

EMILY MAE SMITH MATRIX 181



FEBRUARY 7 – MAY 5, 2019
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

SATIRICAL INGENUITY

“The first broom I put in a painting was a riff on the broom character in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. It was a way for me to paint an object, figure, female, and phallus all at the same time. I thought it was funny and an ideal vehicle...The ideas for my broom figure have changed and expanded since then; it has been moulded to my painting needs. You can say more difficult things with a character.”¹

—Emily Mae Smith

With references to distinct painting movements from the history of art—including Symbolism, Surrealism, and Pop art—Emily Mae Smith creates lively compositions that offer sly social and political commentary. Leading with humor, she presents a vocabulary of signs and symbols that start with her avatar, inspired by the bewitched broomstick figure from *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* sequence in Disney’s animated film *Fantasia* (1940). This unlikely, even silly, choice is an astute one as the broom simultaneously alludes to a painter’s brush, a domestic tool associated with women’s work, and the phallus. Smith’s flexible character has continued to evolve across her body of work. By adopting a wide variety of guises, the broom and a stockpile of other coded symbols speak to timely, relevant subjects, including gender, sexuality, capitalism, and violence.

For her MATRIX project, her first solo museum exhibition in the United States, Smith engages with a masterpiece from the Wadsworth’s permanent collection: William Holman Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott* (c. 1888–1905). The Pre-Raphaelite painting, which represents the culmination of Hunt’s career, has had a persistent presence in Smith’s life for several decades. The artist recalls having a reproduction of the work in the form of a greeting card since her teenage years. So taken with the image and subject, she has carried that card from place to place, and studio to studio. Teeming with symbols, Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott* proves a perfect foil for Smith’s modus operandi in the form of a feminist reimagining of the narrative composition featuring the oppressed and tragic Lady, originally conjured from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem of 1832 (revised 1842).²

COVER: EMILY MAE SMITH, *STILL LIFE (DETAIL)*, 2015
PHOTO: CHARLES BENTON



WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT, *THE LADY OF SHALOTT*, c. 1888-1905
OIL ON CANVAS; 74 1/8 X 57 5/8 IN. WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART, THE ELLA GALLUP SUMNER AND MARY CATLIN
SUMMER COLLECTION FUND, 1961.470
PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS, WADSWORTH ATHENEUM

Victorian-era poets and painters regularly collaborated in the mid-nineteenth century. For the allegorical poem *The Lady of Shalott* Tennyson found inspiration in the story of Camelot, inventing the character of the Lady who lives alone in a remote tower. Under a spell, she passively weaves tapestries depicting episodes of the outside world as reflected in a mirror. But one day, the Lady sees a young married couple reflected in the mirror, realizes her lonely fate, and looks directly out the window as Sir Lancelot passes. Her world immediately erupts:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
“The curse is come upon me,” cried
The Lady of Shalott.

In a state of panic, the Lady then escapes the tower, climbs into a boat by the river, and drifts downstream toward Camelot, but dies before she arrives. Her body is recovered and seen by Lancelot who notes her beauty and says a prayer.

Hunt’s visual interpretation of the poem has been regarded as a Victorian lesson on the “sinfulness of dereliction of duty.”³ The painting depicts the chaotic climax in the tower room, when the Lady breaks from her gendered duty. Behind her, the circular mirror cracks and releases a burst of physical energy, which causes her red mane of hair to fly upward dramatically whilst the tapestry threads spiral and entangle her form.

To a twenty-first-century audience, the story can be understood as one of male fear of female autonomy.⁴ A beautiful woman is locked away in a tower (likely by a man), bound to create handwork at his command, and punished by death for a momentary, impulsive act of defiance. Victorian women were relegated to uneventful and subservient lives. A break from this role, as with the Lady’s fall from grace, would trigger the monster-woman of the Bible and mythology, “the charming but ‘terrible sorceress-goddess [such] as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy.’”⁵ Hunt invokes both the Sphinx and Medusa as details in *The Lady of Shalott*.⁶ Likewise, these female monsters have long been part of Smith’s feminist visual vocabulary, appearing in works including *Medusa* (2015), *The Riddle* (2017), and *Medusa Moderne* (2018).

