

Arts and Culture

## A Still Life Tradition in the Digital Age

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If you've ever seen the work of Lisa Frank, you've likely found yourself mesmerized by the way the artist manipulates photographs of nature into complex, detailed, often-repeating patterns.

Frank's latest exhibition, *STILLEVEN*, running through June 30 at the James Watrous Gallery, features these tight-knit, wallpaper-like compositions. But the show also reveals a body of work influenced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch still life paintings.

Dutch still life painters of this period often depicted scenes featuring flowers, food and elements of nature—all elements that hint at the passage of time.

Frank's compositions reference this tradition with their dark backdrops, carefully positioned subjects and sense of lushness teetering on the verge of decay. They incorporate an incredible range of photography she's shot across Madison—reptiles from the Henry Vilas Zoo, cacti from the UW Greenhouse, birds from Olbrich Botanical Gardens—and elsewhere.

She combines elements from the natural world in ways they wouldn't exist without this human touch, and the sense of staging feels like a modern interpretation of "stilleven," the Dutch word for "still life" or "immobile nature."

In one work, bright flowers coexist with koi fish, a yellow bird and a turtle, while in another, a dead white bird is placed next to a floral arrangement. A more patterned work features green stems and leaves interwoven with snakes, plus flowers, berries and a yellow bird.

Despite their type or degree of staging or manipulation, all the photographs create compelling yet mysterious narratives.

"These photographs also express a personal lament. They imply the fragility of natural forms in an ailing ecosystem," Frank writes in a statement for the exhibition. "At times they are tinged with melancholy, at other times a wistful romanticism."

*STILLEVEN* runs through June 30 at the James Watrous Gallery along with *It's Only Natural*, an exhibition of paintings by Nova Czarnecki in which nature and the human body serve as metaphors for emotional and spiritual states. For more information, visit [wisconsinacademy.org](http://wisconsinacademy.org).

*Photos courtesy of the James Watrous Gallery.*