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Being in Midair

The fall, physical or metaphorical, has long served as a potent image in art, literature, and philosophy, symbolizing both catastrophe and transformation. While traditional narratives present the fall as a moment of divine punishment or moral failure, it can also describe ordinary processes of change, decay, and renewal. In visual culture, the fall manifests in a variety of forms: the suspended tension before transgression, the bodily or symbolic descent through midair, and the aftermath of collapse in objects, nature, and human experience.

This paper examines how artists across centuries have represented these states of instability, revealing the human engagement with risk, loss, and continuity. From the biblical fall from Eden to the image of a falling man from the twin buildings, the fall evolves from cosmic drama to everyday reality. Renaissance and Baroque paintings capture the tension preceding catastrophe, rendering gestures, postures, and compositional balance as markers of imminent disruption. Modern and contemporary works shift the focus toward the experience of falling itself, portraying bodies and objects in midair to explore vulnerability, motion, and transition. Finally, still lifes and contemporary representations of fruit and vegetables trace the aftermath of the fall, highlighting cycles of decay, renewal, and the human desire to control or deny mortality.

Through this three-part framework: Before the Fall, In Midair, and After the Fall, this study considers the fall as more than a singular event. It argues that falling is a continuous condition, a lens through which art reflects the interplay between fragility and resilience, loss and renewal. By analyzing works ranging from Durer and Bosch to Cornelis van Haarlem, Jeff Wall, and Ori Gersht, the paper demonstrates that the fall is both a symbol of human vulnerability and a means of understanding transformation, temporality, and the ongoing negotiation between life, decay, and consciousness.

Before the Fall

Images that precede catastrophe often seem calm. Their surfaces are composed, balanced, and orderly, yet they carry the subtle tremor of what is about to happen. Artists across centuries have been drawn to this suspended state, when the world appears whole but its edges are already loosening. The moment before the fall is not only about innocence, it is about the awareness that innocence cannot last. Works such as Michelangelo's The Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve(See Fig. 2) and Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights(see Fig. 3) each hold this tension between serenity and premonition, between faith in order and the quiet knowledge of its collapse.

From Heaven – Durer and Michelangelo

Fig. 1 Albert durer. *Adam and Eve* (1507). oil on wood panel. 208 x 91 cm per panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

In Durer's Adam and Eve (See Fig 1), the human figures stand in perfect equilibrium, embodying the ideal of Renaissance proportion. Around them, the animals rest in unnatural calm. The serpent coils delicately around the Tree of Knowledge, not yet striking. The composition suggests harmony, but it is a harmony that feels rehearsed, fragile, as if it exists only to be broken. Durer presents the moment before transgression with the precision of an artist who already understands its consequences. The fruit is still intact, but the gesture toward it has already begun; the fall has been set in motion.

Fig. 2 Michelangelo. *The Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (1509-10). Fresco. 280 x 570 cm. Cappella Sistina, Vatican.

Michelangelo, in The Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve (See Fig. 2), unites two events that were traditionally separated: the temptation and the punishment. A monumental fig tree divides the composition, its branches stretching from the serpent offering fruit on the left to the angel's sword driving the couple away on the right. The tree functions as a hinge between desire and exile. Its fruit, with its overt sensuality, becomes both the symbol of sin and the agent of

consciousness. The simultaneity of the two scenes collapses time: temptation and loss become one continuous gesture. In this way, Michelangelo visualizes the fall not as a single event but as a process - an unfolding awareness that what is being gained is inseparable from what will be lost.

From Earth – Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights

Fig.3 Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490 - 1500). Grisaille, Oil on oak panel. 205.5 cm x 384.9 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

Bosch's triptych (See Fig.3) expands the story of Eden into a panorama of pleasure and dissolution. On the left, Adam and Eve inhabit a crystalline paradise; in the center, humanity revels in ecstatic play; on the right, the world burns. The middle panel, often interpreted as a warning against sin, can also be seen as an image of suspension, the brief and impossible equilibrium before collapse. The figures move with both freedom and confusion, their joy shadowed by excess.

