

Nashville Arts

MAGAZINE

John Baeder: Another Side of Passion

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by Michelle Jones



In the forty years since he left the *Mad Men* world of advertising at a top New York agency, John Baeder has traversed the country capturing iconic images of the great American roadside, establishing an international reputation as a photorealist painter.



However, his latest Nashville show—he also exhibits regularly in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris—is something completely different: a series of painterly still-life photographs drawn from the work of baroque-inspired still-life artists, particularly Chardin and Luis Meléndez.

Twenty of Baeder's still lifes are on display at The Arts Company in *John Baeder: The Magic of Illusion and Reality—Painting and Photography* from October 6 through November 16. All shot using natural light—specifically north light just as those early painters used—the photographs are a testament to Baeder's love of the genre and a statement of his connections to the items featured in the images.

In the compositions, which in some cases bring to mind sophisticated magazine advertisements from publishing's golden age, Baeder combines artificial flowers and fruit, vintage books and glassware with one of his many 1:24-scale models of vintage cars. Baeder began incorporating books from his own collection not only for the personal, biographical connection, but also for form, color, and messages about the

compositions. *Traffic: Accidents and Congestion*, for example, takes its name from the volume standing behind a tow truck. The livery of the vehicle ties into the reds of apples and other fruits lying nearby as well as the book's blue cover. (Baeder has shared with us a personal recollection for each of the works printed here.)

The use of vehicles in the photographs adds a touch of irreverence and a personal perspective. Baeder estimates he collected hundreds of these die-cast vehicles over a five-year period. His Nashville home is filled with toy and model vehicles, most arranged on specially built shelves, others placed on almost every surface of the airy room he uses as his still-life studio.

The presence of the vehicles in the photographs also gives Baeder a means of tricking the eye—a visual jolt. The juxtaposition in scale of the automobile or truck and the life-size, but fake, vegetation adds another dimension to the still lifes and also recalls the photomontages of surrealist photographers in the early twentieth century. In some cases objects are the impetus for the compositions—old glass bottles, a particular car, or the shape of a piece of fruit. “Capturing the essence and spirit of each individual element and then making a whole statement is what I strive to achieve with each image,” Baeder explains.

Baeder also developed compositions as color studies, as in *Red Book*. The picture features red apples in a Fiestaware bowl, a vintage *Redbook* magazine, a red book, and a three-tone model car. Baeder found the magazine on eBay and was struck by the cover's red background and image of a woman dressed in beige and black. Next he located the car, a 1956 Buick Roadmaster, whose red-and-cream body and black top picked up the colors of the magazine. “Everything was working. When that happens, that's like a little mini visual event for me,” Baeder laughs.

A, B, C, D, Ford, 1955 Sunliner, on the other hand, is awash in yellow hues. Perched atop a book with yellow accents, lemons, a common fixture of baroque still-life paintings, anchor the photograph. The result is a celebration of color that acts as a tribute to Baeder's historic inspiration and his personal obsessions as an artist and a collector.

At times, the personal narratives in Baeder's photographs are poignant, as in the sublime *Homage to Aunt Emmy and Uncle Zolty*. This photograph is dedicated to Baeder's paternal family, most of whom perished at Auschwitz. His family was in the perfume and cosmetic business in Budapest, Hungary, before the war, he explains. His aunt survived the war and managed to rescue a few of the family's possessions, kept hidden in her coat, including the recipe book shown in the image.

Four exquisite art deco-style fragrance bottles, each embossed with the Baeder name, and a vase with pink and orange roses are positioned next to the open book. A silver Packard is parked in front. “I put the Packard in there because it's elegant; they were elegant bottles, and it was an elegant business. An elegant family, actually, all gone. I wish I knew more about them.”

Though this series of still lifes is new and different, it also continues a line of work Baeder has been exploring for some time. He began painting still lifes in 1997, while taking a break from his diner series. At that time he was searching for the “quintessential American still life, the experiential still life that everybody is confronted with every day,” he says. He found it in the multitude of items located on the counters of gas stations and convenience stores. Antique malls also captured his imagination. “All this stuff sitting on a shelf, they had a humor and a sadness about them,” he says. “All

these little figures . . . they had a life of their own sitting on a shelf waiting for another life. The way they were all placed haphazardly, that was a still life—a distillation of American culture on one shelf.”

Baeder’s still life series takes on new meaning in his photographs. No longer a study of America, they are a close examination of the artist’s own life. Through the compositions he is revisiting his various collections—model cars, vintage books, assorted bottles and vases—and enjoying his exploration of the genre of still life. “You enjoy your ideas and you play with them,” he says. “It’s just the beginning, which is also a nice ending.”