ALMINE RECH

Still Life, Living Form

Feb 12 — Mar 22, 2026 | Gstaad

Almine Rech Gstaad is pleased to present 'Still Life, Living Form,' a group exhibition on view from February 12 to March 22, 2026.

The still life and the figure are perhaps the most intimate artistic motifs. Often drawn from the artist's own immediate surroundings, these compositions represent a choice to capture and represent the mundane, documenting a fleeting moment for eternity. In *Natural History* Pliny the Elder designates the first artist as "the Corinthian Maid," a young woman who traced her lover's shadow on a wall before he left on a journey. This instinct towards preservation can be seen in these two genres across the centuries.

Possibilities abound as the still life and the figure intersect and unite. On the domestic compositions of Chardin, Proust wrote "Since it is not at all the display of special gifts but the expression of the most intimate things in his life [...] it is to our life that his work appeals; it is our life that it reaches out to touch [...] close to the heart of things." The works presented in this show, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, and drawings, date from the early 20th century to the present day. Together, they get close to the heart of things, revealing the radical potential of these enduring forms.

While the history of the still life can be traced to Ancient Greco-Roman art, it became a genre in earnest through the Dutch and Flemish painting of the 16th and 17th centuries, before falling out of fashion, relegated to the lowest rung in the academic hierarchy of genres. The rise of the Impressionist movement in the late 19th century brought with it a resurgence of the still life as well as a revolution in figurative art. Artists advocated for the importance of technique and the depiction of atmosphere, time, and color over subject matter. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Anémones dans un vase* attests to the artist's interest in light and composition, exploring arrangements of shape and color to create a joyful, dynamic work.

Pablo Picasso brought still life and portraiture to the forefront of the avant garde. He pushed the two genres to new heights through his experimentations with the portrayal of form and space, returning to the same subjects throughout his career to depict them in varying styles and mediums. While *Nature morte aux poissons et au couteau* demonstrates Picasso's ability to elevate the simplest subject matter, *Profil gauche de femme (Marie-Thérèse)* captures his mastery of the portrait, his ability to convey a likeness with just a few deliberate, expressive lines.

In mid-century America, Tom Wesselmann made a bold decision; amid a thriving scene of abstraction, he dedicated himself to figuration, declaring "as my subject matter, the history of art." Yet his work did not revisit and replicate the past, it updated its modes for modern life. Wesselmann's work explores post-war consumerism, patriotism, and beauty. *Still Life with Goldfish and Rose gestures to Henri Matisse*, an artist Wesselmann greatly admired. Meanwhile, Fernando Botero's sculpture *Naturaleza muerta* recalls the sobriety of classical still life, reinterpreted through his signature "Boterismo" style characterized by exaggerated proportions and volume.

Wesselmann's *Little Great American Nude #23* links artistic movements, citing Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (the reclining nude) and Henri Rousseau (the bouquet of flowers). Both referential and forward-thinking, the work evokes the past while also capturing a modern sensibility through its utilization of collage. The themes of desire, power, and beauty that interested Wesselmann echo in Jeanette Mundt's *Olympia*. A critical development within 20th and 21st century art is the ever-increasing inclusion of female voices. Though long depicted as a subject of art, women had to fight to receive parity as artists in their own right. The long-overdue inclusion of female subjectivity within depictions of the female form has brought with it a renaissance within the motif. A major figure in this movement was Maria Lassnig, whose process was informed by Körpergefühlmalerei, or "body consciousness," a term coined by the artist herself. *Silbernes Teeservice/Geburtstagsbild* and *Innerhalb und außerhalb der Leinwand I* testify to Lassnig's daring, embodied style.

Today, contemporary artists endeavor to capture the female figure in all of her psychological complexity. Ewa Juszkiewicz challenges depictions of women in historical portraiture, exploring the tension between exposure and concealment, while Claire Tabouret's neon-underpainted figures confront the viewer head-on. Jess Valice's still lifes harken back to Chardin and contain a remarkable intensity, while her portraits, like *Brittany* feature a striking emotional frankness. Adorned with flowers, Inès Longevial's figures incorporate motifs often found in still life. Merging genres, Longevial creates rich, sensual compositions. Farah Atassi also plays with genre; in *Seaside with Citrus* and *The Reader*, fruit, objects long associated with the still life, find themselves depicted in landscapes and interiors.

Moving to the realm of the surreal, Alejandro Cardenas and Xingzi Gu present dreamlike scenes that bring symbolism and fantasy into figuration, while Brian Calvin's large-scale flattened faces interrogate the relationship between the figure and the space surrounding it. In these instances, the portrait becomes speculative, recasing the figure as a character to create exciting, imaginative works.

During the Dutch Golden Age of painting, painters rediscovered the Roman motif of the *Vanitas*, allegorical works that speak to the shortness of life and the futility of ambition and worldly desires. Contemporary Belgian artist Hans Op de Beeck presents his own interpretation of this perennial theme, featuring everyday objects: shoes, fruit, a newspaper, alongside burning candles, symbols of the transience of life. A candle is also featured in Not Vital's *Self-portrait*. Encapsulating the intersection between portraiture and still life, the mysterious, flickering subject is at once the flame of a candle and a portrait of the artist himself, a haunting memento mori for his own time.

If this exhibition proves one thing, it is that the motif of the figure and the still life are just as relevant in 2026– across abstract and figurative art– as they were in 1915, or 1984. Artists will continue to plumb the depths of these subjects, in search of their own particular forms of meaning.

— Louisa Mahoney, researcher