Bosch's vision of paradise is strangely modern in its instability. It feels less like moral instruction than a reflection on the limits of desire, a recognition that pleasure already contains its own end. The garden is beautiful precisely because it is temporary, a celebration of what will soon decay. Its tone borders on the ironic: a paradise too full, too vivid, too alive to last. If the Renaissance treated the fall as moral failure, Bosch presents it as a natural condition, the inevitable consequence of being alive.(Snyder 2004, 395–396)

Before the War – Adi Nes, The Last Supper

Fig 4 Adi Nes, *The Last Supper* (1999). Photography. Israel museum, Jerusalem, Israel.

In Adi Nes's The Last Supper (See Fig.4), the biblical drama of betrayal and sacrifice is restaged as an everyday scene among Israeli soldiers. The artist translates Leonardo's sacred composition into a photograph of contemporary vulnerability. Plastic cups replace chalices, combat uniforms

replace robes, but the emotional structure remains: the moment before loss, the calm before violence.

Nes's photograph captures a similar kind of suspended time found in Bosch and Michelangelo, but within a modern register. It is not only a religious meditation but a commentary on a society that lives in a continuous state of anticipation. The soldiers share a meal that could be their last; the viewer knows, as they perhaps do not, what might follow. The stillness of the composition carries the same double meaning as Dürer's or Bosch's images - it is both stability and prelude to collapse.

What unites these depictions is their understanding of the fall as mundane as much as monumental. The gestures are familiar - reaching, touching, eating, sharing. The fall begins not with thunder or divine punishment, but with a small, human motion. In that sense, these images reveal the quiet, everyday origins of catastrophe. They remind viewers that before the great collapses of history, there is always a moment of grace so ordinary that it can almost be mistaken for peace.

In these depictions of anticipation the world still holds together, but just barely. Each image captures the instant before gravity takes over, when awareness begins to replace innocence. This is the fragile beauty of the "before": a moment that believes itself whole while already fracturing.

To move from this stillness into the fall itself is to cross a threshold. The body begins to lose its balance, the frame starts to tilt, and time accelerates. The next chapter turns to this moment of descent - the space of midair, where artists have tried to capture motion that resists containment. In these images, falling becomes not only a physical event but a condition of being: an image of transition, instability, and the strange freedom that accompanies the loss of ground.

In Midair: The Moment of Falling

The image of the fall has long marked the threshold between stability and collapse, knowledge and loss. To depict the instant of falling is to attempt to represent transition itself - an impossible task that exposes the limits of vision and form. From Cornelis van Haarlem's The Fall of the Titans (See Fig. 5) to Jeff Wall's Boy Falls from Tree (See Fig. 8), artists have returned to this suspended state as a way of thinking about transformation, vulnerability, and time.

Fig. 5 Cornelis van Haarlem. *The Fall of the Titans (*1588–1590). Oil On Canvas. 239 cm × 307 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Cornelis van Haarlem's The Fall of the Titans (see Fig.5) fills the canvas with tumbling, twisting bodies. Each figure is anatomically precise yet disoriented, caught between grace and chaos. The Mannerist fascination with muscular tension and unstable composition turns the fall into a display of mastery: descent becomes a stage for virtuosity. The collapse of divine order mirrors the instability of Haarlem's late sixteenth-century world - a Europe marked by religious and political upheaval. Hendrick Goltzius's engravings of similar scenes (see Fig. 6) further transformed this spectacle of descent into reproducible form. Through the sharp lines of printmaking, movement is held in suspension, paradoxically stabilizing the act of falling. The image becomes a record of perpetual motion, an attempt to fix instability itself.

Fig 6 Hendrick Goltzius. *Phaeton, from The Four Disgracers* (1588). Engraving. Diameter 33.5 cm. Metropolitan, NY, NY.

