

# PAULETTE TAVORMINA'S NEW TAKE ON THE OLD MASTERS

**F**ine Art Connoisseur rarely covers the field of fine art photography, lively as it is, because many other publications do so regularly. We've made an exception, however, for Paulette Tavormina (b. 1949) — an artist who works in New York City and Litchfield, Connecticut — because her photographs are not mere replicas of the Old Master still life paintings we love, but rather distinctly contemporary, highly personal riffs on them.

Beyond their luminous beauty, they reflect Tavormina's thoughtful decisions about what to retain, delete, or alter to make the resulting scene fresh, sometimes autobiographical or whimsical, always poetic. Some of her elements sustain their allegorical meanings from the 17th century, while others resonate for the artist herself. These tabletop arrangements result from Tavormina's exhaustive experimentation with different shapes and colors and her deft management of atmospheric lighting, through which the objects glow against pitch-black backdrops, achieving the balance of light and shadow the Italians call *chiaroscuro*.

"As a photographer," Tavormina explains, "I can be the researcher, composer, set designer, and director." Working alone with intense concentration and patience, she takes "months imagining my next image or series," she says. "Sometimes, I make a sketch. Then I search for the antiques to create the scene. Once I have a multitude of them, I can begin." Every shoot is a



*Botanical IV, Water Lilies and Poppies, from the Botanical series, 2013*





Love Notes, from the Trompe l'Oeil series, 2018





**JACOB VAN HULSDONCK** (1582–1647), *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Pomegranate*, c. 1620–30, oil on panel, 16 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

race against the clock: cut flowers begin to wilt, fruit rots, dewdrops evaporate, and butterfly wings crinkle. "It can take days," she notes. "It takes a lot to gather and then marry everything together and ensure it's all cohesive."

Yet Tavormina knows the effort is worthwhile: "The beauty all around us is fleeting, and yet can be embedded forever in a perfect moment that is a photograph. My practice has become an avenue to explore the intimate moments of my life, to tell universal stories of love and loss, of joy and sorrow, all the while feeling grateful for the rich abundance of life. I want viewers to enjoy the image but also to see, as well as feel, the emotion I feel when I arrange a leaf just so, or when I add an object that may have a special, or hidden, meaning."

#### A UNIQUE PATH

So how did Tavormina get here? Growing up in Rockville Centre on Long Island, "My first love was antiques,"



*Lemons and Pomegranates*, after J.V.H. [Jacob van Hulsdonck], from the *Natura Morta* series, 2010



she declares. "My grandmother used to take me to an antiques store near her home. I remember it was very cluttered. She purchased a miniature wooden table for me, not so different from the ones I use today as the surface for all the other elements in my photographs. It was then that I began collecting things — shells, old keys, dice, lobster claws, ephemera, and tiny ceramic dishes. My bedroom became a museum of little things that I arranged to tell stories. My older sister and brother always liked to make fun of this — and they still do, only now they also supply some of the objects that I use, such as Italian honeybees, pea tendrils from the garden, or oyster shells from Norway. There is a magic about objects that evoke memories and connections."

Not surprisingly, Tavormina's first job was working in a Boston antiques shop. Ultimately she headed to the Manhattan auction house Sotheby Parke Bernet, where she was surrounded by art of all kinds. In 1987 she moved to Santa Fe, where her interest in photography began with a class learning black-and-white techniques. Tavormina recalls fondly the wonder of photographing her own artifacts and then watching them emerge on paper in the darkroom. Soon she was working full-time photographing Native American pottery and Navajo jewelry, for which Santa Fe has long been a commercial nexus. She also spent a lot of time with her friend Sarah McCarty, a gifted still life artist who paints with egg tempera, and who maintains an English-style garden lush with lemons and quinces.

It was McCarty who introduced Tavormina to the wonder of Old Master still lifes, especially those painted by two groundbreaking women, the Italian Giovanna Garzoni and the German Maria Sibylla Merian. "From then on," Tavormina recalls, "everywhere I went, in Europe or America, I would go to museums and seek out still life artworks, to admire their dramatic lighting, color palettes, and unique compositions. I became infatuated. The way their work transcended time and place amazed — and inspired — me. I wanted to create my own still lifes photographically, but it took me almost 20 years to finally feel comfortable doing so."

As readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* know, still life emerged around 1600 and has flourished ever since, with varying degrees of intensity. The English term for this genre derives from the Dutch *stilleven*, but the French call it *nature morte* (dead nature). For various reasons, the 17th and 18th centuries are still considered the genre's golden age, generally characterized by exacting, proto-photographic detail and a range of latent meanings that everyone knew through myth, folklore, and the omnipresence of homemade herbal remedies. Among Dutch practitioners, the leaders included Balthasar van der Ast, Evert



Vanitas IV, *Dreams, After A.C.* [Adriaen Coorte], from the *Vanitas* series, 2015





*Cardoon and Radishes, after J.S.C. [Juan Sánchez Cotán], from the Natura Morta series, 2010*

Collier, Adriaen Coorte, and Willem Claesz. Heda. Flanders had Jan van Kessel, Spain Luis Meléndez, Italy the great Caravaggio, and Germany Georg Flegel — to name only a few still life masters.

Since her epiphany in Sarah McCarty's garden, Tavormina has become an avid collector of books about still life and has visited hundreds of museums worldwide. Among many close encounters, she particularly relishes her 2009 introduction to the Norton Simon Museum's magnificent painting by Francisco de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose* (1633): "I was mesmerized and stood in front of it, not wanting to leave. I decided I should have my own, so I created it."

Deep as her love of history is, Tavormina also lives in modern times and thus reveres photographs by such 20th-century masters as Irving Penn, Edward Steichen, and Josef Sudek. Before she began creating her own fine art in 2008, she flourished as a commercial photographer, a food stylist for cookbooks, and a prop and food stylist in Hollywood. Among the seven films she staffed were *Nixon* and *The Perfect Storm*, projects that demanded intensive research and rigorous authenticity. She is especially proud of *The Astronaut's Wife* — a 1999 movie starring Johnny Depp and Charlize Theron — for which she created a Dutch still life scene featuring papayas, pheasants, geese, and roasted quails on puff pastries, all indirectly inspired by film director Gabriel Axel's 1987 masterpiece *Babette's Feast*.

In 2005, Tavormina returned to New York City and to Sotheby's, this time photographing the superb artworks being prepared for sale there. At night and on weekends, she kept busy in her small Manhattan apartment making her first fine art photographs, often using flowers she had cultivated in planters on the windowsill. In 2009 the principals at Robert Klein Gallery (Boston) took a chance and started representing her, and indeed they still handle her photographs today.

Since 2008, Tavormina has undertaken 10 separate series, most of them ongoing. The first, and perhaps the most revealing in terms of her debt to the Old Masters, is *Natura Morta*. Illustrated here, for example, is the 2010 photograph *Lemons and Pomegranates, after J.V.H.* These initials reference the Flemish master Jacob van Hulsdonck (1582–1647), whose *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Pomegranate* hangs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. As the Italian scholar Silvia Malaguzzi has written, this is in no way a replica; just for example, the historical piece contains oranges and orange flowers, but Tavormina included only the flowers. The original allegorizes marriage.



JUAN SÁNCHEZ COTÁN (1560–1627), *Still Life with Game, Vegetables, and Fruit*, 1602, oil on canvas, 26 3/4 x 34 3/4 in., Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





*Dutch Tulips and Goldfish, from the Fiori del Giardino series, 2021*

with lemons as signs of chastity, oranges of matrimony, and pomegranates of fertility. Tavormina did not resist those associations, but she added a moth (a symbol of decay) and made the fruits much more individualized in shape, sometimes even bizarrely so.

Similarly, her 2010 *Natura Morta* scene of *Cardoon and Radishes*, after J.S.C. honors the legacy of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627), whose *Still Life with Game, Vegetables, and Fruit* (1602) hangs in glory at Madrid's Museo Nacional del Prado. The Spanish master is distinctive in having created the stone niche that became an artificial stage for his meditative arrangements of fresh produce, some of which he

suspended in proto-surrealist ways. Tavormina opted not to replicate his dead birds hanging on strings, but she did go with the cardoon (also called artichoke thistle). Common in Mediterranean cuisines, it is not an especially attractive vegetable, yet it means something to Tavormina personally: "My mother kept a large paper bag and a large knife in the car. When we went to my grandmother's, we would stop by the railroad tracks and cut some cardoons down. They were considered delicacies in my Sicilian-American family."

Anyone even a bit familiar with the history of the still life genre will appreciate the titles of Tavormina's subsequent series: *Botanicals*; *Flowers, Fish, Birds & Fantasies* (initially inspired by a large painting by the Flemish master Gerard Van Spaendonck that she admired at Sotheby's); *Bodegones* (the Spanish term for still life, and inspired particularly by the work of Luis Meléndez); *Vanitas*, with its *memento*





Pink Peonies and the Cat, from the Cats series, 2024

*mori* evocations of the inevitability of decay and death (such as wilting flowers and spoiled oysters); *Trompe l'oeil* (the French term for “fool the eye”); *From the Sea*; *Fiori del Giardino* (Flowers from the Garden), which started during lockdown in 2020 when the only flowers Tavormina could obtain were from her own garden; *Cats*, a new series featuring Fellini and Puccini, two gorgeous ragdoll felines for whom the artist’s husband, Paul, serves as chief wrangler; and *Garden Botanicals* (to be launched this autumn).

