

A Poetics of Appropriation: On Sharon Core

by [Donna Stonecipher](#) on October 17, 2015



Sharon Core, “Early American – Still Life with Flowering Tobacco” (2009), analogue C-Print, 14 1/2 x 18 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York)

I.

Sharon Core does not simply make photographs of still lifes that exactly re-create paintings, she creates the still lifes — literally. She baked and iced the cakes in her photographs that re-create Wayne Thiebaud’s famous cake paintings; she grew the fruit depicted in her photographs inspired by the early American painter Raphaelle Peale (featured in the lavish publication [Sharon Core: Early American](#), 2012). Core re-creates some of the iconic images so precisely that in a search results page of Google images, you can’t tell which thumbnails are of the originals, which are of Core’s work.

Her transfer of subject matter from the medium of painting to the medium of photography leaves its subject matter intact and fundamentally alters it, imbuing both original and facsimile with a poignant

loss that re-emerges as fraught gain.



Sharon Core, “Early American – Watermelon and Blackberries” (2009), analogue C-Print, 14 x 18 inches

II.

I tried for years to think of how I might mimic Core’s simulationist trick in writing. But writing’s identity with its medium is total in a way that visual art’s is not. If I were to, say, handwrite a text and then type it on a typewriter, the result would be only a micro-shift in representation. Translation offers an obvious metaphor, but “original” and “translation” stand in a different relation to each other than do painting and Core’s photograph. The mimesis is located in a different spot; the “content” is altered in a different way. And the trompe l’oeil falls away; we would never mistake one for the other.

Then I happened upon Jorge Luis Borges’s 1939 short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” and thought I might finally have found a possible literary parallel to Core’s undertaking.

The unnamed narrator of Borges’s story tells us about the oeuvre of Pierre Menard, a French writer and critic. After an enumeration of the “visible” works of Menard, the narrator arrives at the “invisible” work, “perhaps the most significant of our time.” This “peerless” work consists of the 9th and 38th chapters of the first part of Cervantes’ picaresque novel *Don Quixote*, and a fragment of chapter 22. In other words, Menard has re-written, word for word, a few sections of one of the primary works of the Western canon, more than 300 years after it was written. But Menard is not merely copying Don Quixote:

He did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

The eerily plausible absurd: familiar Borgesian territory. The frisson of the story rests on two far-fetched notions: first, that someone would undertake to “compose” a work that has long since been composed, and second, that someone else would see fit to admire it. But it hints at much more: questions about authorship, about original and copy, about appropriation, about simulacra, about the passage of time, about labor itself — just as Core’s photographs do.

Borges’s title is transferrable, nearly: “Sharon Core, Artist of ‘Cakes’.” Like Menard, Core neither copies nor transcribes the paintings; the change in medium allows her to “compose [the cakes] herself.”

Menard writes letters to the narrator about his task. The first method Menard conceived, says the narrator:

[...] was relatively simple. Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, *be* Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard studied this procedure . . . but discarded it as too easy.

Instead, Menard decides that infinitely more interesting and “arduous” is to remain Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* that way.

Sharon Core does not “become” Wayne Thiebaud or Raphaele Peale, either. For one thing, she does not paint the paintings (though she does have a background as a painter). Copying paintings is the standard practice of art school students and of forgers — appropriation for educational or crooked purposes. Instead, her rendering of the paintings’ subject matter as photographs acknowledges the non-identity of her work with theirs, even while she strives toward an identical-ness. It’s this contradictory impulse that gives her work such a delicious tension.



Sharon Core, “Early American – Peaches” (2009), analogue C-Print, 13 1/4 x 17 1/2 inches

III.

How many “lives” does a still life have? Still lifes traditionally serve several functions: representations of commodity-based status; reminders of our mortality; and principles of arrangement and aesthetic taste. In French the term is *nature morte* — dead nature. Is a “still life” dead or alive? What about the once-living natural objects still lifes tend to depict — sometimes killed for the sake of the still “life,” like Audubon’s birds? The actual birds are dead, yet their depictions achieve a species of immortality.

Core’s work invites us to consider these and many other questions. Her change of medium asks about form and content. Is the “content” — an arrangement of luscious, perishable objects — the same if it looks exactly or almost exactly the same, and is only represented via a different form, that is to say, a different medium? Is the “content” the same if the “copy” was made many years after the original (which, in turn, had no “original” to contend with)? What is content?



Sharon Core, "Early American – Blackberries" (2008), analogue C-Print, 12 x 17 3/4 inches

IV.