There is an uncanny affinity between the coded iconography of Smith and Hunt. Memory of the greeting card image of *The Lady of Shalott* subconsciously found its expression in Smith’s work over the years. For her MATRIX project, she now presents a project that runs parallel to the painting’s narrative. The artist has curated a selection of seven paintings (dated 2015 to 2018) that relate to the subject, and painted three new works (dated 2019) directly inspired by Hunt’s masterwork. A major difference,

EMILY MAE SMITH, *VIEWFINDER*, 2015
PHOTO: CHARLES BENTON



however, is that Smith paints from a position of female authority that opposes Hunt’s “male gaze,” which represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. Smith’s depiction of the female body is all visual wit and dark humor incorporating sinister, erotic imagery. Using references to high and low art, Surrealism and Pop art comingle with nods to Walt Disney animation, science-fiction illustration, airbrush art, and video game design.

Sentinel Madonnas (Monument Valley) (2017) features a pair of identical towers topped with dizzying M. C. Escher-like structures, impossible to escape, evoking the Lady’s turret. Their forms also relate to contemporary culture as directed by the subtitle “Monument Valley,” which is a video puzzle game (released 2014), and early fourteenth-century Italian master Giotto’s style of painting of architectural structures. The addition of golden-rayed halos and pouty lips on each post anthropomorphize the doubled objects as simultaneously virtuous and sexy. This duality parallels the contradictory Pre-Raphaelite subjects of female beauty/sexuality and religious moralizing.

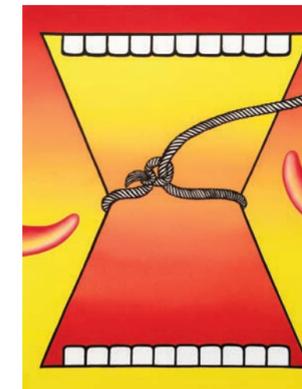
EMILY MAE SMITH, *THE DRAWING ROOM*, 2018
PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI



EMILY MAE SMITH, *THE VALLEY*, 2017
PHOTO: CHARLES BENTON

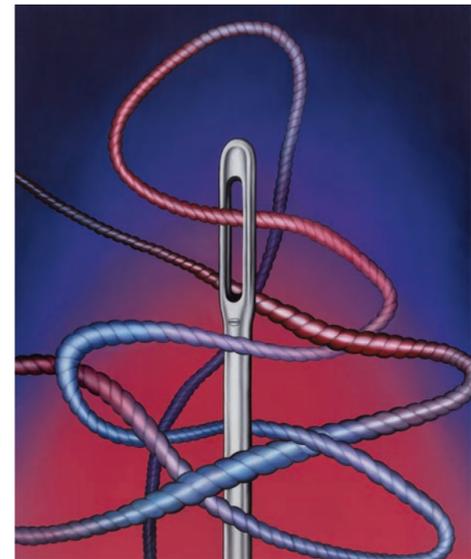


EMILY MAE SMITH, *WAISTED TALENT*, 2015
PHOTO: CHARLES BENTON



Also doubled are the sci-fi moons in the sky of *Viewfinder* (2015). Pink and blue, female and male, they hover in the sky behind Smith’s broom avatar—here, rendered as a simple line drawing—who looks downward through a pair of binoculars from a crenellated tower window. Reminiscent of the Lady’s isolated situation of experiencing the world through a mirror, *Viewfinder* incorporates disparate (but complementary) styles with a surreal René Magritte-like sky, a contour figure, and hyper-realistic brickwork.

