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- [Culture](#)
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- [« previous page](#)

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Drop Dead Gorgeous

### Still life photos of Vera Mercer expose unique taste for art

by Michael J. Krainak

If a viewer enters photographer Vera Mercer’s first U.S. solo show and stays long enough, he or she is likely to experience it in three stages and on a roller coaster of emotions.

*Still Lifes*, on display at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts through April 9, features 11 large format, painterly images from this Omaha-based international artist that, with colorful compositions of food, flora and fauna, may remind some of 17th century Flemish and Dutch paintings.

That is, once one gets over or past two inevitable initial reactions. The first is an immediate sensual response to these works, which are drop-dead gorgeous. A fitting description, more ironic than hyperbolic, considering the object holding center stage in each is an animal whose life indeed has gone still. And though initially all photos are a moveable feast for the eyes, it becomes readily apparent that not all objects are fit or even prepared for human consumption. Unless, perhaps, Andrew Zimmern of the Travel Channel is your cup of Chinese medicine tea whose ingredients include shavings from a deer’s penis.

Speaking of deer, one of the most striking images in this most impressive exhibit is titled simply “Deer Head,” and it is served on a platter as prominently as was that of John the Baptist, at least in Oscar Wilde’s version of the story in his play *Salome*. While most viewers may not be tempted to embrace said deer as did Salome the head of St. John, there is no denying Mercer’s artistic license and paradoxical “joie de vivre” for all dead creatures, great and small.

Which brings us to the second stage. Because beauty remains in the eye of the beholder, it may be difficult for some to appreciate a skinned “Nude

Rabbit,” a dead “Redheaded Woodpecker,” “Paris” with raspberries, a skeletal “Naked Deer Head,” or the severed foot of a pig in “Pied de Cochon, Hong Kong.” Each is served up lovingly, almost reverentially, as if items on a banquet table graced with roses, melon, orchids and candle light. To an audience conditioned to a processed and prepared carry-out cuisine, the sight of what some might deem “road kill” could kill their appetite for art.

But not the artist. Mercer began making photos of food and its industry in the '60s in the marketplace of Paris, where she and her husband Mark still keep an apartment. She first gained notoriety for her portraits of such artists as Jean Tinguely, Miki de Saint-Phalle, Eva Aeppli, Norman Mailer and Andy Warhol, as well as documentation of an avant-garde community known as the “Nouveau Realistes.” Since coming to Omaha 40 years ago, the Mercers have helped transform the Old Market into the city’s artistic community, most currently with its Moving Gallery exhibiting regional and international artists.

It is Mercer’s instinctive taste for global culture and a non-conformist, experimental approach to her art, that will ultimately pull viewers out of shock mode; she enables them to suspend disbelief as they enter that most difficult stage of all, interpretation. What to make of work that appears to be readily accessible, but flies in the face of convention as if daring one to either look away or try to make sense of it all?

One could do neither, and simply drink the photography in for the sheer pleasure of its aesthetic and presentation. Bemis curator Hesse McGraw deserves credit for the latter as he has chosen 11 photos from more than 200. Each selection “tells a story or makes a direct statement about her art.” Factor in walls painted in an elegant blend of maroon or burgundy; add dramatic, key lighting and each piece either radiates outward, as with the dense imagery of “Crab, Paris,” reminiscent of the decadent painting of Paul Renner, or entices with its deep field of focus, as in “Judith’s Rooster, Omaha.”

Yet, in this stage, there is always the need to rationalize what amazes or confounds us, or at least what we find curious or unexpected. This was readily apparent during the artist talk in February following the show’s opening. McGraw, Mercer and Humberto Chavez, deputy director of the National Centre for the Arts in Mexico City and a frequent visiting artist and curator in Omaha, did their best to enlighten without attempting to explain the work away.

McGraw acknowledged a visual connection to Flemish/Dutch still life, but cautioned against attributing a similar, symbolic inference to Mercer’s use of food and/or animal imagery. “These photos are more direct. It’s a constructed reality, not an allegorical reality. The woodpecker is not about virility. That said, they will mean something different to everybody.”

For Mercer, too, the image she has created is not symbolic or idealistic, but respectful and a matter of “exposition,” a favorite expression of hers when referring to works of art. “Their life is granted something new by the work,” she says, referring to her use of animal imagery, “a quiet life, not something lost, but something revealed.”