Fig. 7 Richard Drew. The Falling Man (September 11, 2001). Photograph. Associated Press.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the theme of falling shifts from mythic punishment to existential condition. Richard Drew's The Falling Man (See Fig 7) captures an anonymous figure descending from the World Trade Center, frozen in an eerily symmetrical vertical posture. The image resists comprehension, suspended between serenity and horror. Its stillness denies closure, leaving the viewer caught in the same midair as the subject. Nikki Cesare Schotzko describes this era as one defined by "spectacular and horrible falls" that have both global and intimate repercussions (Schotzko 5). Drew's photograph materializes that collective state of suspension - a moment where historical trauma and physical descent converge.

Fig. 8 Jeff Wall. *Boy Falls from a Tree*(2010). Colour photograph. Edition 1 of 3. 234.15625 x 313.531 cm. White Cube.

Jeff Wall's Boy Falls from Tree (See Fig. 8) revisits this suspended state with controlled artifice. The carefully staged scene depicts a child mid-fall, his body weightless and luminous against the background of leaves and sky. Wall's practice of reconstructing moments with cinematic precision transforms the accident into a tableau of stillness. The fall is both real and imagined, a meditation on perception itself. Bjorn Thomassen's account of liminality helps illuminate the tension in Wall's image: liminality is the condition in which "the taken-for-granted order is suspended, and new forms can appear" (Thomassen 12). The child's body, poised between ascent and impact, inhabits this liminal zone.

Ann Cooper Albright's phenomenology of falling reframes descent not as catastrophe but as a practice of resilience. To fall, she writes, is to learn how to move with instability rather than resist it (Albright 38). Wall's suspended figure embodies this lesson: within the fall there is a fleeting moment of freedom, an image of becoming rather than defeat. Gilles Deleuze's notion that being is a "continuous process of becoming" (Deleuze 41) resonates here, suggesting that the act of falling can be understood as a state of transformation - a threshold where bodies, meanings, and histories are momentarily released from structure.

To represent falling, then, is to engage with both the fragility and the potential of motion. These works - from Haarlem's anatomical drama to Wall's quiet suspension trace how art attempts to visualize the impossible: the instant between what was and what will be. Midair is not a pause between two certainties but a space where perception and matter are briefly unbound, where the act of falling becomes the image of change itself.

After the Fall: Decay, Renewal, and the Ground

Just as the body suspended in midair embodies the tension between gravity and freedom, the image of fruit carries a similar symbolic weight in the aftermath of the fall. Fruit recurs across artistic and cultural history as a marker of abundance, desire, and consequence. In Eden, it is the perfect gift of nature, freely given and emblematic of heavenly plenitude. It also becomes the object of transgression, the symbol of knowledge, sin, and the awakening of consciousness. After the fall, fruit continues to appear, but its meaning shifts: it becomes both the labor required to sustain life and a reminder of mortality. In still lifes, vanitas, and modern depictions, the fruit on the table or in the supermarket mediates between desire and effort, pleasure and decay. It embodies the human condition- simultaneously seductive, perishable, and instructive and signals the work necessary to remain conscious, nourished, and alive in a world where innocence has been lost.

Fruit as Abundance: The Garden, the Table, and the Still Life

The story of Eden positions fruit as the symbol of perfect abundance: nourishment without labor, sustenance without cost. In Genesis, the garden is not only a place of spiritual harmony but also of effortless provision. Food appears freely, growing without cultivation, offering a world in which pleasure and survival are aligned. The fruit in Eden represents a condition before scarcity- before time, decay, and work enter human experience.

The shift from foraging to agriculture redefines humanity's relationship to this abundance. As Tom Standage argues, the development of settled farming societies was "the worst mistake in the history of the human race" ((Standage 16) , not only because it required dramatically more labor, but also because it reduced the variety of the human diet and increased vulnerability to disease

(Standage 16–21). The agricultural world is one of control, ownership, and hierarchy. Food becomes something extracted rather than encountered, and the world of effortless Eden becomes a nostalgic ideal, an image of a fullness that can no longer be accessed.

