

Anj Smith

A Willow Grows Aslant the Brook

18 May — 5 September 2021



Exhibition guide

The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present a major solo exhibition by renowned British painter Anj Smith. The exhibition comprises new and recent works, many of which can be seen for the first time in Walsall. Featuring paintings and prints, this is the largest presentation of the artist's work in a UK public gallery to date and offers a rare opportunity to view a significant body of work together.

Rich in detail, colour and texture, Anj Smith's work is conceptually rigorous in its interrogation of the world around us. Drawing together source material ranging from designer fabrics and jewellery to the natural world, from the histories of art and literature to popular culture, every detail is carefully selected and positioned to create multiple, fragmented and complex narratives. These multi-layered and seductive works draw us in and slow us down, offering respite from the frenetic pace at which we tend to consume information. Ambiguity and instability are as significant in these paintings as the handling of the paint.

The title of the exhibition references Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and specifically Queen Gertrude's eloquent description of the site of Ophelia's retreat and eventual death;

*There is a willow grows aslant the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples...*

Despite being silent or off-stage for much of the play, Ophelia's agency is crucial. The allure of the language she is given suggests her role is far more significant than any romanticised depiction of mental deterioration or 'female hysteria'. For the artist, she has come to epitomise a kind of silencing. In her foiled attempts to be heard and in her fragmentary, stitched-together language, Smith sees a question: If languages are shaped by the cultures from which they evolve, how do you communicate if your experiences are not valued within that?

Contrasting powerfully, the brook represents a linear narrative, narrow and shallow and incapable of power or depth, whilst the willow, huge in scale with shifting foliage, is unpredictable, having the capacity to change direction. The willow, intersecting the brook obliquely, suggests a rejection of unthinking convention, ascribing importance instead to the consideration of counter-narratives.

A more nuanced interpretation of Ophelia combined with autobiographical elements became the catalyst for the painting *False Steward* (2019-20). Seen from the back, the



Anj Smith, *Flowerings of the Chocolate Cosmos*, 2020, oil on linen, 23.5 x 27.5 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne. © Anj Smith.

figure appears isolated and potentially vulnerable. Like many of Smith's paintings, this work is replete with details that elaborate and extend her complex and conceptual narratives. Here, peonies, tulips and roses embellish her Dior, Valentino and La Perla ensemble. Diamond shapes echo the Harlequin, an unreliable character from the *Commedia dell'arte*, who, by tapping his stick, controls the presentation of the narrative. Who is the False Steward? This unsettling note is echoed in the bleached-out harlequin beetles which nestle within the folds of her clothing.

Also represented are Snakeroot, heart-shaped Water Hemlock and Wolf's Bane, all deadly poisonous plants. A Versace hairpin celebrates Medusa, who, far from being passive, had the ability to turn the viewer to stone by returning their gaze. A Suzanne Belperron *Bleeding Heart* jewel is worn as a trophy, suggesting survival and restoration.

Painted during the first lockdown, *Flowerings of the Chocolate Cosmos* (2020) encapsulates some of the mental terrain experienced by the artist during the pandemic. A South American plant with luxurious, velvety petals that range from a deep bloodlike red to lighter pinks, the Chocolate Cosmos exudes a powerful, chocolatey scent, suggesting sensual pleasure, tactility and delight. Although the plant here is semi-trapped beneath sheets of ice, it remains very much alive, travelling across most of the surface, one of its branches even extending beyond the edge of the frame. A variety of other details come into play within the work – amongst them, a liqueur glass with spilled crystallised violet petals hint at a different order, before the freeze. In one sense, this painting rejects the still life genre where nature has been dominated and tamed. Instead, the portrayal of the surviving plant suggests an opportunity to refresh thinking and to rebuild differently. As a portrait of psychological states, the work becomes a testament to the irrepressible creativity that can accompany fear and uncertainty. Bearing witness to a particular moment in history, the vibrant petals evoke the power of hope and human resilience in extreme circumstances.

The Lover (2020) is one of the most recent works in the exhibition to be completed by the artist. Ambiguously gendered, this double self-portrait is a first for Smith, and also contains strong elements of autobiography. Like many of us during lockdown, the artist felt herself retreating into an interior world, where the lure of pathological thinking felt hard to resist. Luscious colour, intriguing delicacy and the sensual qualities of details such as pearls, all speak of this seduction.

