

PRESS RELEASE

March 2021

The New
Art Gallery
Walsall

Anj Smith

A Willow Grows Aslant the Brook

The New Art Gallery Walsall

18 May - 5 September 2021

Anj Smith's exhibition should have opened in January this year. The exhibition has now been scheduled to open on 18 May (subject to government guidelines) and will be extended until 5 September.



Anj Smith, *False Steward*, 2019-20, oil on linen, 63.4 x 56.3 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne.

The New Art Gallery Walsall presents 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, each 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 seductively complex paintings draw us in, offering a respite from the fast-paced nature of consumption culture, whilst throwing challenges our way.

The title of the exhibition references Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and specifically Queen Gertrude's eloquent description of the landscape 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. For the artist, she has come to epitomise a type of silencing, in her thwarted attempts to be heard. 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, suggests the importance of counter-narratives.

Combining autobiographical elements with a more nuanced interpretation of Ophelia became the catalyst for the painting *False Steward* (2019-20). Seen from the back, the 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 accoutrements, firmly rooting the figure in a contemporary sensibility. Unsettling notes are sounded in the bleached-out harlequin beetles which nestle within the folds of her clothing. Diamond shapes echo the Harlequin from the *Commedia dell'arte*; an unreliable figure who, by tapping his stick, controls the presentation of the narrative. Also represented in the work 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. Here, the figure's 'Bleeding Heart' is realised as a Suzanne Belperron jewel, worn as a trophy, suggesting survival and restoration.



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

Painted during 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 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 extending far 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 that hint at a different time, 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 of liberation from calcified thinking and a chance 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.

Painting provides a platform where time, space, gravity 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.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication with essays by Dr Joost Joustra and Dr Zoé Whitley. It is designed by Studio Ard.

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Note to Editors:

Biography

Anj Smith is one of the UK's leading contemporary artists. Born in 1978 in Kent, England, Smith 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, the 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.

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Gallery opening times: Temporarily closed



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