



Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1942. Oil, 26.7 x 34.9 cm. Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

MORANDI AND WONNER: The Metaphysical Philosopher Meets The Abstract Realist

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Bottles and tins, vases and cans, domestic receptacles within arm's reach: these commonplace items have been the recipients of scrutiny by major twentieth-century painters. Few people, however, have maintained as exclusive a perspective on these mundane objects as did Giorgio Morandi (Bologna, 1880-1964) and, more recently, Californian Paul Wonner (b. 1920).

Although united by their interest in still life, these two artists nevertheless appear to share little beyond subject matter. For a month last fall, their art was seen on one floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, each artist the subject of a retrospective exhibition; Wonner's exhibition began a three-site tour at that institution, and Morandi's was organized by the Des Moines Art Center.¹ The crossed paths of the exhibitions offered an opportunity to compare styles and intentions and to examine the artists' provocatively disparate attitudes about the things of this world. Those attitudes became clear not only through the artists' choices of objects but through the relationships established between objects and the space they occupy.

For both artists, their most thought-provoking still-life images were

produced late in their careers. Morandi, a proponent of *Pittura Metafisica*, a brief movement that flourished in 1917, worked toward discovering a new psychological reality behind objects. Commonplace containers and functional architecture became symbols for the mysteries of the everyday—foils for seeing what Giorgio de Chirico called "the metaphysics of the common."

Pertinent to Morandi's desire to penetrate to the essence of an object was the artist's study of his Italian forebears Giotto, Masaccio, and Uccello. He sought from them models for three-dimensional illusion. Days of painstaking arranging of bottles, dishes, cups, and candy dishes preceded his classical compositions dominated by balance, harmony, and solidity. Through steady meditation on the arrangement of objects and their architectonic forms, Morandi sought to portray fundamental essences. At the same time, he came to understand painterly representation of form from the modern still lifes of Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, and Rousseau. The resulting heavy impasto, strong contrasts, and dark shadows lent his compositions a tactility and emotional weight that strengthened his earlier, more

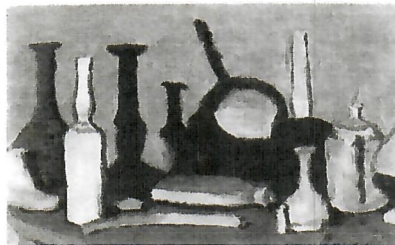
arid mathematically composed arrangements.

Morandi's 1942 *Still Life* (Minneapolis) was produced during a particularly fertile period from 1940 to 1943, following a well-received 1939 retrospective exhibition within the Third Rome Quadriennale. The front corner of the tall, square bottle projects toward the viewer in the manner of a trompe l'oeil still life; more important, it joins two contrasting planes of light and dark, functioning as a central axis that anchors the arrangement of two cylinders on either side. The contrast between its buttery yellow highlighted face and the shadowed side on the right divides the composition in half: lively striped, open-mouthed forms sit on the left while dark, closed, smudged shapes fill out the right. By limiting the palette to rust hues, Morandi was able to explore a few patterns of shadow and light that segregate and break up volumes. By also restricting the arrangement to a few similar shapes, he established monumental stability. Thus, the eye slowly travels across the shallow band of geometric shapes as if it were examining a fragment of an antique frieze, with its narrow, patterned band of light-and-dark.

In his paintings of the forties and fifties, Morandi eliminated extraneous detail and clarified the representation of individual shapes. Within this large retrospective exhibition, displaying over sixty oils, thirty-five watercolors and drawings, and twenty-six prints spanning the artist's career from 1921 to 1963, the work can initially appear repetitive. Despite this deceptive uniformity, however, Morandi's best work is intriguingly complex.

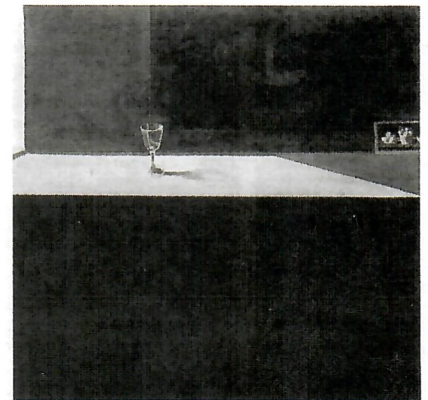


Paul Wonner, *Seven Views of Model with Flowers*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 48 x 46". Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Vitali 225)*, 1938. Oil, 24.1 x 39.7 cm. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

PAUL WONNER
ABSTRACT REALIST
 Los Angeles Municipal Gallery,
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Paul Wonner, *Wine Glass and Postcard (Zurbaran)*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48". Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo Phillip Galgiani.

