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by Naomi Ekperigin



**Minnie Smells a Trap**

2007, oil, 16 x 20. Collection the artist.

“I prefer not to label myself a still-life painter, although still-life objects dominate my work,” says Boston artist **Barney Levitt**. Looking at his paintings, it is easy to see why he shuns labels. His still-life setups combine rich, naturalistic detail with quirky, off-beat compositions that juxtapose ordinary objects in ways a viewer doesn’t expect. “My paintings are the result of combining photographic references, direct observation, and imagination—with a lot of artistic

license thrown in,” Levitt explains. He primarily uses objects of personal interest, but also incorporates found natural objects. Once the items are collected, the composition is his next focus. “I spend a great deal of time arranging and rearranging it until I’ve found a workable composition,” he says. “Oftentimes I have to glue objects together, such as the arc of stones piled on top of one another in *A Fine Balance*.”

After the composition is complete, Levitt takes a photo and scans it into Photoshop image manipulation software, where he can place the finishing touches. When it is time to paint, the artists uses both the altered and original photographs as references. “I prefer to work from actual setups, but I like to have photos handy when the natural light becomes inadequate.”



**Fragility**

2005, oil, 24 x 24. Collection the artist.

Levitt works in stages, graphing out the composition on the canvas and then loosely establishing a dark/light study using an underpainting of burnt sienna. The task of choosing subject matter and finalizing the composition is the most time-consuming portion of his process, though the artist also spends up to 12 hours painting in a single session. This is due to what he calls his “obsessive attention to detail,” born out of a love of great realist painters. He cites

the Dutch Masters and contemporary realist painters such as Stone Roberts and Gregory Gillespie as some of his major influences.

While Levitt’s realistic and detailed style evokes the work of Old Masters, his compositions and subject matter take classical technique and turn it on its head. “I try to create a narrative from the chosen objects that will elevate and give new meaning to their ordinariness,” He says. “I also strive to create a sense of mystery or humor from seemingly disparate objects.” This is evident in the paintings in which he uses a natural landscape as a backdrop, which sharply contrasts to the strategically spaced items in his still life. For these backgrounds, he relies on photographs he has taken of landscapes. He then adds his own interpretations, which are heavily influenced by the subject matter.

Levitt often likes to create visual puns, and his still lifes seem to take on their own personalities. In the piece *Minnie Smells a Trap*, popular iconography and a lovable cartoon character are placed in a dangerous situation. “I wanted to spin a tongue-in-cheek visual pun. She has it all—a doting boyfriend, a huge jar of candy, but...beware!”



**A Fine Balance**

2006, oil on panel, 16 x 19. Collection Garrett Demarest



**Release**

2006, oil, 18 x 24. Collection Garrett Demarest.