Smith regularly combines painting styles or changes style from work to work. She adopts a realist style in *The Drawing Room* (2018), a take on French painter Marie Denise Villers’s *Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d’Ognes* (formerly *Portrait of a Woman Drawing*) (1801) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The painting was long misattributed to Jacques Louis David, which for Smith demanded reclamation for her own feminist purposes. In the Villers painting, the young woman sits in a painting class on the upper floor of the Louvre. Backlit with natural light from a window, she balances her drawing board on her lap and confronts the viewer with her gaze. Smith’s variation is largely faithful, but with a surreal twist by featuring her



objects: a plump red cherry and a glistening, melting ice cube. Here, Smith evokes Dutch vanitas paintings as a reflection on mortality, including the vanity of earthly life and the transience of feminine beauty and sexual appeal.

Smith regularly alludes to female sexuality in explicit terms. *The Valley* (2017) and *Citadel* (2018) feature female breasts as double forms. In *The Valley* they are violet breast-mountain silhouettes topped by a dramatic sky cleaved by a smoking gun that projects threateningly into the viewer's space. As symbols, guns are connected to male power and sexuality. Smith leaves the narrative open to interpretation. Similarly, *Citadel* includes double silos or towers with cold metal exteriors, setting a dark tone to the narrative. Stitched together with a zipper, the machine-like structures' tops become breasts that emit noxious fumes from their nipples. In consideration of the Lady, the works signal her fatal end. In *Waisted Talent* (2015), Smith's signature male mouth portal, lined with Chiclet teeth top and bottom, has been lassoed and cinched into an hourglass figure. The restrained female form, taunted by wagging phallic tongues, resonates with the Lady's story.

In direct dialogue with Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*, Smith created *Brooms with a View* (2019) and *Unruly Thread* (2019). The latter finds a surrogate for the Lady in the form of a needle. Like a painter's brush or Smith's broom, the needle is anthropomorphized with female lips. Set against a background seamlessly gradated from red to blue, the needle's thread menaces, spiraling around the form and threatening to tighten its grip. In *Brooms with a View*, the artist offers an alternative to Hunt's source painting. Hunt's single mirror has been doubled by Smith into windows that become the eyes of a face, and a pile of straw forms lips. The tree-lined river recalls Hunt's landscape. On the left, the figure pulls bristles from her brush, conscious of her undoing. Likewise, on the right, the broom openly contemplates the landscape outside the tower chamber. Contrary to Hunt's picture, personal freedom is embraced.

Singularly imaginative, Smith utilizes eccentric humor and a meticulous hand to convey commentary on relevant issues with an unusual vocabulary of symbols and artistic styles. The artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood are also noted for densely encoded compositions. In Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* she finds a familiar image and perfect source to address the outdated psychology of female oppression, male authority, and implied violence, still pertinent today. At the same time, in Tennyson and Hunt, Smith finds a different connection with the lonely plight of the artist and poet in the eternal search for meaning in life.

PATRICIA HICKSON

The Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

EMILY MAE SMITH

Born 1979, Austin, Texas
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

EDUCATION

- 2006 M.F.A. Visual Art, Columbia University, New York
- 2002 B.F.A. Studio Art, University of Texas at Austin

SOLO AND DUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *MATRIX 181*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
- 2018 *Le Consortium*, Dijon, France
A Strange Relative, Genesis Belanger & Emily Mae Smith, Perrotin, New York, NY
Feast of Totems, Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany
- 2017 *The Sphinx or The Caress*, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY

