

Shelley Jordon: Ordinary Matter, Extraordinary Beauty

by Linda Tesner, Director, Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art, Lewis & Clark College

Shelley Jordon is an assiduous observer of everyday life. This commitment is a thread that weaves one series of Jordon's work seamlessly into another. Her studio practice involves traditional painting from nature—oil on canvas or gouache on paper—as well as technically advanced works that rely on computer software and digital editing.

Her work explores the passage of time, domestic life, and the intersections between interior and exterior worlds. Jordon puts a contemporary spin on universal themes through her use of modern technology combined with traditional drawing and painting.

Earlier in her career, Jordon was best known for her monumental and sumptuous still life paintings. In these she arranged various objects into complex compositions—a cut melon, a glass pitcher, cut flowers, a ceramic platter, the drapery of a simple tablecloth. Behind



Lemon Sunflowers, Oil on Canvas, 48" x 60", 2006, Courtesy Murdoch Collections, Portland

the arrangement, in the distance, is the actual view of wherever she is painting, the homes and trees of her current residential neighborhood in Northwest Portland, or the more urban skyline she viewed from her studio in Portland's Pearl District in the early 1990's. These earlier works virtually exploded in saturated hues as Jordon celebrated the lushness that could be gathered from a kitchen counter (fig 1).

More recently, Jordon's focus combines her love of drawing and painting with her

interest in animation to evoke narrative. Her animated films are viewed on a monitor or projected onto a screen, such as *Anita's Journey* (2011) (fig 2), which retells the story of Jordon's mother-in-law as a six-year old girl in Nazi Germany. In another video-based work, Jordon makes reference to her earlier still life paintings by creating an installation that is a three-dimensional depiction of one of her earlier still life compositions. *Morning Coffee* (2010) (fig 3) is the scene of an early morning breakfast. Only the surface of the coffee is the "ground" for hand-drawn images that might float through one's mind at the break of day. Within Jordon's microcosm of an everyday ritual, the familiar (the coffee cup) contains a dreamy, stream-of-consciousness fictive that weaves together current events with personal musings.



Anita's Journey, hand-painted animation, 2011



Morning Coffee, animated Installation, 2009

In 2011 Jordon began to paint the most minimal and spare still lifes of fruits and vegetables from the farmer's market. The series, *Little Things*, portrays ordinary objects that arrest and delight the eye. Jordon captures the transcendent beauty found in the aubergine, the acidic-green furls of radicchio, (fig 4) or the autumnal blush of an acorn squash.



Radicchio, gouache on birds-eye maple paper, 8.5" x 11", 2014

Little Things are portraits made in gouache on 8.5 x 11 inch bird's eye maple paper. The objects themselves are painted at roughly life size, so there is an intimacy of scale that gives the viewer the sensation that one might reach out and hold the object in one's hand. The subject—the chili pepper or the packet of Oreos—simply "floats" in space, with no sense of pretense or presentation. The elimination of any background "noise"



Little Things, gouache on birds-eye maple paper, 8.5" x 11", 2014

in these graceful pictures invites the viewer to focus intently and without distraction on Jordon's prize.

Jordon painted other "little things" that one might find around the house. A roll of toilet paper, a carelessly-squeezed tube of toothpaste, the metallic gold bag that coffee beans come in, a discarded stuffed animal, partially-emptied snack bags and canned goods. She exhibits *Little Things* in grids (fig 5) in which there is no irony in the pairings of, say, a juicy papaya half in proximity to a bottle of earplugs, or a few humble potatoes near a single elegant chanterelle.

At times objects captured by *Little Things* border on detritus, whatever is left after the Goldfish crackers have been eaten. Jordon expanded this idea in another grid called *Wetzel's Pretzels* (2012) in which she focused on a single, empty bag. By viewing the bag from different angles, Jordon imbued the sack with a palpable sense of personality. The

resulting grid is both witty and almost anthropomorphic. The bag appears to be “voguing” across the grid. Jordon used the drawings to create a stop motion animation called *Carnavale* (2012) in which the Wetzel’s Pretzels bag convincingly cha-cha-chas to Cesária Évora’s brassy “Carnavale De Sao Vicente.”

Still life painting, especially at its zenith during the Dutch Golden Age, was a metaphor for the passage of time and, ultimately, for death. Traditionally the most ambrosial components of still life are evanescent. A fully blown rose, a peach at the peak of ripeness, a shucked oyster—seductive and alluring—quickly become putrid. Jordon references and tweaks this very theme with her animated paintings of fruit and vegetables out of her *Little*



Bananas, gouache on birds-eye maple paper, 8.5" x 11", 2014

Things series. Jordon typically paints *sur le motif*; that is, she paints directly from life, pacing her gaze between her subject and the ground she is painting on. For her animated produce series, she starts by painting a spare “portrait” of a banana (fig 6), a pear, or a bell pepper. She then literally repaints over and over the painting, day by day, altering the still life to capture the way in which the fruit or vegetable ages and eventually spoils.

Each rendition is one of her stop frames. She invokes a centuries-old motif: that a bunch of ripening bananas is as effective a *memento mori* as any skull or just-snuffed candlewick. This depiction elicits in the viewer a heightened awareness of time’s passage. From the pristine beauty of a youthful ripe banana to its gradual aging, no segment of time goes unappreciated by Jordon.

Jordon’s investigation of one’s interior life also has a quotidian rhythm. Her video *Dreaming/Drowning* (2010) starts with a painting of a female figure enlivened by floating amorphous shapes that flow into and over the figure. The slow sequencing of this video suggests a certain distractedness or quixotic state. In the animated installation *Inhale/Exhale* (2010) Jordon uses simple breath as the subject of brush and ink drawings to explore the shifting power of mother-daughter relationships.

In *Little Things* and many other works, Jordon focuses solely on her subject narrowing the experience and preserving the exquisite potency of a single moment. Jordon achieves this with the ordinary matter of everyday things.