Fig. 9 Jan Davidsz. de Heem. *Still-Life with Fruit and Lobster*(1648-49). Oil on canvas. 95 x 120 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

In the Dutch still life tradition(see Fig 9) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this lost abundance reappears in carefully arranged displays of fruits, flowers, spices, and imported goods. These paintings are often saturated with color and texture were a way to perform wealth. To commission or display such a painting was to declare access to global trade networks- sugar from the Caribbean, porcelain from China, pepper from India. Still life becomes a visual

technology through which the merchant elite portrays itself as restored to an Edenic state, surrounded by the world's bounty.

In this sense, the still life is not simply a depiction of fruit, but a dream of return: an artificial recreation of abundance. The table, overflowing with delicacy, becomes the secular garden. The fruit in these images does not grow from the ground of the owner's land; it exists instead as proof of possession, of the power to bring distant worlds into the domestic space. The still life externalizes desire: it shows not only what is eaten, but what is desired to be possible.

Yet this abundance is not neutral. As Silvia Malaguzzi and Kenneth Bendiner both note, the still life genre emerges precisely when Europe's colonial and mercantile networks are expanding (Malaguzzi; Bendiner). The abundance portrayed is inseparable from global extraction: the fruit on the table is also a map of empire. The fantasy of Eden is reconstructed through systems of labor, trade, and distance. Thus abundance, in the aftermath of the Fall, becomes something that must be acquired, displayed, and performed. Eden's fruit was lived; the still life fruit is owned.

Fruit as Corruption: Vanitas and the Bodegon

If the Dutch still life celebrated abundance, the vanitas painting introduced a deliberate interruption to that pleasure. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, religious and moral authorities expressed concern that still life painting had become a display of wealth without reflection. In response, artists inserted reminders that abundance is temporary and that pleasure is inseparable from decay. The shining fruit of earlier tables begins to wrinkle and show decay.

The vanitas vocabulary draws on Christian teachings that emphasize the transience of earthly pleasures. Alongside the fruit objects like skulls, extinguished candles, and wilting flowers

appear. These symbols remind the viewer that everything that appears full will eventually fade. The fruit is not only a sign of abundance but also a reminder that time is always advancing, that the fall is ongoing, and that no display of beauty or wealth can prevent dissolution.

Fig. 10 Juan Sánchez Cotán. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* (1602). Oil on canvas 67.8 x 88.7 cm. San Diego Museum of Art.

The bodegon paintings of Spain(see Fig 10), though visually simpler, carry a similar insistence on mortality. Unlike the lush abundance of Dutch arrangements, the bodegon presents food with restraint. A single melon, a clay jug, onions laid directly on a bare table. The emphasis here is not on display but on humility. The Spanish still life draws attention to the material conditions of

existence: survival, hunger, storage, and preparation. In these paintings, fruit no longer stands for luxury but for a life lived close to necessity. The table becomes a place of contemplation rather than consumption.

Together, the vanitas and the bodegon shift the symbolism of fruit from delight to awareness. The fruit is shown not only at the height of ripeness but also at the moment when that ripeness begins to decline. These images insist that abundance cannot be separated from the passage of time. The painting becomes a kind of temporal object. It freezes the moment where life and decay overlap. The viewer is asked to hold the beauty of the fruit and the inevitability of its disappearance at the same time.

This return to decay is not only a moral correction. It also reintroduces the body into the image. Fruit becomes a metaphor for flesh: soft, vulnerable, marked by time. In this sense, vanitas painting continues the story of the Fall. The fruit in Eden gave knowledge, and vanitas painting makes that knowledge visible. It shows that to live in the world after Eden is to live in time, and to live in time is to be subject to change.

