

ORT PROJECT | VANITAS ARTWORK DESCRIPTION

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Vanitas is an installation and exhibition of artworks by ORT Project, the artist-duo Oona Nelson and Anna Noelle Rockwell. Inspired by 17th century “vanitas” paintings from The Netherlands, ORT Project turns this antique style of painting into a contemporary sculptural tableau vivant that re-contextualizes the macabre nature of the genre.

ORT Project extends the vanitas point of reference from a scrap on the table to the venerable still life tradition, exhibiting the burnt remains of the original gilt-framed oil paintings. The remains found within these paintings lay in various states of repose: ashes rest in hand-blown glass reliquaries while half burnt paintings hang on walls or idle in darkened corners.

Each artwork can be admired on its own or displayed within a larger installation that incorporates the individual pieces onsite, inviting the audience to walk through the static aftermath of this modern-day bonfire of the vanities. These seductive scenes depict the grotesque remains of some mysterious after-party, the wrecked furnishings, the luscious drapery, and the visage of the torched oddities laid to rest on the gallery floor.

Continuing their focus on themes of temporality and impermanence—and employing symbolic objects designed to remind the viewer of their mortality—ORT Project pushes the concept of the historical vanitas through a contemporary prism to expose the vanity and vulnerability of our corporeal world.

In previous incarnations which critiqued aspects of consumption, abundance, and decay, ORT Project created lush installations of material excess: tables heaping with party remnants, molding gourmet treats, and objects symbolic of tarnished opulence abound while with the occasional living creature acts as a sentient witness to this hubris of human folly.

With the Vanitas exhibit, the artists craft “snapshots” from these scenes of imploding anarchy and decadence and then turn them into opulent oil paintings. These “one of a kind” paintings are first placed in ornate gilt frames. Then the artists use torches and fire pits to further deface the works with flame—either partially or entirety—thus completing their transformation. The resulting “art cadavers” are then assimilated into the morgue installation by placing their remains into hand-blown reliquaries on marble bases that are labeled with brass museum plaques noting title, original materials, and provenance.

The process of incineration is meant as a symbolic gesture representing the decline of “civilization” and its slide toward extinction. Thus, these contemporary vanitas serve as a record of what was (man’s material-driven yet ephemeral “privileges”) and what is (the dark beauty of reality seen through mortal life). These are, effectively, the relentless turning of the screw, where there is no escape from fate. Whereas the traditional vanitas paintings served as pious warnings of this inevitability yet offered the possibility of redemption and transcendence, ORT Project presumes no salvation—all is lost in this incendiary realm of perishing vanitas.