

IBID PROJECTS

Anj Smith

States of Fragility

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For her third solo exhibition at IBID PROJECTS, Anj Smith will present a series of eight new paintings to be shown for the first time.

Each work is located between representations of portrait, landscape and still life painting, often encompassing or rejecting elements of all three. This collapsing of simultaneous ideas and phenomena is intrinsic to these paintings, where narratives are as complex and layered as the application of paint and where objects disintegrate into chaotic rubble or reconfigure to acquire brand new and bewildering meanings. Differing states of time, place and different psychological spaces overlap in these works, as do the types of painting, with luminous jewel-toned colour banks as likely to exist against crude slabs of impasto, scratched barren areas or zones of almost pornographic attention to the minute. Smith has said: "There's definitely no literal or singular narrative in any of the paintings. I think of them as having multiple 'narratives' existing on top of each other. In terms of the physical paint, much of the detailed areas are so intricate that layers of painting only emerge on very close inspection. The specificity of the minutiae is entirely invisible to the casual viewer, adding to the intensity of the scale. So you can experience different paintings depending on proximity, echoing the multiple narratives of the piece."

There's something about this constantly roving instability that resonates with Smith's depiction of increasingly fragile realities. Parallel portals of time and space co-existing on the same plane, seem to relate to juxtaposed contexts experienced on the same register. Smith cites being lent a book on the quincunx of heaven and noticing how the exact geometry appeared elsewhere in unrelated images: "...on a photocopy lying in my studio, the shapes described were examples of Platonic form theory, basic blocks of the universe. Next to it, in a book on Renaissance altarpieces, the same shapes had symbolic significance as mystical expressions of divinity. In a postcard of Robert Morris's 1965 installation, the shapes again seemed pure modernist machismo. A Top Shop vest hanging in the corner of my studio had the same shapes again." Forces of gravity and perspective are similarly unreliable, and time fragmented, appearing simultaneously retroactive and futuristic, with crumbling mosaics and fossilised remains of past epochs coexisting with current trends as they decay into base-matter.

Smith has always been fascinated by the changing currency of visual syntax and its constant evolution, whether it be from the half-forgotten codes of seventeenth century Dutch vanitas painting or the quest for the new in haute couture and the street. She describes this evolutionary march as having broad implications, with the "littering of half-lives of meaning that the process leaves in its wake" as analogous to a contemporary anxiety, a sense of fragility, where nothing is fixed or stable. In the Dürer-like 'R.F.', even gender boundaries have slipped their physical moorings, the subject still waiting to complete re-assignment surgery and experiencing an alienating suspension of physical identity. This is the second painting Smith has made of her close friend, which appears layered with aspects of self-portraiture and questions about authenticity. Weaving

jersey and tulle with dried grasses, McQueen's sarcastic 'Romantic Nationalist' silks and nostalgic vintage lace, with amateur embroidery and tattooed stockings, the ensemble emerges as intricate yet coherent armour for protection and display.

In 'Attempts At Conversation', representations of the banal and idiotic, such as a cartoon bomb or gemstone, jostle for attention amongst more ominous detritus, left by a long-gone presence suggested only from these traces. A giant pizza slice or spliced apple-and-CND monogram are piled perilously high in a construction so intricately established that it seems the least threat would instantly dislodge the whole arrangement. Despite the dry humour, there is a touch of Blakean horror about these unstable worlds - basic geometrical shapes have mutated far from their intentions to quantify and systematize, and caricatured clichés of fruit or weather are similarly isolated from origins of natural phenomena. Smith is as likely to cite Richard Dadd as an influence as the more expected Cranach or Breugel and there is often an unsettling intensity in the work, despite the high seduction. Yet any bleakness is eroded by the lavish excess, not just of the hysterical logic played out in many of the works, but also in the ambition of the painting: the intensity of the minutiae, the layers of underpainting that exist unseen and the process of making itself, typically taking months to complete, despite their intimate scale. These are very much paintings of now. "I see my work as partly being a comment upon the delight and materiality of painting as well as the limits of being an artist in general", Smith has written. "I try to convey the clumsy pointlessness of painting as a means of representation and the impossibility of transcendence whilst making an object that contradicts both these things." These opposing forces cement the disturbing entropy at the heart of the work, resonating with Smith's depictions of fragile and alienated identity in a contemporary climate of existential anxiety.

Anj Smith (Kent, 1978) graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London, in 2002 and received her MA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London, in 2005. Recent solo shows include 'Geometry of Bliss', Hauser & Wirth, New York and 'Paintings', Nyehaus, New York. Recent group shows include 'Night Scented Stock', Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 'Among Flesh', Alison Jacques Gallery, London, 'Group Show', IBID PROJECTS, London and 'House of Beasts', Meadow Arts, Shropshire, UK.

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