

Still Life with
Box of Socks
Removed, 2008.



SYDNEY LICHT

In her intimate and richly colored canvases, this New York painter imbues everyday objects with unexpected grandeur. BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

In the early 1990s, Sydney Licht gave herself an assignment. After years of painting large, organic abstractions in which she felt she was using color arbitrarily, she decided to set up a still life, juxtaposing a shell and a pot, and limit her palette

to five colors—the three primaries and black and white. “In order to understand color better, I took the color away,” says Licht, who found the structure of the “still life project,” as she calls it, to be liberating. Ever since, she has painted intimately scaled ensembles of contemporary artifacts that hover between recognizable domestic objects and abstract shapes. “Still life is really an excuse for me to think about the issues of painting: color, composition, form, light, negative space.”

In *Balancing Act* (2014), two Chinese take-out boxes are distilled to angular brown shapes poised in a pas de deux on a horizontal ledge against a mottled blue background. “This one took five years to find resolution,” says Licht of the 12-inch-square work. Other canvases, which may happen more quickly, depict piles of folded linens, such as *Still Life with Bundles* (2011), or stacks of boxes, like *Untitled* (2010). All are painted from a low vantage point and surrounded by indeterminate, atmospheric space that heightens the focus on the blocks of pattern and color. “When I started the still life project, I was working in a tiny space and sitting on the floor a lot,” says Licht, who lived in Chicago after getting her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, prior to which she double-majored in art and psychology at Smith College. “I was looking up at everything and noticed that things that were familiar started to take on a more abstracted look.”

Today, in the spacious TriBeCa loft where she has lived and worked since 2002, Licht has a table that she can move up and down with a crank and a repertoire of everyday objects that make repeat appearances in her paintings—including a deep yellow espresso bag from Le Pain Quotidien, the signature brown-and-white-striped bag from Henri Bendel, and a mug stuffed with a variety of sugar and artificial-sweetener packets. “I have lots of little actors that play parts on the stage here,” says Licht, who will make a quick sketch of a given arrangement before beginning to lay down swathes of color, using a palette knife to organize the space on the canvas.

She no longer uses black, and she sticks to a relatively limited range of colors, mixing cool and warm tones. Licht also makes sculptures ▸

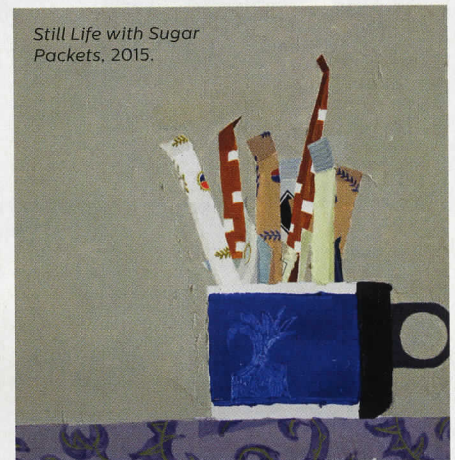
Still Life with Plum, 2014.



Untitled, 2010.



Still Life with Sugar Packets, 2015.



from found packages, such as the 12-foot *Tower of Boxes* (2015), which serve as models for her paintings. She exhibited the three-dimensional pieces for the first time alongside her small canvases at her recent show, “Packaged Goods,” at Kathryn Markel Fine Arts in New York, which has represented her since 2006.

“Perhaps the most enlightening thing about how Sydney continues to conceive her art is what she chooses as her subject, and what it has to say about our world now,” says Mark Pascale, a curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago who first met Licht in the 1980s, when both were teaching at the museum school. “She has a powerful sense of observation.”

“I’m a person trying to live in my world, which is full of fast-food containers and packaging that is designed to attract me—and it does,” says Licht, who will have a solo show in December at the Chase Young Gallery in Boston. “A box holds the promise of what is inside, which is also intriguing to me. Packaging really reflects the way we live.” ■

Still Life with Bundles, 2011.





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ABOVE: Sydney Licht's 2014 painting *Balancing Act*. **RIGHT:** A double-faced bust in the dining room of a London townhouse designed by Philip Vergeylen.



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Faux-painted walls in the breakfast area of a Paris apartment by Jean-Louis Deniot.

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