

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

EMILY MAE SMITH

A CANDLE MAKES ITS OWN FUEL

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Contemporary Fine Arts is excited to present Emily Mae Smith's second solo show at the gallery. "A Candle Makes its Own Fuel" comprises 18 small and mid-sized paintings in which Smith revisits her artistic origins through the lens of new surroundings. The resulting imagery possesses a surreal quality in an enchanting visual lexicon that is unequivocally her own.

For Smith, smaller format paintings honor her artistic roots. A decade ago, circumstances led her to paint on her living room desk after losing her Brooklyn studio lease, and large-scale paintings became impractical. This followed a pattern of feast and famine, a cycle the artist existed within for years, and a recurring theme in her oeuvre. Yet from that crucible, Smith's distinct artistic language emerged. Prompted by that formative period, Smith continues to work on small canvases to hone her colors, subjects, and images. Small paintings remain the principal format from which Smith grounds her works, each existing as compact semiotic microcosms. Should we rather steer clear of the truism that it's much easier to create a big painting than a small one, we might resort to an analogy from a different art form: "a good short story can break my heart in a way a novel just can't," writer Ottessa Moshfegh once said.

Nowadays, Smith spends her time between Brooklyn, NY and Woodstock, NY. The forested terrain and verdant Catskills mountains of Woodstock provide a trove of inspiration for the Texas-born artist. They inspire the scene of "Annunciation," where van Eyck's Virgin Mary and angel Gabriel turn into real and imagined flora bending in the wind, and the luminous dove is replaced by a pair of fortuitous bats. Direct subjects from Smith's current mountainside life appear; paintings such as "Morning Glory," featuring a flower Smith encounters daily on her way to the studio, exemplify the artist's constant engagement with her local landscape.

And so, the group of paintings before us suggests two forces at play in Smith's creative process: absorption in art history and profound fascination with the world around her. Yet it becomes clear at closer inspection that the two are in no way mutually exclusive, revealing a subtle nod to her historical neighbors from the 19th century Hudson River School and the idealized transposition of their imminent landscape into painting. But Smith has no intention to represent nature as it is, and much less to repeat (art) history; much more she thwarts their monumental inclinations by creating intricate, small canvases, testifying to undeniable precision within her unique iconography.

Smith's emphasis on the location and context where art takes shape is further made evident in her 'Studio' series of the past decade. These paintings, inspired by the Art Nouveau magazine of the same name, reflect not only on the act of creation but also on the environment in which it occurs—which is of particular importance to Smith, especially pertaining to how women artists live and work. Smith's paintings reside somewhere in between, both in concept and composition, the midst of transformation, poised between the before and after, and blurring the lines between the inside and the outside. This idea is expanded in "Reliquary" through nods to allegories of the cave by both Plato and Joseph Campbell, inviting us to explore uncharted realms of inspiration and self-expression. By way of a gang of pastel eyes peering at the onlooker through a knotted web, Smith's gaze in "Reliquary" suggests to the viewer that the biggest treasures radiate from within.

By crafting an artist-stand-in in the form of a broomstick, Smith deftly alludes to both artistic and domestic labor in one sweep. Her broomsticks allegorize the problematic muse and become symbols of feminine subjectivity within the confines of art history. In "Shell that Echoes," a pensive broom contemplates the fragility of existence, akin to the imagery of Joos van Cleve's "Saint Jerome in His Study" (1528), which prefigures the memento mori genre. In "Bacchus," Smith delves into the vast reservoir of artistic representations of the ancient god, paying homage to Caravaggio, among others, with grapes draped over the crown of her figure's head. In the studies for "A Candle Makes its Own Fuel" and "The Apparition," Smith refers to renowned compositions of Pieter de Hooch and Gustave Moreau, and inserts within them reflexive feminist metaphors about belonging in art and painting, of bearing the weight of being a subject while seeking representation of subjectivity. Although she begins her smaller studies before reimagining them on a larger canvas, she often returns to them long after the completion of the larger painting, maintaining that revisiting the subject serves as a means to reclaim the work.

The allegory of art continues in her artwork "Olympia," in which Smith refashions the ribbon necklace from Edouard Manet's iconic painting, draping it over her own intricate, tattoo-like patterned backdrop of rodents and wheat. Beyond challenging notions of flesh and beauty, "Olympia" asserts that the subject of every painting is always first and foremost painting itself, the annals of which Smith continues to interrogate, and its associated canon, which she seeks to expand.

Emily Mae Smith, born in 1979 in Austin, Texas, lives and works between Brooklyn and Woodstock, New York. In 2024, she is set to have an institutional exhibition at the Magritte Museum in Brussels. Notable recent solo institutional exhibitions include "Habitats" at Pond Society, Shanghai (2023), "Feast and Famine" at SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA (2020), "Ex Libris" at Marion Art Gallery, Rockefeller Arts Center, Fredonia (2020), "Matrix 181" at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford (2019), and "Emily Mae Smith" at Le Consortium Museum, Dijon (2018). Smith earned her MFA in Visual Art from Columbia University, New York, in 2006, and her BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas in Austin in 2002. Her work is held in multiple public and private institutions such as the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus; The Consortium Museum, Dijon; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum Brandhorst, Munich; Powerlong Art Museum, Shanghai; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Zuzeum Art Centre, Riga.