Though psychologically dark in one sense, there are accents of hope. Underground orchids emerge from the excrement of burrowing animals. Again, things are not what they might seem at a glance. Lethal-looking pincers on closer inspection reveal a pseudoscorpion - a harmless arachnid - shown inside her moon-shaped cocoon, a retreat built when under threat. Only



Anj Smith, *The Lover*, 2020, oil on linen, 61 x 78.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne. © Anj Smith.

emerging when conditions are more viable for survival, this and her uncanny mimicry, signify tenacious ingenuity despite her inherent vulnerability.

An earlier painting, *Rhinoceros* (2016) refers to Clara, a famous rhinoceros displayed in European capitals in 1749. Thick and seemingly impenetrable in places, the rhino's hide is alluded to in the leathery folds of the biker jacket, here worn over the head. In contrast, the stitched-together chemise suggests a softness and vulnerability. Twisted up on top of the head, the 'horn' references both the exaggerated Parisian trend of "hair à la rhinoceros" of the time, but also the way long hair can be tied back to remove make-up. Addressing the 'performance' of gender and also its opposite - a 'given' state, the work also celebrates painting as an art that can embrace complexity, holding both of these conversations simultaneously. White drapers pins reflect fashion's process of construction, the blurring of fantasy with reality. It also ties in with the Iron Maiden badge, which operates not just as a cultural



Anj Smith, *Rhinoceros*, 2016, oil on linen, 38.3 x 30.4 x 2.2 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne. © Anj Smith.

reference to the metal band but also the medieval method of torture from which the band derived its name. Within these sliding references, this tiny portrait speaks eloquently of the anxiety many feel when doubting their appearance or capability.

S.O.S. (2016-7) is characteristic of the artist's *Museum Paintings*, created from 2015. Following an implied catastrophe, an unknown protagonist has curated a series of objects as trophies or relics. The wide range of objects collected here include a Lalique Martini glass, a fragment of Roman pottery, a Cartier

Panthere ring, a shark's tooth with heart-and-arrow scrimshaw, dark green sequins, a blueberry, a gooseberry and a shell from the Kent coast.

This series has evolved into new works such as *Landscape with Deep Void* (2020). Relics here include Birds of Paradise, a Suzanne Belperron shell, a set square with its numbers worn away, a swizzle stick, jelly beans, a lipstick and a call for help written in Morse code with toothpaste. Characteristically gathered together as part of a structure which appears damaged, unstable and vulnerable, the paint handling also indicates that these are affirmed as treasures, in the meticulous rendering of detail.

Painting provides a platform where time, space and perspective can be shifting and unstable. Within this malleable construct, Smith is endlessly inventive and creative, bringing together diverse and disparate objects and environments. The familiar and the unfamiliar, the contemporary and the archaic, all interweave to create intense and often psychologically charged works, exploring themes and ideas around identity, mortality, anxiety and desire.

Deborah Robinson

Head of Exhibitions

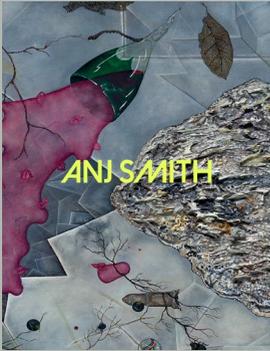


Anj Smith, *Landscape with Deep Void*, 2020, oil on linen, 67,5 x 107,5 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne. © Anj Smith.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication with essays by Joost Joustra and Zoé Whitley. It is available in the Gallery Shop at a special exhibition price of £20. (usual price, £25).

To order your copy, please contact:
info@thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk



Biography

Anj Smith is one of the UK's leading contemporary artists. Born in 1978 in Kent, England, she studied at Slade School of Fine Art and at Goldsmiths College in London. Smith has exhibited internationally at museums and galleries such as Mostyn, Llandudno, Wales; Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland; Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany; Fondazione Stelline, Milan, Italy; Museum Arnhem, Arnhem, Netherlands; The Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK; Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville TN; Hudson Valley Centre for Contemporary Art, Peekskill NY; Galerie Isa, Mumbai, India; La Maison Rouge, Paris, France, and Me Collector's Room, Berlin, Germany.

Smith's work is also displayed in the collections of many leading international museums and collections including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK; MOCA The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA; DRAF David Roberts Art Foundation, London, UK and the Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland.

EVENTS

In Conversation

Tuesday 25 May, 5pm (Zoom)
Anj Smith with Zoé Whitley

Live Performance

Saturday 10 July, 2pm and 3.30pm
A live performance created in response to the exhibition by actor and performance artist Keziah Joseph

In Conversation

Thursday 2 September, 5.30 for 6pm
Anj Smith with Joost Joustra

Please visit our website and social media channels for further resources and booking details.

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