

GRIME

CLEAN

The writer and academic James Sey once observed that death has occupied Kathryn Smith's extensive artistic, curatorial and critical oeuvre for several years now. It is a fact that has also informed her self-confessed 'forensic method' of producing art, a method that recreates narrative and history (both public and secret) by sifting through the debris, fragments and potentially risky spaces of a city and its suburbs.

"Forensic modes of art lead us to consider the residue of a surrounding historical field," the Los Angeles-based art critic Ralph Rugoff once wrote. "It is an art of scattered and ambiguous clues, in which information seems to be straightforwardly presented but we are nevertheless denied the whole story." The forensic aesthetic, Rugoff went on to announce, forms part of a significant shift in the history of the relationship between viewer and artwork.

Working in film, video or photography, Kathryn Smith's work is illustrative of this shift. Instead of presenting linear narratives she offers viewers glimpses of what happens in freeze frame, revealing the invisible actions and expressions that haunt a moving image when frozen. Expanded upon, her method evidences an attempt to reveal how images, taken out of context, start to tell other more sinister stories. "It's about latent information and coded access," she has said.

For CLEAN the artist has produced a work composed entirely from borrowed materials, stills stolen from filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and *Dial M for Murder*. Fragments of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* were also

used. The work is an attempt to bleach out the simultaneously hot and insipid Technicolor tones associated with these films, "to see if they could begin to approach a film noir treatment." As she observes: "They don't, of course. They've become quite beautiful but rather impotent albinos of their former selves. Old films, shot in Technicolor, look quite mad – strangely colourless despite their colour." As the artist clarifies: "I was interested in interrogating the emotional spaces 'behind' the colour".

'*The Forensic Qualities of Sleep*', the work presented on CLEAN, forms part of 'A.D.A.S.T.W.', an ongoing project that derives its designation from an informal police-forensic acronym 'arrived dead and stayed that way'. The artist has commented that the films, or isolated scenes from films, were chosen specifically for "their relationship with photography, art, the cinematic gaze, death, investigation and interpersonal relationships based on conflict, desire and trauma."

"I have tried to work with still and moving images such that they begin to behave like the body, so that they twitch, breathe, jerk, 'sweat' and 'bleed'. I try to work with the secret histories and unspoken desires that exist between the private and the public. Issues of transgression and license are primary areas of interrogation, focusing on the threat of danger and its association with the erotic."

Not one to miss the latent humour in the materials she plunders from, the artist asserts: "Hitchcock made my day when he commented that suspense is not a fear but a dilated wait."

kathryn smith





THE FORENSIC QUALITIES OF SLEEP  
 DIGITAL ENCAD PRINT  
 HINGED, 2120 X 5650 CM [FRAME INCLUDED]

DETAIL



CLEAN

GRIME

### How have you dealt with the formal restrictions of the exhibition?

My participation in CLEAN and GRIME is not without certain ambivalence about the curatorial imperative to formal concerns where the obvious conceptual issues are avoided. Then again, how can CLEAN or GRIME, both of which come with a full and matching set of Louis Vuitton psychoanalytic baggage, allude to anything other than metaphorical or conceptual concerns? So it's a neat and cunning trick. Very nice.

### How have you specifically chosen to tackle the brief?

I was thinking about a range of things, but mostly that it was important to make a connection between the work for CLEAN and new work for GRIME. And that it was important that new work be made for both shows. For CLEAN, I desaturated stills from Technicolor thriller/suspense/murder films. For GRIME, the source has been a novel called *A Seductive Offer* written by Kathryn Smith. The cover depicts an embracing couple in a field, cleavage and chest flirting – the works. I initially thought real-life models must have been given a painterly filter on the old graphics software package, but it turns out an artist called Diane Sivavec did the illustration by hand. Pink embossed text declares title and author and there's the suitably hyperbolic commentary from reliable literary sources endorsing its merit. It was published by Avon Historical Romance.

### Where did you find the book?

I picked it up in the airport bookshop during a pre-flight browse. I was on my way to Austria on a residency. When I saw my name on the spine, my stomach churned. My first thought on giving the book the once-over was: "Christ, I hope no one I know has seen this here and thought I wrote this filth." But then I thought: "How very appropriate". I bought the book and read it cover to cover. I think I even enjoyed it.

### How did you develop the work from there?

Initially, whilst in Austria, the cover became a mural-sized white-on-white painting in oils on the wall of the gallery. It simulated the act of painting rather than being a painting itself. For GRIME I have literally turned the book on its head by reworking selected text into an opposite kind of narrative from the original one. This new scenario is generated in scrolling text on an LED screen. The narrative seems to conclude itself, or rather, the female character appears to resolve something, but it loops back on itself in endless repetition. The saccharine cover illustration is now a series of extreme close-up black and white photographs. This

process had the desired effect of picking up invisible scratches and flaws on the book cover, providing the perfect patina of violence. The piece behaves almost like a thought bubble. I have since contacted the author, who I like to think of as my body double – or rather, the Mr Hyde to my Dr Jekyll – and we're in communication.

### What was Kathryn Smith's response to your request to investigate her work, to scrutinise authorship, personal histories and identity?

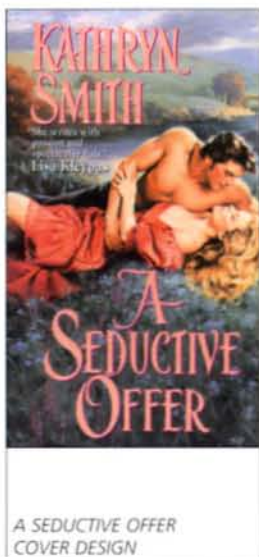
It's more about using a namesake's work as a reflective device for these issues. When I admitted to her that I am not a die-hard fan of romance novels, but had used her book as 'raw material' for a new piece, she jokingly asked whether I'd ripped up the book. I assured her not physically. I love soap opera, and the two genres make cosy bedfellows. She's admitted intrigue, wants to keep in touch and has extended an invitation to use her material in future. All signs point to in-depth discussions around the suspension of disbelief.

### How does this work fit into the rest of your output to date?

I am primarily interested in seriality, of both narrative and compulsion, and authorship in terms of text and language, the cult of personality and creativity. In my work generally I take quite a forensic look at photography, video/ film and representation, cutting it up, re-editing it and creating new stories that emerge from the existing footage, almost as if they were always there as subtexts, but now take on a more sinister/ambiguous edge. I have applied the same process to the work on GRIME. I am really interested in the ambiguous nature of the cinematic still, especially when a passionate embrace begins to look like an assault and the close focus on a face in a love scene (head thrown back etc.) seems to imply something entirely more violent. So it's about revealing the close connections between violence, intimacy and desire – when 'normal' interactions are subverted to satisfy 'pathological' desire.

### Manipulation of photographic images is as old as photography itself. How have you developed on an established tradition of recontextualising imagery?

It's not so much about manipulating the photographic image as it is drawing out 'narratives in denial' across all kinds of texts, whether they are images, words or motion pictures. I am seduced by the potential underbelly of any text – whether a glossy, refined exterior is masking an abject inner core, or whether a violent, 'abnormal' action is spurred on by something far more fundamental and normal.





"THERE WAS NOWHERE TO GO; THE SMALL OF HER BACK WAS PRESSED UP AGAINST A WRITING DESK." (WITH APOLOGIES TO KATHRYN SMITH)  
LED SIGN & LAMBDA PRINTS  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

...plunged her reason to run