

relics

S*an D. Henry-Smith
Reina Sugihara

June 29–August 4, 2023

“relics” is a two-person show at 47 Canal that pairs photographs by S*an D. Henry-Smith and paintings by Reina Sugihara, in a correlation of their durational methods and estimations. Both artists value looking, though not strictly as means to an end. Henry-Smith is also a poet of lucid description, and Sugihara is often moved to paint by sculptural impulses—both after sustained relationships with friends, sites, found objects. But processes are not so straightforward as motivations. Henry-Smith does not draft the images they want to make, nor does Sugihara paint the object she has long held. Both artists’ work materializes the search not so much for meaning but emotion. They begin with the personal and distill it into abstractions of peculiar empathy and memory, sometimes in opposing proximity.

Henry-Smith works primarily with a medium format film camera, and makes careful exposures. Their subjects are assuredly framed: a friend, the Atlantic, an aberration of nature; we are beholding sites the artist has looked at, revisited many times over prior to exposure, and is sharing with us now. These photographs emerge from wandering and repetition. We see Elliott in (*scrying; you loop*) (2019), refracted by the bevel of an oval mirror in a dim, warm kitchen; *what mosses* (2022) is a cloudlike overgrowth in a field at late dusk. Holding what haunts and what awes in equal rite, Henry-Smith considers looking as collaborative exchange between themselves and their subjects, and that which slips and evades description. They often oscillate between image, text, and sound to rupture pre-existing language, or language that has already been imposed. Even their camera can be taken apart and played as a percussive instrument against its own logic of capture, as in their performance “astringency principle of the looking drum,” which took place at the gallery earlier this year. Their first film, *Lunar New Year* debuted on 47 Canal’s website back in the summer of 2021 and takes us through a day of moving through the city via a carousel of images, bringing to mind Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* (1982) or Fred Moten’s *B Jenkins* (2009). The formal analysis that follows each documented image is scrutinous, near intensive, and slowly atmospheric, the envy of any art historian. Looking, as performing the act of making a photograph, for them engages an ethic of slowness, language, epistrophe, and prophecy.

There is a muddy pearlescence to Sugihara’s paintings. The surfaces vary between pooled, gummy skims of oil paint and thin, absorbed areas with a matte finish. Still, hints of green move in underlayers, like shadows in a mossy pond. *Years* (all works 2023) is anchored by a half quatrefoil, or perhaps it is a sideways heart, formed by concentric outlines of daubed dots. Each successive trace follows the previous one and the whole form billows irregularly; trails of gray-brown blots stammer toward the canvas’s right edge, stuck in a bottleneck. This series of paintings began with a fish, a pet pleco owned by Sugihara’s father, that frankly repulsed her as a teenager. And happening upon a charm necklace of the very same fish, sharp and angular, many years later—the pleco compelled these paintings and drawings, whose slathered densities recall the sedimented canvases of Fautrier or Richard Pousette-Dart. For Sugihara, the subject must no longer be recognizable, abstracted from her memory. For the viewer, the experience

is akin to visiting a reliquary site. At the very eastern end of Hōryū-ji, the Buddhist temple founded by the semi-legendary Prince Shōtoku of the Asuka period in Ikaruga, Nara Prefecture, Japan—stand two large halls united by a hip-and-gable, or “resting hill” roof. On the left is the Shariden, or Hall of Relics; on the right, the Eden, or Picture Hall. We are told the buildings house the bones left after the cremation of the Buddha, but can only stand at a distance, peering into the holes of the latticed hinoki wall many meters away. It’s about belief. *Underwater* is made from an old, disposable foil plate palette, a molded dome of congealed oil shot through with wisps of ochre, maroon, navy blue. Occasionally, instead of mixing paints, Sugihara works by dipping her pigment loaded brush straight into a tray of oil, allowing herself a uniquely resistant medium—while tainting its clarity at the same time.

—Alex Jen, June 2023

S*an D. Henry-Smith (b. 1992, New York) lives and works in Amsterdam. They received their MFA from the Sandberg Instituut in 2022. Recent solo exhibitions include “tremor low” at ROZENSTRAAT in Amsterdam (2023) and “in awe of geometry & mornings” at White Columns in New York (2021). Their book *Wild Peach* (2020), was published by Futurepoem, and shortlisted for the PEN Open Book Award, and they are the author of two chapbooks: *Body Text* (2016) and *Flotsam Suite: A Strange & Precarious Life, or How We Chronicled the Little Disasters & I Won’t Leave the Dance Floor Til It’s Out of My System* (2019). They have received awards and fellowships from Amsterdam Fonds voor de kunst (2023), the Fulbright Program (2020), The Poetry Project (2019), and Poets House (2017), among others. They have read and performed previously at 47 Canal, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Shed, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, The Poetry Project, and Triple Canopy, among others. Henry-Smith regularly collaborates in sound, poetry, and performance with Dweller Electronics, Imani Elizabeth Jackson as Mouthfeel, Justin Allen, Taja Cheek, Yulan Grant, Ryan C. Clarke, Danny Sadiel Peña, Gabrielle Octavia Rucker, and Derica Shields, among others.

Reina Sugihara (b. 1988, Tokyo, Japan) lives and works in Tokyo. She received her BA from Tokyo University of the Arts before pursuing a MA in painting from Royal College of Art in London. Her solo exhibition, “Frame,” was recently on view at MISAKO & ROSEN in Tokyo. Her recent exhibitions include “An Index of Being of Alive” Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles (2022); “Memory of Rib” N/A, Seoul (2022); “No cinders remain in ashes, but” Lavender Opener Chair, Tokyo (2021); and “FAKERS” Thames-Side Gallery, London (2018).