Denial of Death: The Supermarket and the Distance from the Ground

In the contemporary world, the meaning of fruit has shifted again. What was once rare, seasonal, and tied to the rhythms of specific landscapes has become mass-produced, constantly available commodity. The supermarket offers an experience of abundance that appears effortless. Fruit from different climates and continents sits together in a single refrigerated display, presented under uniform lighting, wrapped in plastic, labeled, priced, and standardized. It is possible to purchase strawberries in winter, mangoes in cold climates, or persimmons grown on the other

side of the world. What was in the seventeenth century a mark of extreme wealth has become accessible across economic classes.

However, this abundance is constructed on a profound distance from the ground. The supermarket replaces the soil, the tree, the hands that harvested, and the environments that sustained growth with a surface of packaging and smooth presentation. The fruit is no longer seen as something that was alive and will decay, but as a product to be selected and consumed. Imperfection is removed. Rot is hidden. Smell is controlled. The sensory reminders of life and time are minimized.

This represents what Ernest Becker describes as the cultural project of denying death. Becker argues that modern societies build entire structures to avoid confronting finitude, often by turning to systems that distract, soothe, or replace the fear of mortality. As he writes, "the fallacy in all this sterile utopianism is that fear of death is not the only motive of life; … and so men sell their souls to consumer capitalism or consumer communism, or replace their souls—as Rank said—with psychology" (267). Becker is not describing supermarkets, yet his point illuminates the logic that underlies them: consumer systems promise a form of continuity, control, and self-stabilization that masks decay. The supermarket becomes one of these systems. It hides the work, soil, and perishability of fruit behind packaging and constant restocking, allowing the consumer to encounter a world where decay appears managed and mortality held at bay. Its perishability is masked by refrigeration, plastic sheen, and constant restocking.

Because of this, the fruit in the supermarket no longer signals abundance in a spiritual or symbolic way. It signals control. The abundance is not of nature, but of logistics, distribution chains, and industrial agriculture. The consumer does not encounter the tree or the field, only the

shelf. The relational, seasonal, and cultural meanings that once shaped human relationships to fruit are flattened into a generic experience of consumption.

The contrast with the still life tradition is significant. In Dutch paintings, fruit was displayed as evidence of wealth, but that wealth still acknowledged time. The fruit would ripen, bruise, and expire. The vanitas painter made that visible. In the supermarket, the fruit appears as though time has been paused or erased. The fruit is available always, and decay is managed elsewhere, out of sight.

Fig. 11 Nobutaka Aozaki. *Grocery Portraits #Manhattan (3 Ave & E 11 St, NY)(*2020). Archival pigment print.

Nobutaka Aozaki's *Grocery Portraits*(see Fig. 11) makes this concealment visible again. For this series, the artist collects abandoned shopping lists he finds on the streets during his daily travel

through the city. He then buys the groceries written on each list and photographs the assembled items as portraits of unknown people. The resulting images, displayed alongside the original lists, restore a human presence to products that have been standardized and stripped of context. Aozaki's portraits show how the supermarket shapes identity through consumption while obscuring the labor, histories, and environments that produced the food. In doing so, the series reintroduces the groundedness that supermarket aesthetics attempt to erase, returning the fruit and groceries to the realm of lived experience.

This transformation marks a shift in how the fall is lived. The contemporary consumer exists after the fall, but unlike the bodegon's humble acceptance of finitude, the supermarket suggests that the fall can be ignored. There is abundance without labor, desire without waiting, consumption without consequence. The fruit becomes not a reminder of knowledge and mortality, but an object emptied of history, earth, and effort.

Yet the knowledge of the fall persists, even here. The supermarket generates a particular melancholy: abundance without connection, consumption without grounding. It is a suspended state, a midair relationship to nourishment, in which the body continues to fall while the ground remains unseen.

As the Symbol of Renewal: Growth, Decay, and Continuity

If the supermarket masks decay, the still life tradition and contemporary art offer a different understanding: that decay is not an end, but part of a cycle. Fruit rots, seeds dry, and life continues through dissolution. The fall does not only signal loss. It also marks the beginning of transformation. The fruit in the story of Eden did not simply banish humanity. It introduced

knowledge, consciousness, and the ability to reflect on the world. Awareness carries grief, but it also carries possibility.