#### WHEN OBJECTS SPEAK

“I have always been attracted to the magic of objects that evoke memories,” Tavormina explains. “Being a sentimental person, capturing moments in photography brings me back to past feelings so I can savor them again.” It is particularly important to note that not one of her photographs depicts humans, only suggestions of their presence and their lives’ passage, conveyed by such motifs as rumpled tablecloths, lit candles, and partially peeled fruits.

From the Renaissance onward, privileged Europeans began to assemble cabinets of curiosities (*wunderkammern*) — rooms filled with exotic, unique, and puzzling items gathered from art, travel, and nature. Ultimately, these became the first museums, and it seems Tavormina is well on her way to launching a museum of props. As noted above, she has long prowled farmers markets, flower stalls, antique shops, and flea markets across America and Europe, and now her Connecticut home has closets, boxes, and drawers — all carefully organized and labeled — brimming with small items of every description: jewelry, coins, shells, ceramics (sometimes chipped to suggest the passage of time), dried insects and stuffed birds (including spectacular butterflies from the famous Parisian taxidermist Deyrolle), and much more. In preparation for her *Vanitas* series, Tavormina was awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant that enabled her to acquire even more props, including the human skull illustrated here in *Vanitas IV, Dreams*.

Tavormina grows flowers and produce on her Connecticut property, and she buys them at Manhattan’s flower market. She is always on the lookout for unique shapes, colors, patterns, and what one might even call personalities. (For an example of the latter, study the idiosyncratic lemon at the lower left of *Lemons and Pomegranates*, after J.V.H.) These items resonate with her: “My grandparents lived near us growing up, and they had large garden beds of roses, plate-size dahlias, figs, and Italian plum trees — often winning blue ribbons for their garden club.” She is particularly fond of figs and notes that her brother’s tree was grafted from her father’s, which had come from his own father’s. She adds that the snails that sometimes appear in her art hail from her cousin’s property in Palermo.

One could be forgiven for imagining that still life set-ups are straightforwardly predictable, but Tavormina is always braced for surprises. “In photography, there is spontaneity, and sometimes mistakes happen,” she laughs. “But it usually happens in an organic way — like when a leaf falls on the table or a flower’s color changes. Once, though,” she continues, “some zebra finches flew the coop and slept on my bookcases all night... I captured and photographed them, but then decided to use taxidermy birds and owls going forward. Once I wanted to use real fish, so I bought a 10-gallon tank. They all lived happily after they were featured.”

Tavormina sees her occasional failures as “blessings that can lead you to places you never imagined.” In general, however, her studio is a place of technical precision. Resting on a tripod is her Hasselblad camera, with its huge megapixel capacity, tethered to a computer; on either side are a Broncolor strobe light and a reflector. During one session, Tavormina might take as many as 500 shots, and then she edits the best ones on her computer. “It is finished when I fall in love with it,” she says. Once the files are ready, they are examined by her esteemed colleague August Pross, a co-owner of LTI Lightside Photographic Services in New York City, with whom she does color corrections using Adobe Photoshop. The result is an archival digital inkjet print, which comes in four sizes: small (edition of 15), medium (7), large (5), and extra-large (3). Also available are the artist’s proofs (two or three of them depending on the project).

The success of Tavormina’s fine art photographs has also moved her career toward unexpected new partnerships in the commercial sector. She has shot two campaigns for Gucci fragrances, and another for Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop line. These projects have introduced a broader public to the sumptuousness of her aesthetic, but her focus remains firmly on her own work. “Years from now,” she concludes, “I hope the photographs I create will affect someone as deeply as the Old Masters’ paintings have affected me.” ●

**Information:** Tavormina is represented by Gilman Contemporary (San Valley, Idaho), Heather James Fine Art (Palm Desert, California), Holden Luntz Gallery (Palm Beach), March SF (San Francisco), Robert Klein Gallery (Boston), and Winston Wächter Fine Art (New York City). In 2016, the Monacelli Press published the 160-page monograph *Paulette Tavormina: Seizing Beauty*, which contains insightful essays by scholars Mark Alice Durant, Silvia Malaguzzi, and Anke Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven.

**Peter Trippi** is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.