



DANIELLE FRETWELL | *TABLESCAPES*

By J. Cabelle Ahn

“With an apple, I will astonish Paris,” Paul Cézanne once declared. The Frenchman’s bravado wasn’t just bluster; it hinged on his conviction that the most ordinary objects could, if represented in a visionary manner, prompt questions about the very basis of reality. Everyone knows what an apple looks like—until, suddenly, an artist invites them to see one in an entirely new way.

Danielle Fretwell’s richly symbolic still lifes likewise center on objects that should be as obvious as an apple. Apricots tumble down a white tablecloth, plums roll across a table set with vintage silver, and cherries in a claret bowl saturate the senses. It’s tempting to read these arrangements through the well-worn semiotics of *vanitas*—the crab as armor or temptation, the apricot as both Trinity and carnal desire, the cherry as spring, childhood, and resurrection.

But that interpretive reflex is also a trap. The work invites this exercise of legibility only to expose its contradictions. Roland Barthes reminds us that a drawing of a tree is really a “tree-being-looked-at.” Fretwell’s paintings press the point. What you see is never simply what is seen.

Cézanne used the humble tablescene to chart a new way of looking—what philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty described as a “lived perspective” that sought to counter both the long-dominant single-point perspective of painting and encroaching photographic vision of 19th-century France. Similarly, Fretwell probes layers of deception in both optics and technique. “The core of my work lies in my interest in truth, both in painting and in society,” she says, noting that the pictures also address “anxiety about how we perceive information, and how it is disseminated amongst each other.”

Her concern with distribution permeates all levels of her process. Like still-life painters of the past, Fretwell sources her own props—vintage silver trays, modernist bowls, produce of all kinds—casting herself as both curator and dispatcher of objects. More precisely, she curates the things themselves but dispatches them as images. The role is historically apt: early still lifes drew on local markets, trade networks, and collectors’ cabinets, making the genre an ideal format to advertise and circulate commodities. “I think about the histories these objects carry that are unknown but regenerated through me, and eventually I release them back into circulation,” she says. “I feel the intersection with local economies happens as I become part of the network of exchange and circulation.”

Fretwell’s canvases examine perception as much as depiction. Several of her works fuse printmaking and oil painting. The upper sections of *In Waning* (2025) and *So Much and More* (2025), as well as the backdrop of *Days of Solitude* (2025), were made by pressing bed linens dipped in thinned oil paint onto the canvas, akin to printing a monotype. By using another fabric to render canvas into a likeness of the latter’s unstretched texture, Fretwell muddies hierarchies of representation and its referents. “The idea is that I use fabric to recreate the look of fabric,” she notes, adding, “The texture acts as a trace of what was once there.”

There’s an art-historical echo here of Pliny the Elder’s anecdote in *Natural History*: Zeuxis painted grapes so convincingly that birds would peck at the images, yet he himself was still deceived by his rival Parrhasius’s painted curtain—a rendering so life-like that Zeuxis asked his competitor to draw it aside to reveal the picture behind. In

ALICE AMATI

Fretwell's works, however, her phantom textiles do more than revel in mirage; they also register the artist's body. In *Dream Weaver*, the impression of her knee reads like a setting sun, transforming the mulberry backdrop into a landscape for the floating tulips, folding illusion and symbolism into a single split screen.

Fretwell calls these works "Split Still Lives," a phrase with a double meaning. On the one hand, it nods to the ubiquity of the multi-device experience of contemporary media. (Who really puts their phone down when watching TV anymore, for instance?) On the other hand, it ties back to the still life genre's own divided loyalties between symbol and sense, documentary and fiction. She likens her role as the artist to that of a host. "I can orchestrate and decide what to include, what to omit, how to guide attention, when to disrupt, and where to comfort," she says. "As the 'host', I think about the responsibility not only as a maker of images but as a steward of experience." Here, the seduction of execution meets the cold realities of information systems, enlivening the ways meaning is packaged, transmitted, received, and processed.

Across languages, the very term for still life—nature morte, natura morta, stilleven—seems to promise a moment fixed as fact. But Fretwell's paintings insist otherwise, operating closer to a live feed of our contested reality. She reanimates the genre by revealing its scaffolding: the technical structure, the symbolic habit, and the fragile cultural consensus we call "truth." If Cézanne vowed to astonish Paris with an apple, Fretwell startles us with an apricot mid-fall—proof that looking, too, is alive.