



GRAHAMSTOWN

/KATHRYN SMITH

MONUMENT GALLERY | GRAHAMSTOWN

left Kathryn Smith, *Episodes: The Hour Has Come, But Not the Man*, 2004, paired lambda prints on Kodak Metallic paper, 60 x 80cm each
right Kathryn Smith, *Memento Mori #11*, 2004, series of lambda prints on Kodak Metallic paper, 64 x 80cm

In the nineteenth century, death became aestheticised in uniquely modern ways, which, nonetheless, are not very far from older forms of the public display of torture, pain and violent demise. An amazing photograph from the famous Burns archive of historical medical photography shows a formal and highly symmetrical view of the observation area of the Paris morgue from 1883. The laconic commentary on the picture tells us: "At the Paris morgue, an area for the display of bodies was a public attraction; on Sunday the public could view the remains of the unidentified dead of the week. This viewing did have the official purpose of helping the coroner identify the remains. Over the years, the manner of presentation changed; in the 1880s the bodies were divested of their clothes, which were displayed on mannequins."

The Paris public thus demonstrated an early prurience and fascination for the human detritus of the modern urban condition. This fascination, as well as a tight relay between death, forensics and the new technology of vision – photography – was formalised in 1882 by the adoption by the identification bureau of the Paris police of a forensic identification system for dead bodies devised by Dr. Alphonse Bertillon. This system, a world-first known as Bertillonage, was extended to include crime-scene photography in the 1890s, which was almost immediately used as evidence at criminal trials.

At the same time as these technical innovations, which were designed to deduce knowledge of criminality and motive from dead (and sometimes living) bodies, occurred a series of violent murders that would usher in our modern era proper, defined as the age of the serial killer – the Jack the Ripper killings in Whitechapel, London, in 1888. Since the nexus of forensic science, photography and serial murder were in many ways inaugurated by the Ripper killings, the Ripper forms the logical centrepiece of Kathryn

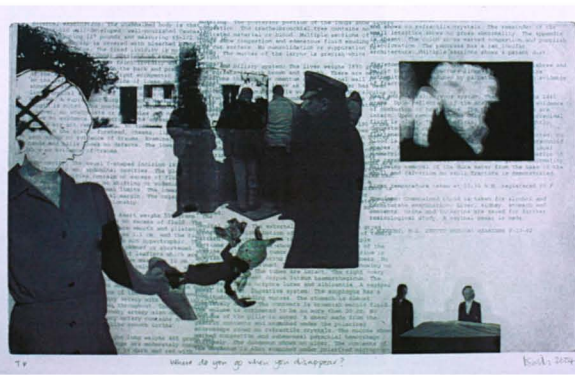
Smith's seductively demanding and aesthetically rigorous show *Euphemism*.

This year's Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year has been hailed by many in the art world for her forensic aesthetics, taking violence, death and the evidence of crimes as her subject matter and opening up the taboo and excess of these acts and objects to refigurations and interpretations that are undeniably beautiful. Just as many viewers have been repulsed or baffled by the subject matter, but the density of meaning and clarity of execution, if you'll pardon the pun, Smith achieves in this latest show is further evidence of both her incisive intelligence (she continues to work as a respected critic and curator) and her singularity of vision.

The show, which is designed to be adapted to the different galleries to which it will travel over the year of the award, is structured around the film, production stills and production portraits Smith extracted from a live performance at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, in 2003, entitled *Jack in Johannesburg*. In this meticulously staged reconstruction of the Ripper murder scenario, Smith is tattooed on her upper left arm with the words 'Never search for unicorns until you've run out of ponies'. This aphorism about serial murder investigation, by an FBI specialist, is another way of dramatising the classic forensic investigative style of deduction by elimination. The writing style of the tattoo is carefully copied from a text written with pigment and paintbrush and purporting to be one of the hundreds of letters addressed to the police from the Ripper himself at the time of the murders.

The central reconstructive scene of the film was projected onto twin screens with a soundtrack on headphones replaying lines from Ripper films, which make the connections between art, especially painting, and murder even more clear. Radiating out from this central tableau are three series of curiously and tangentially interconnected prints.

