

EUPHEMISM



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Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year 2004

2004

Monument Gallery, Grahamstown
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum, Port Elizabeth
Durban Art Gallery, Durban

2005

Johannes Stegmann Gallery, Bloemfontein
South African National Gallery, Cape Town
Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

DEAD CERTAINTIES:

The Art of Kathryn Smith



“The trick is to find the trace.”¹

Criminologist Edmund Locard's (1877 – 1966) exchange principle states that 'every contact leaves a trace'. This is a cornerstone of forensic investigation. Time corrodes and extinguishes such traces. Much of Kathryn Smith's work seeks to capture such traces, and, indirectly the circumstances and woundings that produce them, even and perhaps especially when both have disappeared. Or, in a more sinister way, suspected to be present but absent in our familiar systems of technology or knowledge. Indeed, her interest, and ours, intensifies when faced with the scene empty of the act, object or person which attracted us in the first place.

The old phrase 'morbid fascination' speaks to what Smith calls the "close connection between violence, intimacy and desire – when 'normal' interactions are subverted 'pathological' desire".² She concerns herself with the debris of death, its violence, its pain and its peace.³ In 'Words Misunderstood' Milan Kundera has his Sabina say "there are things that can be accomplished only by violence. Physical love is unthinkable without violence".

In her notebook Smith includes a comment by Theodor Adorno; "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime" and makes this link – or its inversion – explicit in the draft proposal for her performance *Jack in Johannesburg*;

This public performance continues existing research into the relationship between art and criminal practice. *Jack in Johannesburg* takes its cue from the resurrected theory that celebrated British painter Walter Sickert was implicated in, if not solely responsible for, the murders attributed to Jack the Ripper that took place in Victorian England, and possibly, further afield. The Ripper himself allegedly claimed to have 'given birth to the twentieth century'; in other words, modernity as we know it. The Ripper is also the model for the modern serial or 'signature' killer, driven by intense visual fantasies, desire and process.⁴

There is a lighter side to this connection. A very recent video work titled *Get the Picture: phase one* (2004) is ironical and humorous and focuses on the theft of a Walter Sickert

Euphemisms are great things – how to lie well, a way to soften the blow. They also seem to function as a kind of dumb allegory – dumb in the sense that they don't quite know/can't know how to speak as eloquently as allegories can. Does this

make them an appropriate means of response to the blunt-force trauma of contemporary society? In other times, artists came up with symbolic/

referential systems to process difficult or metaphysically perplexing issues. I'm seldom satisfied with the reportage/auto-documentary-style of much



painting of a view of the Royal Hotel in Dieppe, France. The work was stolen from the South African National Gallery in 1998. Smith's video is loosely 'documentary' and structured by an ongoing series of minimally edited 'talking head' interviews with anyone who knows anything about the theft. For Smith, this work reveals things about memory and truth, and "the idea of 'testimonial'; of how supposedly objective accounts get shored up with anecdotal and sometimes quite revealing personal agendas. And then one must ask if one is left with anything of value at all?"⁵

The aesthetic atmosphere of this assembly of ideas drives all her work. In her serial *Psychogeographies: The Washing Away of Wrongs* (2003-2004)⁶, she examines, amongst other things, the evacuated spaces left by British serial killer Dennis Nilsen, of whom Smith speaks with some empathy.⁷ In one instance the place designated is the moody Gladstone Park, where Nilsen walked his dog 'Bleep'.⁸ According to the killer, 'Bleep' possessed the "great redeeming feature... she was not formed in my image".⁹ In another work – negative frame thirteen – light leaks inadvertently into the pictorial field; an eerie, alien illumination tinges and interrupts an otherwise banal image of three green refuse bags and a path.

contemporary art dealing with identity, placelessness, indigency, transience. Form's relationship to content is one thing, but this stuff can get so dead-boring. I have always tried to downplay, if not outright deny the relationship of my work to some 'usual suspect' issues – identity, history, memory, body politics. But if you live in the world,



there's no denying their place in the mix. Biography is where things have started getting interesting for me – a weird kind of biography that is a deliberate mix of reality and artifice, of

Another work, of the front door of one of the houses in which Nilsen stayed, is shaky, suggesting some haste and anxiety suffered by the photographer. All the photographs in the series are accompanied by handwritten notes by Smith recounting the tracking process. These look like a sort of school project; or is it punishment, or atonement by proxy? Nilsen considered himself “a professionally perfect person”, and was diagnosed as suffering a ‘false self syndrome’.¹⁰ This touches on ideas of doubleness and duplicity in a sense invoking ideas of fraud, surrogacy and similar ideas around duplicity – which, as we see later, is another leitmotif of Smith’s work.

