

FRANCESCA FUCHS

*She Lives with Objects*



*Something*



*Striped Animal*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Clown, 2018*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
41.5 x 30 inches



*Duck and Dolphin*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Green Indian, 2018*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Orange Visor Animal*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Wood Man*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
41.5 x 30 inches





*Pinkheaded Monster*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Koala Bear*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches



*Rabbit*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
41.5 x 30 inches



*Elephant*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
30 x 41.5 inches







## *Thinginess*

“I want the paintings to feel really straightforward, like they just are what they are. They are really simple and straightforward. And so, sometimes, every now and then, when something looks almost too virtuoso, I might scale it back a little bit, because I want a tiny bit of clunkiness in the painting so that they can just be, and be true...” – F.

Francesca sends me a photograph of her father.

In the image, he sits outdoors, beside a brick wall. His ruddy complexion reminds me of hers. Not quite visible, his gaze is directed toward the right side of the photograph and into the distance, following the path of his arm, which extends onto the table before him. Over a blue shirt, he wears a thick cabled navy sweater with a red silk scarf wrapped inside it. The colors match the ribbon that bands his straw hat, match the colors and pattern of the tablecloth beneath his hand. From these details, I imagine here is someone attuned to specifics. I think perhaps that the impression of easiness is based upon a lifelong study of ease, perhaps one that complements other kinds of studious rigor.

We lean on the supposed veracity of the photograph to imagine a person, to “know” something about him, when all we can do is describe what we see through that imperfect lens that conflates vision with understanding. The emotional charge of a photographic image offers us one way of understanding how photographs help construct memory and its emotions. However, if we think of the photograph as an object, we might place it alongside the many other kinds of objects that fill our days and define our relationships. And then the question becomes not about what we see or feel in the image itself, but about how we live alongside an object and what it might say about *us*.

All I actually know is this: F’s father was a scholar of antiquity. And, surrounded by his family, he passed away on the evening of January 11, 2016. And this thing is a photograph of him, shared with me by his daughter.

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F’s painting process also begins with a photograph. From the photograph, she makes a small, painted sketch, in which she works out the color relationships of the final painting. She keeps piles of these small acrylic paintings on museum board, stacked and ordered throughout her studio. The movement from photo to sketch to painting feels like a series of translations, a digging toward truth.

There is something specific about how F uses color. The wash of the paint and the brushy strokes combine with colors somehow once or twice removed from the crisp brightness with which my eyes see color in my surroundings. In her canvases, intensely personal subjects are subdued by this choice of palette, almost as if they are being seen through a haze of memory that quiets without dampening the heat of vulnerability. In her work, F insists on looking closely at something we often separate from the state of the world, from historical largesse, from Important Painting: here, in paintings of the overlooked intimacies that shape our lives, F gives careful attention to family relationships, to objects of the everyday, to quiet moments, to what art offers when it enters our personal spaces. This is a remarkably significant—if subtle—gesture of careful connection that she and painting make together.

When she has found the color relationships she wants, F projects the image, looking for a scale that feels true to what the painting needs. She rolls out cotton duck canvas and pins it to the wall, preferring to work against the hard surface. Then, she layers gesso, gel, and molding paste in several thin coats, building up a smooth working surface. Once the canvases are prepared, F spends a day mixing small pots of color, finding the hue, value, and saturation for each image. She labels and lines up the small pots before she begins.

She works on several canvases at once, which allows her to move from one to another without fixating on the finality of the first. The sketch quality of the studies is important for her; refusing to finish only one painting at a time helps replicate that early brushiness. “The more times you pass over it, the less it starts feeling like a sketch. A lot of it is about the subtlety of color work, and then also about the brush and the brush stroke,” she says. The bristle of the brush is important: it must be “cruddy” and broken in, but not yet deteriorating.

Once the painting has taken shape, F edits for weeks. “I put in a whisper more of a yellow orange somewhere, or a little lay of something that’s a darker green, just to get those relationships to be perfect... It’s a strange relationship between leaving things open and then also closing them.”

This might also be a useful way of thinking about grief.

