

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

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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 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

- 2024 Things I lost along the way, Everard Read, Franschhoek, South Africa
- 2023 The imprecision of feeling, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2022 Hope is a thing with feathers, Everard Read, London, UK
- 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

- 2022 Seduction, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 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 Exhibition, Everard Read, London, UK

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- Cape Town Art Fair, Everard Read Gallery Booth, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2015 Winter, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2014 Summer Season, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2013 100, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- Centenary, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- Possessed, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- Sydney Art Fair, With Everard Read, Sydney, Australia
- 2012 Johannesburg Art Fair, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- Winter, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- Small Works, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- India Art Fair, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, New Delhi, India
- 2011 Johannesburg Art Fair, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 15th Anniversary, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- Self Portrait, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa
- 2010 Summer, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- View from the South, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2009 Sex, Power, Money, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- Summer, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2008 The City, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2007 Artwords I, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa
- 2006 Seven Deadly Sins, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa
- 2004 Women's Day, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville, South Africa