Because Core's photographs are produced via mechanical reproduction, they sacrifice what Walter Benjamin called "aura." With a photograph or print there is no original; Core's photographs can be reproduced endlessly (as can fruit from a seed — seeds that form a chain leading all the way back to Peale's fruits). But Core's photographs reconstitute an aura of a different kind. Part of the reason paintings have aura and photographs don't, besides the absence of the hand, is the ease and speed with which photographs can be taken, as opposed to the often extended labor of applying paint to canvas. But the labor Core has invested in the photographs meets or exceeds that of Thiebaud's or Peale's: a painting takes many hours to complete, but the growing of vegetables can take months, from seed-planting to cultivation. Ingeniously, Core has not shirked the labor, but has redefined and redistributed it.



Sharon Core, “Early American – Melons and Morning Glories” (2008), analogue C-Print, 20 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches

V.

It seems safe to assume that Wayne Thiebaud did not bake the cakes he painted. Baking is largely coded female, so the fact that Sharon Core *did* bake the cakes she photographed suggests a subtle critique of the privilege of the male artist. Still lifes, from the Renaissance on, were generally not painted by women, yet they share women’s domestic realm: the objects depicted have often either emerged from or are destined for the kitchen, where it was (and still is) largely women who prepare them. Compared to the über-masculinity of a large history painting, for example, still lifes are typically small, intimate, decorative — not unlike the social role of women in most periods of history. The still life alludes to labor taking place off-screen, as it were — prettiness as a scrim for drudgery. In the hierarchy of painting genres established in European art academies since the Renaissance, the still life comes dead last out of six.

With Sharon Core we have a female artist reanimating and appropriating canonical male still lifes — the most “minor” of painting genres. We must ask: does her work constitute homage? Femmage? One-up(wo)manship? A re-(e)valuation of a historically marginalized genre/gender? All of the above?

Or, consider that photography has long been blamed by many for the decline of painting: could we see Core’s photographs as standing in a kind of symbolic triumphal posture over their defenseless forebears, defenseless against the relentless march of technological reproduction, which will fundamentally alter their status and value? The era of photography (invented in 1839) roughly corresponds to the era of feminism (the word *féminisme* was coined by Charles Fourier in 1837).

Technology has played a massive role in the liberation of many women. These facts are all present in the backs of our minds as we consider Sharon Core's mechanical-photographic representations of representations composed by the hands of men in a minor genre.



Sharon Core, "Early American – Watermelon and Apple Gourd" (2007), analogue C-Print, 17 x 23 1/4 inches

VI.

If the author is dead (*morte*), as Roland Barthes speculated in a 1967 essay, is the idea of Pierre Menard writing the Quixote so absurd after all? Core's photographs likewise depend on the sense that Thiebaud's and Peale's paintings form part of the great, swirling treasure trove of ideas, images, styles, and material that we in the postmodern era are free — even compelled — to help ourselves to, in the absence of authors, of ownership. "Help yourself," the host says, offering a bowl of fruit or a plate of freshly sliced cake to guests. Sharon Core has literalized the gesture. And yet the great care and precision with which her photographs re-create these paintings work against the apparent carelessness and ease of sampling, quoting, riffing.

Too, Core's photographs profoundly alter the depicted objects' status. In Thiebaud's cake paintings, the viewer cannot know if the cakes ever existed at all, or were merely figments of Thiebaud's imagination — a fragment of a dream of cakes. That is the nature of painting. But in Core's photographs, the cakes were undeniably extant for the time they posed for her camera. This is the nature of photography, and of the camera's historical role as witness: avowing that the depicted scene is or was "real."

Her photographs literalize the paintings, pluck them from the realm of pure imagination and bring them

down to the realm of the real, spinning a negotiation between imagination and reality. This is what poet Wallace Stevens called poetry: the supreme fusion of creative imagination and objective reality. Core's photographs absorb the original paintings and set the relationship between painting and photograph in motion, into a poetics of appropriation.



Sharon Core, "Early American – Apples in a Porcelain Basket" (2008), analogue C-Print, 15 x 18 1/4 inches VII.

I remember, in 1996 or so, watching a girl in a Godard film from 1966 eat an apple, and thinking that an apple from 1966 looks no different from an apple from 1996, or for that matter an apple from the Renaissance or from the Garden of Eden, and how these timeless entities continually reproduce themselves in a cycle in which the human body, which also endlessly reproduces itself, is complicit. Still lifes do not always depict perishable goods. Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, for example, spent his career painting arrangements of ceramic vessels. But Core's still lifes of food implicate the viewer in a way that re-creations of Morandi's vases would not. Our appetites are triggered by the images, we want to eat the cakes and watermelons, which have been consumed by time, which is exactly what will happen to our bodies. Core's reproduction of perishable items decades or centuries after they were first represented turns them into zombie comestibles — risen, briefly, from the dead.