Such still purity of composition and hue was also achieved by Paul Wonner in a few brilliant mid-period paintings of 1968. They were produced between his broadly painted figurative abstractions, which first brought him to prominence as part of the Bay Area figurative school, and the bright and busy still lifes of the present. Wonner's *Wine Glass and Postcard (Zurbaran)* and *Glass, Lemon, Dish, Postcard (Vermeer)*, both of 1968 and almost companion pieces, each contain three broad registers of color and three simple objects. They demonstrate Wonner's love of quoting from art history by including reproductions; *Wine Glass* also contains a background rectangular outline resembling that from a Motherwell. The pristine arrangements contain a focused tension of geometric abstraction against which the few elements are precisely located for maximum compositional force. Wonner's painterly explorations immediately subsequent to this

work are not included in the exhibition; it continues with his current style, which began around 1976.

In enormous contrast both to Morandi's stately compositions and Wonner's earlier still lifes, the numerous household objects seen in Wonner's recent paintings appear to range informally over the canvas. A crucial difference between the two artists' approaches to still-life composition can be discerned from procedure: Morandi's highly deliberated arrangements were set up prior to his painting, while Wonner paints each object singly, as an entity possessing its own specific time, form, and space. The objective, as Wonner noted in a museum talk, is "to avoid learned responses of how to compose a picture." (His origin in Abstract Expressionism is evident here.) However, this attempt to discover new methods of composition results in a collection of approaches previously arrived at by other innovators. Among them are a variety of perspectives, as seen in cubism, and manipulated (unnaturalistic) scale, as seen in surrealism. The tabletop (or floor, in some paintings) seems almost to angle sharply up the wall at some points, while in other areas one looks down onto the objects placed on it.

In fact, Wonner's contradictory visual perspectives give some viewers a feeling of physical instability as well. The viewer seems to hover in an unfixated and uncertain space above the table, looking down on objects too small to be so close. The disparate perspectives implied by the objects isolate them further, underscoring each as an island within the pictorial field; they are separated and even

enveloped by fathomless space. By extension, these artificially arranged objects exude psychological estrangement. The artist's utilization of anarchical composition implies that none of the objects relate to one another (visually) in a traditional still-life sense—through the use of overlapping or the depiction of natural space or the use of a center of focus. Therefore, these compositions convey no reassuring coherence for the viewer. Objects in the world have not been ordered, they have been scanned. They suggest the beautiful Sybarites who can't transcend self-immersion to communicate on any level beyond that of appearance; and they remind us of ourselves.

Wonner combines the alienation of de Chirico's paintings with the reverence for light and common objects seen in art by Vermeer and Caravaggio. Such a combination is odd, even contradictory, because the warmth and comfort created by the latter is negated

by the former. To deny the basic premise of still-life painting in a still life painting renders Wonner's works unsuccessful to some minds. Actually, such an action follows twentieth century tradition: Duchamp altering the Mona Lisa by adding a mustache, Warhol debasing portraiture with incessant mechanical reproduction. Wonner stops short of criticizing the still-life tradition harshly; he obviously basks in it, but he must play the devil's advocate, at least some of the time, to break new ground. If one believes that nothing new in art is possible and that we see only combinations of old ideas arranged in new sets, Wonner's works are clear examples of another aesthetic synthesis.

Natural beauty (light-drenched objects, flowers, birds, butterflies) and commercial reality (boxes, bottles, cans, postcards, pencils) coexist in contemporary life. Seventeenth century Dutch painting depicts the former, Pop art mimics the latter, and Wonner blends the two.

Even noting Warner's loving rendering, the pervasive emotional detachment undermining his objects is odd. Though his flowers and bottles are thoughtfully placed and painted, their contradictory worldly values give viewers the impression that Wonner is casually selecting anything that passes by. Careful examination, however, reveals that his choices are very precise. If Morandi's highly ordered arrangements exude classical stability and timeless tranquility, Wonner's insouciant noncompositions radiate temporality, ambiguity, and unrest—multiple stimulation and unfocused response. Life in 1982.

In his *Dutch Still Life with Lemon Tart and Engagement Calendar* (1979), the Beck's Beer bottle appears oversize in comparison to a nearby Lejon vermouth bottle; the latter is dwarfed by the oversize Knudsen yogurt container behind it, which does not diminish in receding space as it should. Some objects are anchored in place by high-contrast shadows (at times inconsistent in direction), while narrow objects (knives, pencils, sticks of gum) are deployed throughout the image as pointers to keep the eye moving. But in what direction? Harsh white light floods the scene so that each item looks as important as every other and, indeed, objects are spread through the table/floor area, indicating a modernist flattening and an absence of hierarchical valuation. Caught by all the bright fruits, multicolor bouquets, gleaming glass, and peculiar space between everything, one's eye darts around the canvas for some time, finally questioning the Pop banality of it all. A cold eye has apparently calculated the image and then abandoned viewers who look for explanations.