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The first time I enter F’s studio, she announces that these are her *Dead Dad Desk Paintings* and the awkwardness of the title makes us laugh. I think we also laugh because we have a tacit agreement that once one has sat alongside it, death is something one must talk about, even if it makes the listener uncomfortable, and even if it seems in poor taste. Being polite denies certain truths about our mortality, denies the experience of death and the ephemerality of our lives in favor of some social contract that is infinitely less valuable, even if it seems necessary. We continue to refer to the paintings as the *Dead Dad Desk Paintings*, the clunky alliteration offering something deeply true about the object of study: the desk. F remembers the desk as far back as her childhood home in Münster, though it must have preceded that home. In Münster, it filled the small study, an impressive representation of her father’s research. By the time she was in college, her parents moved to Oxford and the desk had become more a symbol of her father’s career rather than an active work space, itself an artefact of the past.

F has been looking closely at the objects left behind on the desk: scissors, paperweight, stones, letter rack, bookend, tape dispenser, magnifying glass. Part of the loss of a loved one is this clearing away that necessarily happens. There are always so many more of these banal things than we might expect. Indeed, in discarding the objects accumulated over a lifetime, the heaviness of loss meets its daily reminder. It’s not only the big anniversaries and heroic memories, but the minutiae that was shared with the person: we miss the small tenderness the letter rack represents, and the specificity of a tape dispenser becomes precious, even as we know we won’t keep another tape dispenser.

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The *Dead Dad Desk Paintings* are about those objects we collect in the moments before and after windows of grief open and close. How, if you hold a stone in your hand it means something different than if you hold a stone in your hand that you collected from your father’s desk after he has passed. Things have an aliveness because of the love you have for the person who loved the object before you. Things become alive because they have also lived alongside us, because they will survive us. Things become alive because you can no longer hold the person himself.

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(An aside about stones: Roger Caillois describes stones as “almost menacing perfection,” which “rests on the absence of life, the visible stillness of death.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, when I experience moments of profound grief, artists bring me stones. I accumulate small piles of them, each with a story and each from a place. There is a universe inside each one, a friend tells me. A stone *is* alive, even as it also holds a stillness like death.)

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In Emily Peacock’s portrait of F, she sits in her studio on a large gray plastic bucket of paint, her elbows resting on her thighs, hands crossing between her legs as she leans forward. It is a posture of deep attention. Behind her, eight paintings of desk objects hang on the wall in two rows. Beneath them, more of the paintings are stacked on blocks, propped against the wall. F is dressed all in grey-blue, which offsets the warmth of the paintings and her skin. And, while I know the color of her clothing is not intended metaphorically, I can’t help but think of this blue. The *blues*—we make them plural—the *blues*, we call that rich body of music and feeling which encompasses registers of human emotion marked by loss and experience and love and pain and overlapping, hard to describe, feelings. “People think the blues is sad,” said jazz singer Alberta Hunter. “They hear people moaning and such. That’s not the blues. That’s just somebody singing slow. . . . The blues is about truth-telling.”<sup>2</sup>

Months after I see the first of them, F decides to title the desk paintings *How To Tell the Truth and Painting*.

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F’s blobby gray-green elephant sits low and heavy to the surface below it, its trunk drooping down before it. It has two almost-Prussian blue eyes, but one seems to run out of its socket and the other lumps up in a disorienting protuberance. At some point, its trunk has been broken off and the spare piece has been placed lightly in front of the remaining stub. The folds of its ears are absorbed into its thick body form. It is a sympathetic object.

In the series of paintings that comprise *Something*, F observes the child-made objects from her family that have become treasured keepsakes. A lumpy green-faced Indian figure with a single-feathered headdress, a pink-headed mystery creature, a wooden man painted yellow with black spots, a yellow koala with its food dish, and a cheerful armless clown all become larger-than-life, preserved in painted memory. “There’s life in these things, and for Fuchs to put a microscope on this point is beautiful and necessary,” writes artist Robyn O’Neil, about an earlier body of F’s work, her *Paintings of Paintings*. “I’ve been to plenty of collector’s homes, and even those fortunate enough to have walls filled with Alex Katz prints and Philip Guston paintings also have finger paintings done by grandchildren named Rex. They proudly display pinch pots they themselves made in kindergarten or party pics in ugly frames half-forgotten and dusty on bookcases. None of us are immune.” F’s paintings of the objects children make are drawn from her own family stories, and perhaps to think of them alongside the Paintings of Paintings makes a certain kind of sense: there are many different reasons we give value to things. To paint her own art history—making images of paintings that have special resonance for her, but are unknown or anonymous or neglected—and to think of them alongside paintings of children’s objects means to think about what painting actually does, how we live with it, and why.





