

J. Carroll



PAMELA CARROLL

RECENT WORKS



Heirloom Tomatoes, 2022, 9 x 12 in, Oil on Panel

Red Pears, 2022, 9 x 12 in, Oil on Panel



As a genre, still life painting came into its own in the seventeenth century Netherlands, when explorers and trading conglomerates returned from their spice-hunting expeditions with new and unusual botanical specimens. Dutch and Flemish artists embraced exotic flowers as a subject, and their paintings remain prized mementos of the era. At the same moment though, Spanish masters like Juan de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán were working with fruit and vegetables rather than



Juan de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose*, 1633



blooming plants. Bowls of apples or quince, or distinctive cabbages and melons were brilliantly highlighted against a plain dark background. Carmel artist Pamela Carroll gives a nod to this foundational style by taking a similar approach in her newest series of still life paintings.

Carroll's rapt exploration of a single vegetable, or a bowl or basket of one kind of fruit, details both the distinguishing characteristics and the aesthetics of her subject. Placed at the center of the canvas and the sole focus of attention, these otherwise commonplace edibles take on the aspect of jewels. Carroll works from life, as the seventeenth century artists would have done. She sets up her arrangements on a small table adjacent to her easel, with a window nearby for light, although she has the advantage of electricity if she needs it. She loves to paint from life, just because, as she says, "It's so hard. I want everything to feel tangible. When you see a lemon I want you to feel like you just want to take it." These paintings do inspire a yearning to reach in, pull out a red pear



or a purple fig, feel its weight in your hand, and take a bite!

When painting from life rather than from a photograph, both the living model and the quality of light changes by the hour. This offers its own kind of challenge and working methods, because time too becomes a component of the process and of the result. Over the years, Carroll has refined her techniques for working with changing light, and for effectively framing her compositions. Single-subject paintings such as these, demand even more attention to detail because every placement, every brushstroke counts. There are no distractions, no places to hide, and no particular narrative to unravel. A spare surface, or simple basket or bowl alone grounds her subject. Yet this very simplicity allows Carroll to illuminate the unexpected and formal beauty present in everyday objects.

Carroll takes up *how* and *what* we see, and what can be seen when approaching any subject with a clear-eyed and focused attention. All of her paintings respond to this question on some level. Especially impressive in this regard is *Purple Cauliflower* (2022), with its uncountable cruciferous ridges and indentations. Each individual mini-floret is picked out and described within its tightly packed larger iteration. Innumerable small brushstrokes from palest lavender through to grapey purple, plus touches of raspberry and bits of rose, define this challenging, fractal-like form. A soft green glow reflects its surrounding protective stalks and a few gorgeously rendered leaves, and provides a mirage-like indication of a table surface. The delicacy of this precisely painted reflection emphasizes the weighty vegetable, and lends the painting a slightly otherworldly air.

Another vegetable subject worthy of note is Carroll's *Yellow Beets* (2022) – like the cauliflower, a rare subject for painting. Not available here until relatively recently, these vibrant golden orange tubers with their abundant leaves look radiant with vitality. Small root hairs and root knots, plus bits of dirt, lumps, and divots testify to a vegetable not long out of the ground. Damp from a recent wash, or possibly a quick parboil, the beets drip with water that slides down into tiny pools mirroring a reflected orange light. One broken stem testifies to recent handling, and the pea-colored tinges to otherwise bright green leaves, as well as their

slight wilt, provides additional evidence of that parboil. Carroll's attention to every nuance of her subject makes evident so much of what is ordinarily disregarded or missed completely.

Along with the single fruit or vegetable paintings, several of Carroll's works feature containers of fruit. Sparkling citrus heaped in pottery bowls stand out, but her paintings of *Blueberries* (2022), and *Figs* (2022) especially shine. In *Blueberries*, the fruit is mounded in a charming old-style basket. Not many foods have the bright blue of these berries, and they make an arresting subject. It takes a variety of pigments in a range of blue and purple tones to generate their color, and Carroll's hand and eye work together seamlessly to create it. Another superb example is her painting of a baker's-dozen figs with their stems still attached. Again she works with the *mélange* of blue and purple pigment, but now mixed and applied to a very different effect. The figs rest at every angle in a well-used bright green bowl. Precise dabs of color indicate degrees of ripeness in varying dashes of yellowy green, a range of blues, purples of course, and a few significant touches of red. Their veracity is a marvel. Here is the painting to reach into for a taste!

Carroll tackles one more stunning vegetable with her spectacular *Heirloom Tomatoes* (2022). Tomatoes are fragile, so working with them is an extra challenge. But the heirlooms' diverse forms and curious colorations make them a particularly arresting subject. Carroll has chosen an extraordinary trio of fruit to feature: a lumpy, multi-toned reddish example, a mottled lime green and yellow version, and their rounder, smoother, more traditional cousin. In a reflection of Zurburán, she has arranged them in a simple line, on a bare surface, and against a light ground, presenting them to their best advantage. Pale shadows, and tinted reflections unite the space, and define the glossy surface on which they rest. Like *Yellow Beets* or *Purple Cauliflower*, *Heirloom Tomatoes* defies the expectations of a typical still life painting, yet in the same breath, it surpasses them. Carroll presents an uncompromising vision of ordinary foodstuffs unadorned and unencumbered. With an unerring sense of color and light, and with obvious reverence, she offers exquisite appreciations from the bounty of our own rare and astonishing natural world.



(above) *Figs*, 2022, 9 x 12 in, Oil on Panel

(cover) *Purple Cauliflower*, 2022, 12 x 9 in, Oil on Panel

(inside, left) *Single Pumpkin*, 2022, 12 x 9 in, Oil on Panel; *Blueberries*, 2022, 12 x 9 in, Oil on Panel

(inside, center) *Tangerines*, 2022, 9 x 12, Oil on Panel; *Yellow Beets*, 2022, 9 x 12 in, Oil on Panel

Essay by Helaine Glick, *Independent Curator*

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