

# PAMELA CARROLL



THE BEAUTY INHERENT

MAY 29 - SEPTEMBER 6, 2025



With origins dating back to ancient Rome, still life painting as a genre experienced a great resurgence in the seventeenth century. When European explorers and trading conglomerates returned from their spice-hunting expeditions with new and unusual botanical specimens, Dutch and Flemish artists in particular embraced exotic flowers as a subject, and their paintings remain prized mementos of the era. At the same moment though, Spanish masters like Juan de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán were working with fruit and vegetables rather than blooming plants. Bowls of apples or quince, or distinctive cabbages and melons were brilliantly highlighted against a plain dark background. Carmel artist Pamela Carroll gives a nod to this foundational style by taking a similar approach in her recent still life paintings.

Carroll's rapt exploration of a single vegetable, or bowl or basket of a single kind of fruit, details both the distinctive characteristics and aesthetics of her subject. Placed at the center of the canvas and the primary focus of attention, these otherwise commonplace edibles take on the aspect of jewels. Carroll works from life, as the seventeenth century artists would have done. She sets up her arrangements on a small table adjacent to her easel, with a window nearby for light, although she has the advantage of electricity if she needs it. She loves to paint from life, just because, as she says, "It's so hard. I want everything to feel tangible. When you see a lemon I want

you to feel like you just want to take it." Her paintings inspire a yearning to reach in, pull out a purple plum or a yellow peach, feel its weight in your hand, and take a bite!

When painting from life rather than from a photograph, both the living model and the quality of light change by the hour. This offers its own kind of challenge and working method, because time too becomes a component of the process and of the result. Over the years, Carroll has refined her techniques for working with changing light, and for effectively framing her compositions. Single-subject paintings demand even more attention to detail because every placement, every brushstroke counts. There are no distractions, no places to hide, and no particular narrative to unravel. A spare surface, or simple basket or bowl alone grounds her subject. Yet this very simplicity allows Carroll to illuminate the unexpected and formal beauty present in everyday objects.

Carroll takes up how and what we see, and what can be seen when approaching a subject. All of her paintings respond to this question on some level. Under her practiced eye, even the humble onion becomes a worthy subject of inquiry. In her *Onions in a Green Compote* (2024), these ubiquitous root vegetables transcend their ordinary stature. The yellow onions' coppery skins unfurl in delicate papery sections, revealing interior spheres

of pearlescent white tinged with shades of cream and green, while their red-skinned sisters add a brilliant pop of garnet-colored intensity. In a nice blending of the two, rosy shallots punctuate the arrangement's spherical uniformity in pointy oval form. This trio from the allium family is both set off and complimented by the hand-made deep green dish that holds them. An obviously long-cherished vessel with many chips and scratches, it emphasizes the unpretentiousness of the subject. But the delicate attention paid to every detail – threadlike onion roots, gossamer shards of fallen onion skin, and pale, tinted shadows reflected on the table top – elevates a quotidian scene to something rare and special.

Along with fundamental pantry staples, an expanding variety of seasonal offerings attract Carroll's brush. In *Plums in Bowl with Dishcloth* (2024), she presents a familiar treat that portends the warmth and pleasures of summer. A generous sampling of fruit heaped into a stout pottery bowl spills over onto the table. A blue and white towel, so familiar, curls around it. Plums are often an adventure to bite into because they are so various. Will they have red or yellow flesh? Will they be crunchy or juicy? Tart or sweet? Carroll's assortment suggests these distinctions through form and color, picking each out with tints of orange, crimson, magenta, and violet, plus some unerring accents of blue and gold. Only this level of keen observation can so seamlessly convey the marvel of each individual piece of fruit in all its specificity. The same finesse is apparent in every wrinkle and fold of the little towel, and in the warm light reflected in its forward edge. Behind the bowl, all the rest lies in shadow.

Moving a little farther into the season, Carroll selects an iconic summer fruit as her subject. *Peaches with Bowl and Yellow Pitcher* (2024), offers a bountiful bowl in all its radiant glory, stacked up like little globes of summer sun. She captures the soft fuzziness that defines them, and the streaks of sunburn and leaf shadows that makes each one distinctive. The decorated terracotta bowl and simple terracotta pitcher suggest a quiet summer retreat or even the first settings on a picnic table. Then, in *Green Apples in Yellow Bowl* (2024), a heaping bowl of fruit on a similar white cloth-covered table sets up a comparable composition. Although the two arrangements are similar, each painting conveys its own characteristic atmosphere, reflected not only by each fruit's seasonal moment, but by the specific tonality and ambient light that Carroll achieves for each. While peaches glow in full midsummer light, the apples herald the coming autumn when the sun sits lower in the sky. Their cool green skins exhibit the pale yellowy tinge of very ripe fruit, while the two branches with their brown-edged, curling and withered leaves evoke the fading season. The apples rest in a softer and



(left) *Plums in Bowl with Dishcloth*  
2024, Oil on Panel, 12 x 24"

(above)  
*Persimmons and Pomegranates*  
2025, Oil on Panel, 11 x 14"

*Peaches with Bowl and Yellow Pitcher*  
2024, Oil on Panel, 11 x 14"

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more diffuse light, emphasized by the tinted shadows flaring behind them, seeming to hint at the shortening days to come.

In a celebratory ode to winter, Carroll's gorgeous *Persimmons and Pomegranates* (2025), departs from her commitment to a single type of fruit. Here she chooses persimmons and pomegranates, two examples of the late



(cover) Green Apples in Yellow Bowl, 2024, Oil on Panel, 16 x 20"  
 (left) Onions in Green Compote, 2024, Oil on Panel, 16 x 20"

year's most festive produce. The two often appear on holiday tables, not only for their flavors but for their heartening color, adding cheer to a season when most bright things are in decline. It is in this spirit that Carroll depicts them. In a bold move she creates a dynamic chromatic challenge for herself by featuring colors that adjoin each other on the spectrum – a saturated orange and a deep crimson – a difficult color relationship to orchestrate successfully. To make it work she sets the larger pomegranates together with their branches on the table surface, adjacent to the bowl of persimmons. The green of the small pomegranate leaves and the green of the persimmon's decorative stems ingeniously connect this apparently challenging tonal combination. To further unify the composition, the star-shape of the

pomegranate's blossom end nicely echoes its similarly lobed counterpart in the fruit bowl. With its glossy surface the bowl acts as a muted mirror to reflect every hue, while the slim blue stripe at its edge makes the perfect color foil for the orange persimmons. The veracity Carroll achieves here is a marvel. This is the painting to reach into for a taste!

As Juan de Zurburán does in his wondrous explorations of a single type of fruit, Carroll hones her subjects to their essence. Her familiar foodstuffs are unadorned and unencumbered, and infused with a reverence arising out of close and careful attention. With her dazzling facility for color and light, Carroll creates exquisite appreciations drawn from the bounty of our rare and astonishing natural world.

Essay by Helaine Glick, *Independent Curator*

  
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