More to the point here is perhaps the vexing relation between art, violence and death. Writing of serial killers, Anna Gekowski points to a familiar link between art and death; for example, William Blake’s Lucifer is “associated with energy and the pleasures of the flesh, with the creative power latent in that which is hidden or repressed: with Art. And this suggests complex relations between darkness and light, death and life, murder and sexuality”.¹¹ In her early *Still Lives* (1997), Smith explores such relations in an uncanny alignment of police photographs of dead victims and her living body. Slides were projected

artistry and art history, of returning to paintings or styles of visual representation that have made certain memories for me (or are they fantasies of memories I wish I had?) 17th century Dutch painting, European romanticism, the British Pre-Raphaelites. In contemporary South Africa, these are not innocent areas to be exploring. But for me it’s about another kind of colonising – of someone’s else’s language and symbolic system, to steal,

bastardise and make it my own. Regardless of what we like to think, this stuff is popularly, irrefutably recognised as art of the highest order –



onto her skin and she composed herself to conform to the 'found' disposition of the dead body documented in the forensic photograph. The entire scene was then re-shot, the forms and contours of her living body-as-screen altered and disfigured by the lights and darks of the projection. In these works cast shadows become scars, unhealed wounds; facial bruises and lacerations mingle with cosmetic manipulation in a forensic version of a mortifying sexuality; a kind of extended 'Death and the Maiden' trope. Is this a variant of Edgar Allen Poe's infamous formulation that the death of a beautiful woman is the most "poetical topic in the world"?¹² There is also a very real sense of flaying skin in these images, suggesting not so much passive vision but vision that penetrates and cuts into the visual field; what Claude Gandelman calls "haptics in extremis".¹³ Smith herself speaks of "transgression and license" as being primary for her, "focusing on the threat of danger and its association with the erotic".¹⁴

In her Carravagesque *Memento Mori* (2004) Smith turns the tables by imaging herself made up as death. Caravaggio's (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571 – 1610)) pictorial practice and indeed his life were stained by sexual and mortal instabilities.

sentimental, nostalgic, gothic in its melodrama it may be, but it communicates. In trying to find a kinder way to deliver some pretty difficult thoughts, these traditional systems are so much about coded languages and secret histories that they seem perfect. Like taking photographs in Latin. Reading Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, one character is described as being in a state of "advanced disbelief". The disbelief in question was not run-of-the-mill; it was well-developed, matured. This appeals to me.



The artist was mercurial, quarrelsome, antisocial, violent and murdered one Ranuccio Tomassoni in 1606, for which he was sentenced to death (*in absentia*). His later work especially is a high-temperature meditation on violence, sacrifice and martyrdom. In *Memento Mori*, Smith references Caravaggio's *Self-Portrait as Ill Bacchus* (c. 1593 – 1594), where grapes feature prominently in a diseased Dionysian imaginary which creates a link to Jack the Ripper. The Whitechapel killer was reputed to have lured his victims to their awful deaths with poisoned grapes.¹⁵

Smith also references the *vanitas* tradition of Western painting. *Vanitas* is a tradition of still-life painting in mainly seventeenth-century Holland and Spain which cautions viewers about the corruption and transience of earthly delights, worldly pleasures, power and vain-glory. The tradition's source is biblical, from the pessimistic Ecclesiastes 1:2; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. Some grand *vanitas* works – for example, the Andalusian painter Juan de Valdés Leal (1622 – 1690) – show decaying, maggot infested corpses, skeletons and much else besides in a *paean* to us knowing our (final) place in God's world. In *Memento Mori* Smith simulates a dead body in bits, close-up – hands, face, legs, upper torso – viewed

Watching a documentary on television one night (*The Roots of Evil* I think it was called), a learned-looking professorial type commented (I'm paraphrasing) that the job of culture is to contain certain narratives of 'evil', which to his mind includes private enterprises like serial or signature murder, and more public or political evils like genocide. When one can't sublimate these

'narratives of evil' in images, symbols or any other creative form, one acts them out on other bodies. Evil, he noted, is determined by which 'projects' you choose to join.



through the aesthetic lens of crime scenography. These works are darkly contrasted, replete with a burnished, golden light and heavy chiaroscuro. The pictured figure's skin puckers under the weight of the hand-fashioned flies and maggots, which are actually cast in bronze. Flies and maggots are of course agents of decomposition; ironically here they are inanimate, while the body upon which they feed is living, albeit pale and wan.