Writing about things and their special magics, scholar Jane Bennett describes a kind of vibrant matter, thing-power that animates the world. Objects, both human and non-human, organic and not, have something more than the “human meanings, designs and purposes they express or serve,” she claims.<sup>4</sup> Before I tell you a bookend or a pulpy stone clown have an emotional life, though, perhaps we need to agree that the life of an object is an energy that passes between us, a set of associations and experiences and movements, in relationships, one to another. We might call this *affect*: that shimmery thing “found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise), ... those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds.”<sup>5</sup> The child-artist grows into an adult and the trunk of the elephant is broken, but its gloppy green and gray glaze is alive in the universe we share with its maker.

An affect theory of vibrant matter finds its popular synthesis in recent best-selling Japanese guides for household minimalism.<sup>6</sup> Among other rituals, one popular writer suggests saying a gentle goodbye to objects, with gratitude for their participation in one’s life. That goodbye recognizes that things live with us, further, that they are *living* with us, and that they deserve our words and rituals of acknowledgement.

We might be skeptical. It is hard enough to deal with all the incursions on life of the humans and animals and plants we care for. Now, imagine the stones and shards of glass and coils of clay and a wooden block painted with an odd dolphin duck dance and this paperweight are also, in some way, alive, and it’s almost too much to bear.

Maybe, though, they are also caring for us.

F’s father was a collector of objects.

He hung the gray stone funerary stela on sturdy metal brackets at the entrance of each home they made. F would study it, running her fingers along its ridges and figures, tracing the father, mother, and three children, and finding parallels to her own family. When she begins to paint it, she is surprised to find that those years of touching the stone had also made her acutely and accurately aware of its dimensions: she instinctively knows exactly how big it is. There is knowledge—especially unconscious knowledge—that comes from being surrounded by things.

The stela—its sturdy resistance to time, its heavy stone marking a long-forgotten loss—might find its perfect counterpoint in a small yellow koala bear made of dirt. “I wanted to tell you about the yellow koala bear,” F says to me. The bear was one of two she made, the largest only four inches tall. “I made them out of the mud at the bottom of my tower block where I lived in Tübingen. I was probably about six. They were just dried mud, and I painted them with Placka paint, which is a German paint that is very bright. I painted them yellow and then put on little black bits and I made little bowls for them to eat out of, also out of the mud I had dried. And then I shellacked them with the clear Placka.” Last year, the koala bear disappeared, unintentionally washed away in soapy water. He dissolved.

Sometimes objects leave us unexpectedly.



And so, F made another koala bear for her mother. Made several more, looking for the right dimensions, the right feel of the object with which her mother had lived for so many decades. “It’s about replicating the feeling she had for the original. That sense of loss of an object that suddenly isn’t there anymore, that stands in for the loss of a person that also isn’t there anymore,” F says, thinking about objects as touchstones. The stand-in koala doesn’t—couldn’t—replace its original. Instead, it reminds her mother of the life she shared with its forebear.

As a child, inspired by the Canadian television show *Today’s Special*, I spoke to stuffed animals in quiet whispers, not animating them with my imagination but waiting for them to come to life and hoping to find the magic words that would wake them up. I felt very thick in comparison to other children who could dream up fantasy worlds complete with plot twists and character developments; instead, I waited for the hocus pocus alimagocus, the witching hour, the sparkly rainbow transformation from object to life form, sure that under the unblinking gaze of my childhood toys there was a consciousness, biding its time and waiting for me to access it.

