

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS
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EMILY MAE SMITH

FEAST OF TOTEMS

9 June – 14 July 2018



Emily Mae Smith, *Eve*, 2018
oil on linen, 67 x 51 inch

Contemporary Fine Arts is pleased to present *Feast of Totems*, **Emily Mae Smith's** first exhibition with the gallery. In an array of paintings and drawings, Smith's motifs occupy and distort art historical compositions, claiming space for feminine subjectivity.

Smith paints subversive riffs on art history, injecting defiant language, design, and science fiction elements into classic settings. She stages a dialogue between the neo-classical and symbolist works from the twisted end of academic painting and her own visual language. At once humorous and critical, Smith's meticulously rendered

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tableaux present a feast of codes, signs, and symbols. Gradated horizon lines posture a traditional composition, unsettled by the animistic brooms, fruit, and stilettos posing in the foreground.

Many of the images are painted with contre-jour light, accentuating the experience of looking at a scene from behind, or a new perspective. The prickly pear in *Fiction Flesh*, a fruit born from fantasy, nuzzles into an electric pink tongue. This menacing symbiosis is at once seductive and grotesque, challenging the viewer to reconcile the strange coupling bathed in a soft glow. The fruits in this feast forbid their consumption, resist with thorny skins and sealed lips. An insatiable thirst and a desire to devour course through the work, as portals and structures are also adorned with cartoonish teeth. The erotically charged and subtly sinister imagery invokes the proto-feminist, Chicago imagist Christina Ramberg, while Magritte's stylized influence is also apparent.

Smith's recurring broom avatar makes appearances in desert, beachfront, and pastoral landscape at different times of day. The broom figure forms a kind of totem: an object imbued with a special power beyond its literal form. Always contemplative, the broom alludes in turn to a paintbrush, a phallic symbol, a siren, an invisible laborer, and a mischievous interloper. These brooms are tools for new potentialities. Smith reimagines the gesture of the woman in William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Bather* as the broom cleaning her bristles in *The Gleaner*. In *Alien Shores*, she draws upon the wistfulness of George Frederic Watts' *The Minotaur*, investigating the psyche of this mythological creature in a strange new world. Each appropriation and interpretation toys with the viewer's expectations of figurative painting and the role of the female in that space.

The imaginative register of Smith's works entertains humor and hopefulness, staging possibilities for a bright and bizarre future. This optimism is most potent in its belief in painting: Smith negotiates the stakes of how the figure has been rendered in paint throughout history, insisting upon the significance of pushing these boundaries of depiction.

Emily Mae Smith (b. 1979 in Austin Texas) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her MFA in Visual Art at Columbia University, New York (2006) and her BFA in Studio Art at the University of Texas in Austin (2002). Smith's first institutional solo show opens at Le Consortium in Dijon, France in November 2018. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Sphinx or The Caress*, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, USA; *Tesla Girls*, Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium (2016); *Honest Espionage*, Mary Mary, Glasgow, Scotland, UK (2016). She also exhibited in *Unrealism*, a group exhibition organized by Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian, The Moore Building, Miami, FL (2015).

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