Photography – the camera is the quintessential prosthetic eye – is Smith's preferred medium. A photograph is itself dead and death-defying in trying to hold captive lost traces, people, objects, events and environments. Grabbed stills from already shot movie-scenes offer this deadliness and something more. As Sean O'Toole puts it, Smith "offers viewers glimpses of what happens in freeze frame, revealing the invisible actions and expressions that haunt a moving image when frozen".¹⁶ The photographic image is almost not a form of direct contact, but a spatially distant, light-induced trace; here metonymy becomes almost metaphysical.¹⁷ One also recalls Roland Barthes's equation of the photograph with death, and the observation that for Barthes "the only images that belong to one's own history become a 'wound' ".¹⁸ Rather perversely, Smith speaks of trying to work with "images such

So you read my mind?

Did you see how red my mind is?

In the early 1980's, convicted sadist and murderer

Joseph Kallinger ('The Shoemaker') wrote a rather

melodramatic poem in prison called *The Unicorn*

in the Garden. He was supplied with contraband

paper and pencil stubs by a lady friend who would



visit him. The poem is an indictment against the

perceived stifling of his creative drive by his

(adoptive) parents, who he claims forced him to

give up his hopes of becoming an actor in order to

that they begin to behave like the body, so that they twitch, breath, jerk, 'sweat' and 'bleed' ". Such imagined 'behaviour' is threatening, as the usually contained image seeps into and contaminates the world of the viewer. The skin of the photograph is porous.

In a provocative psychoanalytic study of art, Parveen Adams (2003) argues suggestively of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin that "Witkin constructs an ego by making marks and makes himself into a picture. The skin of Witkin's pictures is at the same time the skin of Witkin's body".¹⁹ The subject of Smith's Master of Fine Arts research dissertation was "Limits of Excess: Abjection in the Photographic Work of Joel-Peter Witkin", and her Master's exhibition 'Lifetime Guarantee' (1999) drew extensively on this research.

Body, site, event are, in Smith's work, haunted by links that always seem on the verge of decomposition, the relentless decay of all sensate presence. We can imagine here a loved (or loathed) body purged of life; life lost in sleep, or death, inert, fully empty, as she engages in her *The Forensic Qualities of Sleep* (2001). This work is comprised entirely of stills from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), recast rather fitfully as film noir. For *The Forensic Qualities of Sleep*,

work for the family business (his father was a cobbler). The unicorn was his metaphor for his desire, and perhaps his 'true path'.

There is a strange, yet probably trivial, synchronicity between Kallinger's poem, the unicorns and ponies aphorism courtesy of the FBI investigator and the general mythology surrounding unicorns, that involves a latent



the selected film stills were “bleached... of their colour almost to the point of erasure, a kind of inversion of film noir to film blanc?”, and an arguable reference to the more symbolically loaded terrain of whiteness and blackness. This work was produced for the exhibition ‘Clean’ (2001) held in Johannesburg, to partner her *There Was Nowhere to Go: The Small of Her Back was Pressed up Against a Writing Desk* (2002) work on ‘Grime’ (2002), held in Cape Town. Both exhibitions were curated by Retha Erasmus.



Smith stalks such moral, mortal, muddy terrain searching for ‘narratives in denial’ and moments of inversion “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”.²⁰ It would, of course, for many of us be debasing, even a profound insult, to think of a crime scene or body dump-site as a kind of imaginative creation, worse a site-specific installation, but the parallels are there. We struggle here with the contending forces of desire and duty, and perhaps in some way murderers are failed artists; or is it that artists are failed murderers?²¹ Here the usual sublimations, repressions, displacements and fears – the things we might pour into art to protect us from what we really desire – do not

eroticism (the unicorn – also said to represent

Christ – is said to be a violent, aggressive animal,

which can only be tamed by a female virgin, in

whose lap the animal rests his horned head) and

something

the ability to ward off death. The unicorn’s horn, it

is said, is an antidote to poison. Interestingly, the

narwhal, whose disembodied, washed-up tusks

were held as evidence of the unicorn’s existence,

or is it that is also referred to as ‘corpse whale’. But that’s

enough National Geographic for now.