- The Little Apocrypha*, collaboration Emily Mae Smith & Adam Henry, curated by Samuel Leuenberger and Elise Lammer, SALTS, Birsfelden, Switzerland
- 2016 *Tesla Girls*, Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium
- Honest Espionage*, Mary Mary, Glasgow, UK
- 2015 *Medusa*, Laurel Gitlen, New York, NY
- 2014 *Novelty Court*, Junior Projects, New York, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Engender*, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Pharmacy for Idiots, Rob Tufnell, Cologne, Germany
Women to the Front, Works from the Miller Meigs Collection, Lumber Room, Portland, OR
Le Quatrième Sexe, curated by Marie Maertens, Le Coeur, Paris, France
Scarlet Street, Lucien Terras, New York, NY
- 2016 *Me, Myself, I*, China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles, CA
Surreal, König Galerie (St. Agnes), Berlin, Germany
Untitled Body Parts, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY
- 2015 *Unrealism*, organized by Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian, The Moore Building, Miami, FL
Mrs. Benway, Fourteen, 30 Contemporary, Portland, OR
I Dropped the Lemon Tart, Lisa Cooley, New York, NY
Six Advertisements, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, NY
- 2014 *Parallax Futured: Transtemporal Subjectivities*, Skirball Museum, Cincinnati, OH

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Still Life, 2015
Oil on linen
48 x 37 in.
Private Collection

Viewfinder, 2015
Oil on linen
48 x 37 in.
Collection of Laura Belgray and Steven Eckler

Waisted Talent, 2015
Oil on linen
14 x 11 in.
Collection of Laurel Gitlen

Sentinel Madonnas (Monument Valley), 2017
Oil on linen
47 x 58 in.
Private Collection

The Valley, 2017
Oil on linen
14 x 11 in.
Collection of Diane and Craig Solomon

Citadel, 2018
Oil on linen
38 x 30 in.
Private Collection

The Drawing Room, 2018
Oil on linen
48 x 37 in.
Private Collection

Brooms with a View, 2019
Oil on linen
76 x 110 in.
Courtesy the artist and Simone Subal Gallery, New York

Spitting Image, 2019
Oil on linen
34 x 30 in.
Courtesy the artist and Simone Subal Gallery, New York

Unruly Thread, 2019
Oil on linen
58 x 47 in.
Courtesy the artist and Simone Subal Gallery, New York

All photos courtesy Simone Subal Gallery, New York

ARTIST GALLERY TALK

EMILY MAE SMITH
Thursday, February 7, 6pm
Free with museum admission to *Art After Dark*, 5-8pm

ENCOUNTERS

Emily Mae Smith and #MeToo
Saturday, March 9, 10am
Participate in a moderated discussion exploring the #MeToo movement and the paintings of MATRIX artist Emily Mae Smith. RSVP required. See the website for more information.

CURATOR GALLERY TALK

PATRICIA HICKSON
The Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Thursday, March 21, 12pm
Free with museum admission



600 Main Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
(860) 278-2670

thewadsworth.org

The MATRIX program is generously supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition. Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum provided by Newman's Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.



¹ Emily Mae Smith, quoted in an interview with Charlotte Jansen, *Elephant Magazine*, Issue 26, Spring 2016, p. 66.
² Pre-Raphaelite artists William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais created the woodcut illustrations for the Edward Moxon (publisher) illustrated edition of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Poems in 1857*.
³ See Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr., "Some Notes on Holman Hunt and *The Lady of Shalott*," *Wadsworth Atheneum Bulletin*, Hartford, Summer 1962; pp. 12-13.
⁴ Sharyn R. Udall, "Between Dream and Shadow: William Holman Hunt's *Lady of Shalott*," *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring/Summer 1990; p. 36
⁵ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar quoted in *Ibid*.
⁶ The Medusa head can be seen as part of the floor design in the foreground, between the left and center posts of the loom. The Sphinx form makes up the base of the silver candelabrum/oil lamp in the right foreground.
⁷ This theme is cited in numerous essays and articles. See Udall, p. 37.
⁸ Emily Mae Smith quoted in *Elephant Magazine*, p. 66.

Inaugurated in 1975, MATRIX is the Wadsworth's groundbreaking contemporary art exhibition series featuring works by artists from around the world. Many MATRIX artists, such as Christo, Sol LeWitt, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, and Carrie Mae Weems, are now considered seminal figures in contemporary art.