawn to Heemskerck's *Venus and Cupid* (1545), which updates the Venus and Mars tryst that Piero di Cosimo explored and with which we began. The net to catch our lovers is revealed and, most intriguingly, Venus holds Cupid's bow towards herself suggesting self-sacrifice.

Christ's Crucifixion, the Lamentation, and his Resurrection are processes. Mythologies, histories, and mysteries, and imaginations. Life and Death are still games to be played out in painting terms.

"These are the forces I bring to the discussion."⁶

⁵ See Leo Steinberg's analysis in "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion," *October* 25 (Summer 1983).

⁶ Jutta Koether in conversation with Sam Lewitt and Eileen Quinlan (here in response to Quinlan), "Great Expectations," in *Jutta Koether: Fantasia Colonia* (Cologne: Dumont, 2006), 161.

A classic art history reading receives a visitation. Taking Koether's practiced return "Still Lives / Dead Games
to an array of historical paintings as his starting point, Graham Domke, Curator at Painting perseveres, flourishes, recurs, reignites."
Dundee Contemporary Arts, calls out the personal—however twisted or true—in © 2013 PRAXES / Graham Domke
painting. Domke responds to a selection of 16th and 17th Century paintings proposed All images graphically interpreted
by Jutta Koether: from Piero de Cosimo's *Venus, Mars and Cupid* (c. 1505), Maerten by Lilia Di Bella of Archive Appendix
van Heemskerck's *The Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1530), to allusive Old Master still Published by
lives by Frans Snyders and Jan Fyt. Graphically set in two columns, Domke's writing PRAXES Center for Contemporary Art
sits to the right of art historical texts by PRAXES Curatorial Assistant Jennifer Russell. www.praxes.de