For what is the subject of such a still life? Certainly not the transcendence of common materiality, but, rather, a worship of it, as in Dutch still-life painting of the seventeenth century. Not surprisingly, Amsterdam was the first center of bourgeois capitalism, and the United States, extending that lineage into the twentieth century, is the most prosperous example of flowering capitalism and its attendant worldly values. San Francisco, a city not dissimilar from Amsterdam in its lively commercial activity and its characteristic sensitivity to beauty and culture, is Wonner's home and has been since this series began. Discussions about the "best" wines, the "best" restaurants, the opera, and the symphony are common even among middle class people; "good" taste is cultivated and expected, even in an ambience noted for its acceptance of radical and outrageous behavior, i.e., punky, trashy, and raw tastelessness that can be discerned even on a quick tour of the city. Leftover sixties Bohemianism coexists with ultraconservative wealth—bone china and daffodils plopped into a soda bottle.

Historically, the bourgeois materialistic mentality logically inspires a love for meticulous realism—transcendence, either philosophical or religious, is less important in capitalistic societies than is visible

wealth, since wealth determines status in such cultures. Seen as documentation, Wonner's paintings reveal both America's middle-class obsessiveness about material pleasures and our aesthetic confusion. The love of accumulating personal treasures and displaying them, the search for beauty in a cluttered commercial world, and the arbitrariness of the notion of "beauty" in the twentieth century are attitudes displayed so overtly in Wonner's paintings that some people miss them. They are ensnared by his irony, mistaking it for confusion. His repetition of the tulip brings to mind Kenneth Clark's digression on tulips in *Civilisation*.

... there is no doubt that at a certain stage in social development fluid capital is one of the chief causes of civilisation because it ensures three essential ingredients: leisure, movement, and independence. It allows that slight superfluity of wealth that can be spent on nobler proportions, a better door-frame, or even a rarer and more extraordinary tulip. Please allow me two minutes' digression on the subject of tulips. It is really rather touching that the first classic example of boom and slump in capitalist economy should have been not in sugar or railways or oil, but tulips. . . . By 1634 the Dutch were so bitten by this new craze that for a single bulb of a tulip called the Viceroy, one collector exchanged one thousand pounds of cheese, four oxen, eight pigs, twelve sheep, a bed, and a suit of clothes.

One senses that Wonner's carefully orchestrated pairing of beauty with ugliness or propriety with boorishness (pansies in a yogurt cup, beer bottles and fine china) amuses him greatly, as well as expands his metaphor. He also destroys time-honored ideas of compositional orthodoxy when he allows a singular blossom to poke into the picture from the lower edge (as in *Dutch Still Life with "Flower Painting"* . . .) and when he insistently places objects specifically at the edges of the canvas so that they will be noticeably bisected by the edge, not naturalistically cropped from view.

Since Morandi focuses on timeless, classical form, Wonner's concentration on appearance and today's domestic trivia looks self-conscious. (But then, so do Americans when viewed by other nationalities.) His renegade notion of sensual pleasure is spotlighted, displayed for an item-by-item analysis as if pictured in a sumptuous gourmet food magazine.

Not only are the abstract poetics of commercial packaging important to Wonner, but illusionism, decorative art, and a synthesis of table-landscape imagery extend the implications of still life. He gives us cheery catalogs of lush items symbolizing exquisite living. Desserts, wines, and, in the 1981 painting, empty Heineken bottles. Is this excess? If so, it is not that of the upper class. The upper class's members would not stuff field flowers into milk cartons or drink Andre champagne.

The effect is percussive when compared to the tranquil, contemplative state induced by the clustered objects of the highly ordered late Morandis. They give us de Chirico's light also, Cezanne's solidity, and Morandi's meditative patience, reinforcing the word *still* in still-life painting. Wonner's abstractions, on the other hand, seem to put Vermeer's aesthetic into a Safeway supermarket. The "set" is flooded with theatrical lights and populated by some kind of psychological inventory. We deduce an idiosyncratic order that defies nature and puzzles viewers. And, most important, we reexamine the purposes of still-life painting.

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"Giorgio Morandi," organized by the Des Moines Art Center, where it was seen February 1 through March 14, 1982, after traveling to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (November 18, 1981, through January 17, 1982). "Paul Wonner: Abstract Realist," initiated and sponsored by the Fellows of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On view at the Marion Koogler McKay Art Institute, San Antonio, March 23 through May 15, 1982, and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, August to September, 1982.



Paul Wonner; *Dutch Still Life with Flower Painting and Los Angeles Postcard*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48". Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo Phillip Galgiani.