

EVERARD READ

CARYN SCRIMGEOUR

(b. 1970 Johannesburg, South Africa)

The work of Cape Town artist Caryn Scrimgeour is a playfully deceptive and decidedly contemporary take on one of the oldest genres in art history – the still life.

Scrimgeour creates intricate birds-eye views of objects scattered on patterned fabrics – the aftermath of strange dinner parties. Her paintings resist the conventional notion that the genre, also known as *nature morte* (or 'dead nature'), is empty of life. Despite the fact that her tablescapes are reminiscent of seventeenth century Dutch vanitas paintings in their rich colour, technical virtuosity and use of light, instead of warning her audiences of the fleeting nature of life and the dangers of acquisitiveness, Scrimgeour delights in the myriad memories of a life that inanimate objects can contain. There is also a strong sense from the apparently lackadaisical arrangement of plates, glasses and various other things that the paintings are the scene of something that has just happened, only moments ago. Though seemingly empty of people, her paintings are remarkably full of life, of longing, despair, nostalgia, of humour, alienation and love.

Every object and every fold of fabric is captured in oil paint perfectly: the shimmering shadow of a wine glass on the cloth beneath, the burnt head of a matchstick, the tiny stitches of embroidered petals on satin. Such trompe l'oeil tricks the viewers into wanting to touch the paintings, to pick off the price tag, pop the bubble, straighten the cutlery. Our attention is captured, and we examine the work closely to establish a sense of its meaning. The mastery and care with which each item is first selected then painted recognises its significance as something imbued with meaning and history, both universal and highly personal.

The meaning can be tricky to ascertain because of the busyness of the works. Though Scrimgeour does paint things she finds or is given or borrows, she also portrays things she only comes across online. Some of the painted articles relate to specific memories, like a blood orange eaten in Turin or her daughter's pointe shoes, and the desire she has to hold on to these memories because of their importance in shaping her life. Some, on the other hand, are metaphorical or symbolic, such as a dragonfly's delicate wings or a cracked plate. Others serve as visual puns: an over-ripe banana, or a gravy boat standing for the gravy train of politics. It is a challenge to distinguish between Scrimgeour's memories and our own, between complex allegories and mere loveliness. There is a joy in recognition, and a curiosity provoked by the unfamiliar. We sense that everything has layers of meaning – often hinted at in the artwork's title – but we are disconcerted by not knowing for certain what these connotations are.

While Scrimgeour invites responses of nostalgia and familiarity, she also induces a sense of disquiet through her vertiginous use of perspective and the eclectic juxtapositioning of the objects she paints. The eye is tricked by the unusual shift, for a still life, from horizontal to vertical. This serves to keep the audience at an unnatural, voyeuristic remove. Scrimgeour activates the space between the canvas and the viewer by painting objects above the table surface – strung-up lanterns, floating bubbles and feathers – which enhance the sense of distance. Not only do we have to make sense of what we are looking at, because of the distortion caused by the perspective, but the tempting objects, and their true meaning, remain beyond our reach.

The beautifully byzantine compositions further obscure understanding. Collections are typically a means of establishing order and creating meaning, but the relationships and hierarchy between Scrimgeour's chosen objects are unclear. The painted objects on a single canvas can be natural (scattered petals) or manufactured (a yo-yo); a combination of valuable (a diamond ring) and

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worthless (scraps of newspaper). A sense of unnerving disquiet and unease is felt in the incongruity of these unexpected juxtapositions. The distinctions between them force us to interpret and appreciate each thing in a new context, one defined by what surrounds it. Instead of coldly documenting what she sees, determined by an obvious unifying factor, Scrimgeour seeks and encourages new connections.

"I find that when I paint something," Scrimgeour comments, "it asks a question and then I have to work out how to answer it. Each object I choose to paint changes what was painted before and dictates what I'll paint next. They sometimes feel like riddles or poems that only make sense for a fleeting moment and then dissolve into nothing." The ambiguity allows us to appreciate the paintings as abstractions, where the interplay of items and patterns is used in place of pure colour or geometric form. Responses associated with memories on the edge of recollection are evoked, by capturing the elusive within the solid tangibility of physical objects. We are left with a sense of shared experience and delight.

Caryn Scrimgeour was born in Johannesburg in 1970 and has lived in Cape Town since 1972. In 1991 she graduated from the University of Stellenbosch with a BA in Fine Art. She is represented by the Everard Read Galleries in South Africa and London, and her work is found in many local and international collections. Her work is inspired by her travels around the world, and her curiosity about how we make meaning in our lives.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2021** *Entangled*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2019** *A Word is Not a Sparrow*, Everard Read, London, UK
- 2018** *My Borrowed Life*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2017** *Flotsam*, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2016** *Postcards from Chinatown*, Everard Read, London, UK
- 2014** *Breaking Point*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2012** *Conundrum*, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2008** *Fragile, Fertile Deceptions*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2006** *Solo Exhibition*, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021** *Spring Show*, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
Summer 2021, Everard Read, London, UK
- 2019** *Birds*, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa
Winter, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2018** Investec Cape Town Art Fair with Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Winter, Everard Read London, UK
- 2017** *Winter*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Summer, Everard Read, London, UK
- 2016** *Christmas Collection*, Everard Read, London, UK
Opening Gallery Exhibition, Everard Read, London, UK
Cape Town Art Fair, Everard Read Gallery Booth, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2015** *Winter*, Group Exhibition Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2014** *Summer Season Group Exhibition*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2013** *100*, Group Exhibition Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa

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- Centenary Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa*
Possessed Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Sydney Art Fair Group Exhibition With Everard Read, Johannesburg, Sydney, Australia
2012 *Johannesburg Art Fair Group Exhibition With Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa*
Winter Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Small Works Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
India Art Fair Group Exhibition With Everard Read, Johannesburg, New Delhi, India
2011 *Johannesburg Art Fair Group Exhibition With Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa*
15th Anniversary Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Self Portrait Group Exhibition, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa
2010 *Summer Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa*
View From The South, Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
2009 *Sex, Power, Money Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa*
Summer Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
2008 *The City Group Exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa*
2007 *Artwords II Group Exhibition, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa*
2006 *Seven Deadly Sins Group Exhibition, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa*
2004 *Women's Day Group Exhibition, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa*