

## **Emily Mae Smith**

### **Honest Espionage**

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Is it a coincidence that most of the most powerful artworks made in the history of the human species not only submit to being looked at, but also seem to be looking back at us, unapologetically fixing the viewer as the object of their scrutiny? The impression they give is that they know something we do not. Which is usually fair. There are obvious examples – the Mona Lisa, of course, or Rembrandt's self-portraits, most paintings of women by Manet, and virtually everything by Ingres – but there are countless others, from Greek and Russian icons to the moai of Easter Island, or the gargoyles of Notre Dame. Not all figurative art does this, but neither is the phenomenon limited to frontal depictions of faces. Cezanne's still lives project themselves into real space and confront us on their terms, not ours. Rothko's colour fields stare us down. Much of the best Minimalist sculpture draws its power from a comparable effect.

The paintings of Emily Mae Smith engage with this decidedly masculine representational strategy, but ambivalently. Among the paintings in this exhibition, paradoxically titled 'Honest Espionage', Smith has included an homage to Ingres, a painter she avowedly admires. While Smith's *The Studio, Odalisque* is a forthright reference to Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), her reclining nude – here played by an anthropomorphized brush, or broom, on which more later – is both artist and model, painter and painted, sunbather and concubine.

Smith is as likely to include references in her paintings to Ingres as Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, not to mention Art Nouveau, the Arts and Crafts movement, Walt Disney, 1970s' psychedelia and 1980s' airbrush poster art. One thing that these eclectic sources have in common is what you might call their fast-slow read: an initially rapid visual impact followed by a slower unfurling of meaning and cultural endurance. (One of Smith's paintings is aptly titled *Slow Burn*.)

To say that Smith's paintings pop out from the picture plane is to miss half the story. Yes, their graphic punch – to use another corporeal figure of speech – projects them towards the viewer, just as the frame-like mouths scream their contents into the space of the gallery. However they are also absorptive, and retentive. They accept our gaze, and keep hold of it; there are enough crisp details and miasmic fields of luminous colour in these paintings to satisfy a long, leisurely examination. Visual pleasure, in Smith's paintings, is bait. The net in *Jeopardy Mesh* is substantial enough to trap a layer of cherries behind the rope frame, even if those cherries – all except one lustrous specimen – are

painted as flat, black silhouettes. Are the cherries the subject of the picture, or are they merely background? What about the two shapely mermaids who recline, tails entwined, at the top of the frame? Or the grotesque, peg-like teeth that threaten to snap shut on the entire scene – who do these belong to? Once ensnared, the eye darts madly about the canvas, searching for a way out, in vain.

The space in these pictures may be shallow, but it is not flat. The textured brick wall in *Long Distance*, though rendered in a Ben Day dot pattern that shows it to be as thin as a sheet of newsprint, actually opens onto a blue and purple infinitude. The nightmarish painting titled *The Discipline* is the most explicit allusion in this exhibition to the space of the theatre stage, where painterly illusion combines with compressed scenography and layered backdrops to conjure a potentially limitless expanse. The theatrical form is remarkable for its extreme synthesis of visceral sensorial reality and blatant make-believe; like Smith's paintings, it is both stylized and vividly present.

The animated broom character that has featured in many of Smith's recent paintings recurs here too. While it was initially intended as a reference to *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* sequence in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, in which Mickey Mouse's broom magically comes to life and mops the floor on his behalf, Smith's version of the character has become, at this point in her work, a more ambiguous cipher. The artist has described it as simply a tool to get certain jobs done. Neither obviously male nor female, the broom always seems to be in disguise as someone or something else. In *Slow Burn* the broom – with the addition of lipstick and long blond hair – stands in for a generic female face. As if uncomfortable beneath our gaze, he/she hides behind large sunglasses, which reflect the space where the viewer should, logically, be standing. Space literally; instead of our reflection, the broom sees right through us, through the earth's atmosphere (assuming he/she is of the earth to begin with) and out into the starry cosmos, where a moon or planet is partially backlit. In that respect, the picture (like most pictures) is an impossibility, because the broom is also backlit, presumably from the fiery sunset behind his/her head. Once again, we are caught in a trap, our focus pinging back and forth from cold deep space to a red-hot sunset, from our own bodies to a cartoon depiction of a broom wearing a wig.

Smith's art succeeds in fusing the very real and the very unreal in a tightly compressed laminate of representational styles, references and associations. Her paintings have high stakes – they grapple with societal power relations and Capitalist exploitation, with labour and gender and violence – but they are also funny, and entertaining. They are better than real life. They look back at us, and seem unimpressed by what they see.

Jonathan Griffin

**MARY MARY Suite 2 / 1 6 Dixon Street Glasgow G1 4AX Scotland UK**  
**+44 (0) 141 226 2257 info@marymarygallery.co.uk www.marymarygallery.co.uk**