Mercer’s art is comfortable with the subject of death, or better yet, that arc of time within a still life. Chavez described it in terms not only of each photo’s subject, but also with regard to the artist’s and viewer’s relationship to the work itself.

“There is that concept of time within any still life,” Chavez says, “a frozen time of full blossom, of things seen and even not seen or experienced, yet referenced.”

Chavez is speaking of objects within each image that we not only see ripe, dead or withering in that moment, but along with the artist, connect to additional “bubbles of time” that may imagine the lifespan of each animal or flower on a deeper level. This is especially true, he says, for the artist who spends additional time with each object creating a new reality.

Perhaps the harshest reality one has to accept when viewing these images is “omnia vanitas” or “all is vanity,” that lesson from Ecclesiastes concerning the impermanence and futility of life on earth. Mercer doesn’t shy away from this, nor does she moralize about it. She accepts it, revels in it, and finds rare beauty in its realization. This is first seen with her large format still life prints in the Mercer-owned restaurant, the Boiler Room, which opened in the Old Market in the winter of 2009.

In early 2010 she helped organize a three-part exhibition for the Moving Gallery with Matthias Harder, chief curator of the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin, called *Time, Death and Beauty*. Recognizing a kindred spirit to his show’s themes, Harder invited Mercer to participate; the latter exhibited photos of a solitary amaryllis and two majestic roses in resplendent, grainy black and white that were painfully beautiful and painfully aware of their impending decline.

Later that year Harder curated an exhibit in Berlin of Mercer’s portraits and still lifes: *Joie de Vivre and Vanitas* and published an award-winning retrospective of her work, titled *Vera Mercer: Portraits and Still Life*. In his preface, Harder notes the theme of vanitas in art gradually shifted from moralizing on vanity to an acknowledgement of transience, a dominant theme in Mercer’s work as well.

“The observer is usually presented with fresh vegetables and fish, half-withered flowers and animal skulls — in peaceful coexistence,” Harder says. “Life still seems present in the ripe fruits, though they no longer hang from branches or vines ... the death imagery is just as present: classical vanitas motifs like skulls, fish heads or half-melted candles are reminders — as memento mori — of our mortality.”

Though the result is sensual and engaging for the viewer, for Mercer, her point of view is more detached, her passion reserved for her aesthetic and the process that created it. She shoots in large and medium format, whose negatives help to accommodate her dense imagery and rich color variations.

“I like to experiment with my imagery,” Mercer says. “I know my technique. Every lens creates a different mood. I don’t spend hours and hours composing; I work instinctively. Then I scan each image and use the computer, but no tricks [optical].”

No tricks, but certainly an illusion or two, especially with the occasional use of a background photograph in a given work that Harder describes as a “theatrical scrim,” thus enhancing perception and emotional response. For example, this picture within a picture effect is most prominent in “Naked Deer Head.” The eye travels from fading flower and spindly greens to skeletal antlers against a backdrop of another withering bouquet that resembles dried arrangements as one reality transits into another, once removed.

Yet the real “arrangement” in Mercer’s artistry, a term Harder often uses to describe the structure of each photo, has as much to do with the formal properties of her aesthetic as it does with the composition of subject matter. That is, the arrangement of palette, lighting, focus, angle and perspective as well as other elements to achieve a near-perfect asymmetrical balance that virtually supercedes content.

In describing his own art, James McNeil Whistler said his objective was beauty created through a harmonious pattern. “Just as music is the poetry of sound, painting is the poetry of sight — the subject matter has nothing to do with the harmony of sound or of colour.” Which would explain why the title of his most famous painting, a portrait of his mother, is really “An Arrangement in Grey and Black.”

Thus a similar case could be made for several painterly photos in his exhibition. “Deer Head” could be an “Arrangement in Khaki and Black,” “Judith’s Rooster” renamed “A Pattern of Flour, Flower and Feather,” and “Harmony of Reflected Light and Color” substitute for “Crab, Omaha.” Admittedly, something may be lost in the translation, especially for those who fixate and say, “What about the melting brie that resembles a giant snail slowly oozing its way down a wine glass, and that severed and skinned, sheepish looking head in ‘New Day Together?’”

How do you ignore these? You don’t. You accept them as a fact of life and the muse of an artist whose vision includes a heightened sensibility and sensuality and a taste for adventure. Not to do so would be to dismiss this photography as Shock Art rather than the shockingly good art that it is.

*Vera Mercer I Still Lives continues until April 9 at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 South 12th St. For details go to [bemiscenter.org](http://bemiscenter.org).*



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