The first of these extends the iconography of the film which is projected beside it, and harks back to Smith's early work *Still Lives* (1997), in which colour photographs of the artist in death-like repose were overlaid with spectral images of actual victims of violent death, their contusions and wounds given a fixed, ethereal quality by the medium of the manipulated photograph. This new series, *Memento Mori*, is much more technically accomplished, but also much more



classically referential, a *Kill Bill* to the early work's *Reservoir Dogs*. In it, Smith is photographed in stylised death tableaux, dressed in the same garments as the tattooed victim in the film, and with the same monogrammed handkerchief. In various close-ups of body parts – those most often mutilated in serial murders – the subject is covered with artificial flies and maggots in an aesthetic staging of a decomposing corpse. Thus, a decomposing composition...

The two other series of prints both go under the rubric of *Psychogeographies*, and, alongside the film itself, and its production stills and portraits, form for me the critical innovation and aesthetic success of the whole show. In *The Dieppe Series*, Smith overlays images of landscapes by British artist Walter Sickert onto photographs she herself has taken of the same regions and scenes. One of Smith's motivations in retracing the artist's steps is to flesh out the theory,

SMITH'S EXHIBITION TAPS INTO A RICH VEIN OF SIGNIFICANCE AND POSSIBILITY. IT BURROWS INTO THE HIDDEN CIRCULATORY SYSTEM OF THE MODERN MEDIA AGE

popularly propounded by crime novelist Patricia Cornwell, that Sickert was either implicated in the Ripper killings or was in fact the Ripper himself.

The beguiling documentary simplicity of the prints is thus given a rather more sinister context by Smith's murder tourism – one that is compounded even more effectively by the other *Psychogeographies* series, *The Washing Away of Wrongs*. Here, Smith adds convincing and nicely judged excerpts from her murder tourism diary of visits to the spaces occupied by the notorious (are they ever anything else?) British serial killer Dennis Nilsen to the photographs she takes of banal middle English exteriors and streets. Writing herself into these emptied murder landscapes is in many ways a much more convincing re-enactment and aestheticisation of violent death and serial murder than the other work on show in the photographic or filmic media.

Other works in the show attempt, less successfully, to extend some of the conceits and metaphors

set up by Smith's core nexus of concerns around the aestheticisation of pathology and murder. Thus, we delve into such issues as conspiracy theory in drawing on the iconography of Marilyn Monroe, in the prints *Peculiar Modern Behaviour*, and tenuously connect Monroe to the unicorn murder reference in the series *The hour has come, but not the man*.

The exhibition's supposed ephemera, however, as one would expect from an artist of Smith's intellectual rigour, are highly significant. The fonts for the show's title on the wall of the gallery, and the exquisitely produced faux-Victoriana of the exhibition catalogue, conceived by Smith, extend the meanings of the works beyond the gallery's site-specificity. Colin Richards, in his penetrating catalogue essay, quotes Smith's proposal for the Ripper performance: "The Ripper is the model for the modern serial or signature killer, driven by intense visual fantasies, desire and process." Smith's ephemera give further shape to the signature, or written, mediation of the exhibition itself, and form a key part of the display.

Smith's brilliant exhibition taps into this rich vein of significance and possibility. It burrows into the hidden circulatory system of the modern media age that brings together a controlled, reinterpreted and over-determined version of a serial killer's visual fantasies, the technologies which mediate those fantasies into acts, and the pathological compulsion to act and then confess the action in a move which lays claim to the deed – the 'signature' of the crime – at the same time as surrendering the deed to obsessive written representation, which is then reinterpreted into other media, such as serial killer films, or murder tours and museums.

As Albert Fish, aka the Gray Man, one of the most heinous sado-masochists, paedophiles and cannibalistic serial killers on record, put it after sending a letter detailing his horrendous dismemberment and consumption of a young girl to her mother, "I just had a mania for writing." For Smith, the writing and the visualisation of these pathologies are nothing less than re-imaginings of culture itself in an era in which such acts and desires are themselves always immediately media representations.

■ James Sey

James Sey has researched, lectured and published extensively on issues around the body, technology and media

left Kathryn Smith, *Episodes: Me and My Shadows*, 2004, lambda prints on Kodak Metallic paper, 40 x 35cm each

right Kathryn Smith, *Where do you go when you disappear?*, 2004, photo lithograph and photo gravure, 33 x 50cm. All photos courtesy Goodman Gallery