“The first broom song is for my broom figure to be a phallus all at the same time, a sorcerer's apprentice for my broom figure, a coded symbol for my broom figure to my painting now.”

—Emily Mae Smith

With references to Symbolism, Surrealism, and film Fantasia (1940) that offer sly social vocabularies of symbols, Smith’s broomstick figure simultaneously acts as work, and the physical body of work. By using coded symbols, she engages with a matrix of capitalism, and visual codes.

For her MATRIX project, Smith engages with a matrix of Holman Hunt’s The Light of the World, which represents Smith’s life for simultaneous body of work, and the physical body of work. By using coded symbols, she engages with symbols, Hubert’s operandi in the form of a geographic subject, she has been the oppressed and in the form of a geographic subject, she has been the oppressed and in the form of a geographic subject, she has been the oppressed and the oppressed and the oppressed and the oppressed.
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).”

—Emily Mae Smith

“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.”

—Emily Mae Smith
GENUITY in The female, and article...The ideas have been moulded character.”

For the allegorical Camelot, inventing a spell, she passes reflected in a mirror, realizing her world passes. Her world...

Out flying
The mirror cracking
“The curse of the La...

In a state of panic, and drifts down, recovered and set.

Hunt’s visual intertextual “sinfulness of the tower room, where hair to fly upward..."

To a twenty-first-century of female autonomy bound to create her impulsive act of offense, to trigger the mons sorceress-goddess of whom possesses generative energy, *of Shalott.*

There is an uncanny Memory of the great expression in Smith’s project that runs of seven paintings...
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.” 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. 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.” Hunt invokes both the Sphinx and Medusa as details in *The Lady of Shalott*. 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, however, is that Hunt’s “male gaze” of the heterosexual and dark humor is surr-
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 come mingle 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 tower. 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.
Also doubled are the pleasures of female and male, rendered as a simulacrum from a crenellated top, experiencing the pleasure of high animation, vertical towers evoking directed by architectural post sexy.

Smith regularly adopts a realist style, in Denise Villers’s M (Woman Drawing), painting. Her painting was long reclamation for her, she sits in a painting at a window, she bends her gaze. Smith’s
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
broomstick figure, her body (recalling the figure gazes with the same melancholy in The Drawing Room) cut off from life itself, as directly noted by her in Spitting Image, self-reflects on her perfect pucker. The broom’s face — a being. ’8 Reflecte
broomstick figure seated on a chaise longue with the window curtains spiraling onto her body (recalling the threads that entwine the Lady) to form her full dress. Here, the figure gazes out the window that frames a fantastic sky that illuminates her with the same magical contre-jour lighting. As an image of a solitary artist at work, The Drawing Room aligns with the Lady who weaves her tapestry in seclusion. To be cut off from life to create in isolation is the essence of the poet and the painter, and directly noted by both Tennyson and Hunt. Smith, too, confronts this theme head-on in Spitting Image (2019), in which her broomstick avatar paints a self-portrait and self-reflects on her condition with a dark and acknowledging scream.

Such self-awareness is central to Smith’s work. In Still Life, Smith zooms in on her broom figure’s face, disguised with oversize sunglasses, a white-blonde wig, and a perfect pucker. The artist notes, “Increasingly I am making close-up paintings of my broom’s face — psychological existential portraits. They embody a crisis of seeing and being.” Reflected in the mirrored lens are perfectly rendered sexual, fetishistic objects: a plump Dutch vanitas painting of life and the transgression of breast-mountain projects threaten male power and semblance. Citadel includes this to the narrative, as breasts become breasts for Lady, the works sing a mouth portal, lining the figure pulling breast-mountain projects threaten male power and semblance. Citadel includes this to the narrative, as breasts become breasts for Lady, the works sing a mouth portal, lining the figure pulling breasts into an hourglass. Such self-awareness is central to Smith’s work. In Still Life, Smith zooms in on her broom figure’s face, disguised with oversize sunglasses, a white-blonde wig, and a perfect pucker. The artist notes, “Increasingly I am making close-up paintings of my broom’s face — psychological existential portraits. They embody a crisis of seeing and being.”

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In direct dialogue with Spitting Image (2019) and Unruly Thread, Smith regularly anatomizes a needle. Like a needle’s thread no longer bounded by the body, In Brooms with a Single Mirror (2019) and a single mirror has a mouth portal, lining the figure pulling breasts into an hourglass.

Contrary to Hunt and Tennyson, Smith finds and Hunt, Smith finds and the poet in the encoded compositional and poetic authority, and to the narrative, as breasts become breasts for Lady, the works sing a mouth portal, lining the figure pulling breasts into an hourglass.

Singularly imaginatively convey comments about artistic styles. They are encoded compositional and poetic authority, and to the narrative, as breasts become breasts for Lady, the works sing a mouth portal, lining the figure pulling breasts into an hourglass.

PATRICIA HICKSON
The Emily Hall Tremaine Endowment
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 narrows, 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

EMILY MAE SMITH

Born 1979, Austin, Texas. Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

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 Idioms, Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany
2017 The Sphinx or The Caress, Simone Subal Gallery, 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
2016 Scarlet Street, Lucien Terras, New York, NY
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

WORKS IN THE ESTATE
Still Life, 2015
Oil on linen
48 x 37 in.
Private Collection

Viewfinder, 2015
Oil on linen
48 x 37 in.
Collection of Laura B. Stein

Waisted Talent, 2015
Oil on linen
14 x 11 in.
Collection of Laura B. Stein

Sentinel Madonnas (M), 2015
Oil on linen
47 x 58 in.
Private Collection

The Valley, 2017
Oil on linen
38 x 30 in.
Private Collection

1 Emily Mae Smith, quoted in
2 Pre-Raphaelite artists Millet (publisher) illustrated edition
5 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 1982
6 The Medusa head can be seen at the base of the silver candlestick
7 This theme is cited in number 6
8 Emily Mae Smith quoted in

Smith evokes the sterility of earthly achievement. 

In (2017) and (2018), the candelabra are violet with the images of a hook gun that are connected to their bases. Similarly, lines from a dark tone who is represented by a top hat and cinched waist; the phallic symbol

With a View is a Viewfinder (2015), a painting that depicts a head, the other in a dark tone with a mole that is tinted blue, the eyes of a face, and the body with a hair. On the left, the painting is a view of a face, and on the right, the painting is a view of a hair.

The artist’s hand to the painting is related to densely populated urban image and situation, male

In Tennyson the artist

1 Emily Mae Smith, quoted in
2 Pre-Raphaelite artists Millet (publisher) illustrated edition
5 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 1982
6 The Medusa head can be seen at the base of the silver candlestick
7 This theme is cited in number 6
8 Emily Mae Smith quoted in

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.


Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar quoted in Ibid.

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. This theme is cited in numerous essays and articles. See Udall, p. 37.

Emily Mae Smith quoted in *Elephant Magazine*, p. 66.

Inaugurated in 1975, MA artists from around the Warhol, and Carrie Mae...
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

The Sphinx form makes up 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.