The vanitas painters of the seventeenth century understood this duality. The lemon sliced open, the grapes beginning to wrinkle, and the flower losing its bloom do not only represent death. They represent the ongoing movement of life. Something is always becoming something else. Decay is not outside of life, but central to it.

Fig. 12 Ori Gersht. Still from *Pomegranate* (2006). 59 x 72.3 cm. Israel Museum.

Contemporary art often returns to this idea with renewed sensitivity. Ori Gersht's Pomegranate (See Fig. 12) is a compelling example. The work begins with an arrangement that resembles a classical still life. The fruit hangs, whole, rich in color and promise. Then the moment of rupture is introduced. The pomegranate is shot, and the film captures the instant when seeds and juice scatter into the air. The explosion is violent yet strangely beautiful. The fruit is destroyed, but in

its destruction it reveals its interior abundance. The seeds, which would otherwise remain contained, now scatter, ready to grow. The moment of breaking is also the moment of dispersal and continuation.

This perspective aligns with Karl Jaspers's understanding of historical renewal. In The Origin and Goal of History, Jaspers describes the Axial Age as a period in which civilizations underwent profound crisis and transformation (Smith 315). The collapse of earlier structures created the conditions for new forms of thought to emerge. Renewal is not a return to an earlier paradise. It is a movement forward through breakdown. Cultures reconstellate themselves after rupture. Meaning is not recovered, but remade .

Decay, then, is not simply loss. It is a generative process. It opens space for what comes next. In ecological terms, compost is the richest soil. What has broken down provides nourishment for new growth. The fall does not end the story. It changes its shape.

This understanding of renewal resists nostalgia for Eden or for imagined origins. The search for ground after the fall does not require a return. It requires an acceptance of change, multiplicity, and complexity. Fruit and vegetables carry this lesson quietly. They are seasonal. They ripen, rot, and return. They are reminders of cycles larger than individual experience.

To hold a piece of fruit is to hold time. It is to recognize that life is always moving between fullness and decay, sweetness and loss. To eat is to participate in this cycle. Renewal is not abstract. It is embodied. It is daily. It is ordinary. And it depends on accepting that nothing remains whole forever.

In this sense, after the fall does not mean after meaning. It means living in the knowledge that meaning is formed and reformed through change. Renewal is not the opposite of collapse. It is its consequence.

Conclusion: Falling as Continuity

Throughout this paper, the fall has been considered not only as an event but as a condition. A space of tension, transformation, and reflection. In the “Before the Fall,” artists capture the fragile equilibrium that precedes collapse, showing how innocence, desire, and awareness coexist in moments of suspended time. In “In Midair,” the act of falling itself becomes a site of exploration, where bodies, myths, and photographs reveal the freedom and vulnerability inherent in transition. Finally, in “After the Fall,” the ground- whether through the decay of fruit, the curated aisles of the supermarket, or the symbolic reflection of Vanitas and contemporary philosophy demonstrates that collapse is never final: it feeds renewal, knowledge, and consciousness. Fruit, first a symbol of Edenic abundance, then of labor, decay, and renewal provides a through-line that links the biblical fall to contemporary material culture.

Taken together, these images and ideas suggest that falling is a form of becoming. The fall does not mark an endpoint but illuminates the cycles of life, death, and transformation, reminding us that instability carries both peril and possibility. In art, as in life, the moment of suspension, the midair between what was and what will be, reveals the human capacity to perceive, adapt, and find meaning even amid descent.

Writing this paper has clarified how deeply these images of falling resonate with the world today. The fall is not only a historical or symbolic idea but a condition that shapes daily life. In looking at these artworks, I have come to understand the fall as a space of possibility, a place where uncertainty becomes fertile ground. It is from this position - suspended, questioning, and aware of change, that I approach my own artistic practice.

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