Looking at her photographs, we participate in their reanimation, and thus in a staged re-enactment of

their decay. In this sense they are as much memento mori as resurrections, and enact the vanitas function of the still life, even while undermining it.



Sharon Core, "Thiebauds – Bakery Counter" (2004), analogue C-Print, 55 x 72 inches (click to enlarge)

VIII.

Core's photographs can't help but participate in the negotiation of real and imagined, as Borges's story does. Pierre Menard is "(re)writing" a work of fiction three hundred years after the fact. In the meantime, the book, while a work of the imagination, has had a real existence, on paper, read by millions of people across generations and continents, and influencing a wide swath of subsequent literature. Surely it is the dialectic between the imagined Quixote and his real existence that spurred Borges's own imagination; the imaginary figure of Don Quixote has had a greater impact on culture than most of the real people who have lived within his life span of 300 years. Pierre Menard is an imaginary figure created by the real Borges who re-enacts the imagining of what has become a blend of imagination and reality.

In a moment of devilish humor, the narrator of Borges's story praises Menard's work as superior to Cervantes': "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness)." To illustrate, he compares two passages:

It is a revelation to compare Menard's Don Quixote with Cervantes's. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine)"

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding.

The narrator fulsomely praising "Menard's idea" about history being the mother of truth as superior to Cervantes' is a wink to the reader — the idea can only "astound" because Cervantes' version already exists, and has been influencing thought for three hundred years. It has returned with a "certain alienated majesty," to invoke Ralph Waldo Emerson's remark in "Self-Reliance" (1841) that "[i]n every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." In Borges's story, the narrator recognizes in the genius of Menard's text the alienated majesty of thoughts the culture has already long since digested.



IX.

What does it mean to grow your own watermelon now, in the age of industrial farms, airlifted fruits from all over the globe, and Monsanto, that it did not mean in the early 1800s? Is Core's work "richer" than Peale's because the context around the fruit has shifted so dramatically, because it is more ambiguous? If we think about the first of the still life's traditional functions, the representation of commodity-based status, we might wonder if a watermelon was a luxury item in the 19th-century United States. Core grew the watermelons herself; is this a marker of privilege or the reverse? Gardening is hard labor whether done by migrant workers or by suburban hobbyists. It can skew either way, and with this ambiguity Core's work takes on yet another layer of complexity.

Fruit or cakes produced to serve as subject matter for photographs are not, first and foremost, intended to be consumed, but they will be taken up and absorbed into the market-driven art world, a detail of which Core is exquisitely aware. For in her work she is also posing questions about the ethical priorities of nourishment and excess in our late-capitalist world. A collector might pay tens of thousands of dollars for Raphaëlle Peale's "Blackberries" (ca. 1813), but the fruit depicted will literally nourish no one. By its mere depiction, the exchange value of the fruit has risen to inconceivable heights.



Sharon Core, "Thiebauds – Pies, Pies, Pies" (2003), analogue C-Print, 20 x 30 inches (click to enlarge)

X.

Core's photographs do not compete with the original paintings; instead, they ask what a re-contextualization tells us about the intervening span of time, both technologically and emotionally. For both Borges and Core have created what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," in which the relationship of past to present is not one of linear time, but of constant negotiation. The past not only influences the present; the present also influences the past. As Benjamin wrote, "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, [dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (*The Arcades Project*, N3, 1). The memory of the painting and the presence of the photograph come together to form one of these constellations.

After one has seen Core's photographs, one cannot look again at Peale's or Thiebaud's paintings in a prelapsarian state; they are forever altered by the knowledge of her mimesis. "[E]ven the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins," wrote Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940).

The past is never completed, static, at rest; it too is always vulnerable to reconsideration. This is one of the many lessons of which Sharon Core's poetics of appropriation brilliantly reminds us.



Sharon Core, "Thiebauds – Salads, Sandwiches, and Dessert" (2003), analogue C-Print, 55 x 72 inches (click to enlarge)

Sharon Core's work from [Early American](#) is on view at The Milan Triennale Expo 2015 in "Arts &

Foods: Rituals since 1851," curated by Germano Celant, through November 1. Her work can also currently be seen in "Art in the Embassies" at the American Embassy in The Hague, Netherlands.

Sharon CoreStill lifeWayne Thiebaud