John Updike wrote that “my only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—and to give the mundane its beautiful due.” What we owe to the mundane is first of all to pay attention to it, to notice what is around us; to be conscious of our senses interacting with our surroundings, not simply conveying information to us but creating, through their limitations and their particular gifts, the world we experience. The chief obstacle is familiarity, our ability to perform daily tasks mechanically, with a minimum of attention. Our hands and bodies know their way around our living spaces; how often do we need to do more than scan or glance? One of the purposes of art, of course, is to disrupt this mechanical process, to strip away the blindfold of familiarity and show us things we overlook.

What could be more ordinary or more overlooked than a dishtowel? This truly common object forms the unifying element in the present exhibit: each artist was asked to incorporate a dishtowel into a still life for the show.

As a tool and as a visual element, the dishtowel is versatile and absorbent, a bland ingredient that can be molded to many uses.

Wet or dry, smooth or wrinkled, clean or stained, it symbolizes the blank canvas, the eternal challenge to make something out of nothing.

Still life is an intimate, interior art that often depicts familiar spaces, objects, and views; the known, the worn, the personal, the habitual. But it is above all the art of looking closely and freshly at things, analyzing their forms, their essential characters, their relationships to other things. The show’s assignment thus became the task described by Kierkegaard: “not to find the lovable object, but to find the object before you lovable.”

For high-resolution images, interview requests or updated information, contact MICA’s Office of Communications at 410.225.2300.

Image captions: (left-right) Stanley Friedman, Layers, oil on canvas, 2009; Ruth Miller, Shell and Dishtowel, oil on canvas, 2009. (Courtesy Lohin Geduld Gallery).