In the end, paintings are also things, and we live with them while they live alongside us, and maybe that is enough to ask of them sometimes (and perhaps sometimes they do more, too). The beauty of the child’s imagination is that it *knows* objects to be alive. And we do too, even unconsciously, as we protect things made by children, long after the children are grown. Likewise, we find emotional wisdom in the objects our lost ones collected. What is the incantation that brings things to life? We touch the stone that sat on a desk, we trace the contours of the stela, we see the light refracted by the glass paperweight, and we not only remember our beloved, but we are moved to feeling. Objects move us. Objects animate us. She lives with objects, this painter F, just as they are alive alongside her, and that is not a small Something.

– L. A.

LAURA AUGUST makes texts and exhibitions which find points of connection between our emotional lives and quotidian collaborations, and between our regional histories and landscapes. She works in conversation with artists, poets, activists, and loved ones. Her recent work has been about mud and stones in our shared geographic and metaphorical landscapes. She is founding director of the Guatemala City project Yvonne and co-founding collaborator of Houston-based Francine. Laura completed the critical studies residency at the Core Program of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2018. She holds a PhD in Art History, and is a recipient of The Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her writing in Central America. Her writing has appeared in numerous international artist monographs and exhibition catalogs, as well as in *Art Forum*, *Artishock*, *Art Lies*, *Art Review*, *Arts & Culture Texas*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Pastelegram*. She lives in Houston and Guatemala City, where she is co-curating the 2018 Paiz Biennial, *Más Allá*.

<sup>1</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Cited as epigraph in Nikki Giovanni, *Blues: For All the Changes: New Poems* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Robyn O’Neil, “Francesca Fuchs: Paintings of Paintings’ at Talley Dunn Gallery,” *Glasstire* (9 October 2012), <http://glasstire.com/2012/10/09/francesca-fuchs-paintings-of-paintings-at-talley-dunn-gallery/>

<sup>4</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Seigworth, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014) and Fumio Sasaki, *Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017), among others.





*How to Tell the Truth and Painting*



*Tape Dispenser, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Scissors, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Bookend*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches





*Shard*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches





*Flint*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches

*Magnifying Glass*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Letter Rack*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Cigarette Holder*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Pen Holder*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Notebook*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches

*Letter Opener, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches





*Coaster*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches







*Desk Lamp, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Round Stone, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Pointer, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Cigarette Case, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Green Crystal, 2018*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Calendar, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches

*Necktie*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches



*Telephone, 2017*  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches





*Paperweight*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
16 x 22.25 inches







FRANCESCA FUCHS makes paintings about place and self, looking to the emotional and intellectual intimacies of self-reflection through motherhood, friendships, domestic objects and spaces, as well as art historical references. Drawing from themes of memory, family, and home, Fuchs's work is expansive in scale, from small canvases to public murals, and is characterized by a subdued palette, gentle lines, and gestural brushwork. Her subtlety of gesture and color underscores a rigorous investigation of the significance and traditions of painting, but as they might be understood from an individual, interior experience.

Born in London and raised in Münster, Fuchs moved to Houston in 1996 for the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She received her BFA from the Wimbledon School of Art in London in 1993 and her Meisterschülerin from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1995. Fuchs has been awarded two Artadia Awards, four individual artist grants through the Houston Arts Alliance and the City of Houston, and the Hunting Art Prize. She was the 2017 Josephine Mercy Heathcote Fellow at the MacDowell Colony, and is Art League Houston's 2018 Texas Artist of the Year.

Fuchs's work has been shown in national and international venues including The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; The Suburban, Illinois; with a solo exhibition in 2007 at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. In 2017, Fuchs attended the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, she painted a large-scale exterior mural at Lawndale Art Center, and she had work included in *American Genre: Contemporary Painting* at ICA MECA in Portland, Maine. She also curated the first retrospective exhibition of work by Houston painter Chickie Brown for Art League Houston. In September 2018, Fuchs opens two concurrent exhibitions in Houston: *Something* at Art League and *How to Tell the Truth and Painting* at Inman Gallery. Fuchs teaches painting at the Glassell School of Art, and is represented by Inman Gallery, Houston, and Talley Dunn Gallery, Dallas.

*She Lives with Objects*  
Francesca Fuchs

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Essay by Laura August © 2018 Laura August

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