

Petzel

EMILY MAE SMITH

Transit of Venus

September 17 – October 24, 2026

520 West 25th Street

Petzel is pleased to present *Transit of Venus*, an exhibition of new paintings by Emily Mae Smith, opening September 17 and running through October 24, 2026, at 520 West 25th Street. This marks Smith's second solo show at the gallery and follows her 2024 survey exhibition at the Magritte Museum in Brussels, where the artist's work was curated in dialogue with René Magritte's oeuvre.

In *Transit of Venus*, Smith's hybrid figures and symbolic objects—including her anthropomorphic broomstick, grapes, eyeballs, and open-mouthed frames—undergo further transformations, taking on forms that are part human, animal, and plant. These new forms are trickster-like in their instability, able to defy any fixed identity or easy classification, functioning less as metaphors but rather as propositions. They are figures that resist, rather than merely illustrate, the framework binding labor to class and gender, not only by historical convention, but also by our present social and political conditions.

Smith's new paintings turn directly toward the current moment, when living with dignity feels increasingly fraught and connection to one another and to the living world feels vital to survival. The exhibition's title, *Transit of Venus*, is multivalent, simultaneously alluding to the astronomical phenomena, representations of the female body in painting, as well as mythology, in which Venus the Goddess of Love, becomes a symbol of connection and the creative forces of nature.

Smith draws on her immediate surroundings while adopting the vernacular of art made in periods of comparable upheaval, among them the agricultural imagery of Jean-François Millet, whose depictions of peasants laboring during the Industrial Revolution she has returned to throughout her career.

In "The Locust II," Smith's broomstick morphs into a near-human form emerging from straw, the discarded made animate. The figure, wielding a scythe, arrives with an avenging presence, inverting the passive nude of the nineteenth century painting which inspired it. Where that archetype existed to be looked at, Smith's figure looks back and takes up the blade, a gesture closer to an awakening of conscience than to seduction, the object of the gaze reconstituted as an agent with the power to reap.

Yet Smith's paintings are not bound to genre or motif. Her understanding and control of the medium allows her to shift fluidly through the lexicons of Pop Art, Symbolism and Surrealist sensibilities. In "Only Human," a cluster of brightly colored grapes each carries a single eyeball, frantically searching for the gaze of its neighbor. The painting presses on ocularcentrism—the Western habit of treating sight as the primary route to knowledge and worth—and the idea that we are shaped as much by being looked at as by looking. Together yet apart, the grapes portray how selfhood is negotiated through a gaze it cannot escape.

Built slowly through layered transparent washes and glazes, Smith's paintings achieve luminous surfaces that make the labor of their making inseparable from their meaning. In her sly, subversive visual language, these works ask what it means to hold a self together—or to let it dissolve into something larger—amid questions of power, authoritarianism, and the erosion of individual agency.

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About Emily Mae Smith

Emily Mae Smith was born in 1979 in Austin, Texas. She currently lives and works in Upstate New York. In 2024, the Magritte Museum at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels presented a survey exhibition of Smith's work alongside Rene Magritte's paintings. Other institutional solo exhibitions include Pond Society, Shanghai (2023); SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah (2020); Marion Art Gallery, Rockefeller Arts Center, Fredonia (2020); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford (2019); Le Consortium Museum, Dijon (2018). Select institutional group exhibitions include: Dallas Museum of Art (2026, 2025, 2023); Philadelphia Museum of Art (2025); The Warehouse, Dallas (2025, 2023); Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2024); Palazzo Barberini, Rome (2024); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford (2024); Blanton Museum of Art, Austin (2024); The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2022); The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles (2022); 58th October Salon, Belgrade Biennale, Belgrade (2021); Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus (2021); Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland (2020); Public Art Fund, New York (2020).

Smith's work is included in the permanent collections of institutions such as the Albertina, Vienna, Austria; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas; The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio; The Consortium Museum, Dijon, France; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California; Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Powerlong Art Museum, Shanghai, China; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York; Zuzeum Art Centre, Riga, Latvia.

Petzel is located at 520 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10am–6pm. For press inquiries, please contact Julia Ribeiro at julia@petzel.com, or call (212) 680-9467.