



Farsa y artificio

Melanie Smith

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Farce and Artifice

Foreword

Melanie Smith moved from the United Kingdom to Mexico in 1989 and in the following years became a key protagonist within the Mexican art scene of the nineties. She relocated from the political and economic tensions of Thatcher's Britain to Mexico City, where she witnessed the impact of capitalist modernisation, neoliberal globalisation and hyper-consumerism, the development of an informal economy alongside traditional forms of manufacture and what she refers to as the idiosyncratic manifestations of modernity in Mexico. The two contexts – Mexico, or more broadly Latin America, and Britain, or a wider Anglo-Saxon or Eurocentric culture – are therefore central to her work.

For the past three decades, then, Smith has been based in Mexico where she has developed her work across a range of media, including assemblage, video, painting, photography and installation, but with a particular investment in the relation between the filmed and the painted image. While Smith's work is persistently informed by her reference to painting, she does not describe herself as a painter. This exhibition takes its title from one of Smith's earlier works, an installation incorporating multiple paintings stacked in front of one another. In her work, there is an ongoing exploration of farce and artifice, and she applies these concepts to contemporary society and what has been termed 'baroque modernity'.

Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice, which is the first full-scale survey of Smith's career in Europe and the first in Mexico in over a decade, examines her work from the nineties until today, revealing how she has developed her work beyond her initial generational context into a complex project that makes a unique contribution to current meditations on the nature of modernity and the legacies of modernism. We are delighted that it includes some of her most recent works, including her new film *Maria Elena* (2018), which was filmed in the Atacama region in Chile and is her latest essay on the impacts of Anglo-American industrial modernity within the Latin American landscape. Rather than follow a chronological arrangement, the exhibition and its accompanying publication is organised according to a series of themes or motifs that recur in her work: Abstraction, Urban, Colour, Body, Archaeology, Nature and Scale. This allows works from different moments in Smith's career to be brought into juxtaposition, showing the continuities and yet also embracing tensions, conflicts, irrationality and chaos. Smith has described her body of work as a 'giant palimpsest' and it is the example of the palimpsest that guides this project.

The exhibition has been organised and produced by MACBA in collaboration with the MUAC Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo at the

UNAM Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City and the Museo Amparo in Puebla. It has been curated by Tanya Barson, Chief Curator at MACBA, in close dialogue with the artist. The exhibition has been supported by Anna Cerdà, Assistant Curator, and Meritxell Colina, Projects Assistant, with the collaboration of Helena Castellà. In Mexico, the exhibition is curated by Alejandra Labastida, where it is divided between the two institutions.

We would like especially to thank Melanie Smith, to whom we are extremely grateful for her hard work and generosity in realising this ambitious project, and the curatorial team. Melanie Smith's assistant, Tania Pineda, has been instrumental in supporting the work towards the show. We would also like to thank Roberto Mondragón for realising the mural painting as part of the installation *Fake and Farce* (2018) over a number of weeks at MACBA, and Marga de la Llana for creating the ear sculpture for the installation. We would also like to thank Boris Hirmas and Plataforma Atacama, who were instrumental in supporting the production of *María Elena* which we have the privilege to premier.

The exhibition could not have been mounted without the support of all the lenders: Kendall Ayers; Kim and Scott Martin; Catherine Petitgas; Bridget and Patrick Wade; Museo Amparo, Puebla; CA2M; Colección Fundación ARCO/IFEMA; Ringer Collection, Switzerland; Galeria La Caja Negra, Madrid; Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich; La Colección/Museo Jumex, Mexico City; Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City; Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo and New York; and Sicardi Ayers Bacino, Houston.

We would also like to thank Robin Adèle Greeley for her exceptional essay and Cuauhtémoc Medina for his insightful conversation with the artist. Cristina Paoli, to whom we are also grateful, has designed the catalogue superbly. Additionally, we would like to thank José Luis Barrios for his contribution to the public programme. Finally, we would like to express our thanks to AMEXCID. Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo for their support of the exhibition, as well as to both the Embassy of Mexico in Spain and the Consulate in Barcelona for their assistance.

Ferran Barenblit Director, MACBA

Graciela de la Torre Director, MUAC, and Director-General
of Visual Arts at UNAM

Lucia I. Alonso Espinosa General Director, Museo Amparo

Ramiro Martínez Estrada Executive Director, Museo Amparo



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Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice, Palimpsest and Misalignment

'My skull,' whispered the axolotl, 'is the skull of the Indian; but the gray matter inside is European. I am *the* contradiction in terms...' He is the famous amphibious mestizo, thought Julio Cortázar. 'That's it, the amphibious mestizo,' [Alfonso] Reyes told him. 'It would be fine if this were an agreeable condition which allowed one to enjoy two worlds. Unfortunately it's not like that, but instead, as the fabulist said, "you neither swim like the catfish nor run like the buck", because the appearance of a general ability is deceptive, and nothing is accomplished.'

–Roger Bartra¹

Comedy depends on a rupture with the rational order, it dislocates perspectives and juxtaposes separate actions as if they belong to one another. The sensation disorients, creates patterns of random mosaics and disturbing layers. Nonsense has a power to deconstruct.

–Melanie Smith²

1. Palimpsest: 'Purity is a myth'

¹ Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, translated by Christopher J. Hall. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, p. 14. This quote is taken from Chapter 1 of Bartra's book, titled 'Simulacrum', where he blends Julio Cortázar's story *Axolotl* with parts of Alfonso Reyes' essay *La x en la frente*, and in which, by turns, they become the axolotl in an examination of Mexican *mestizaje*.

² Melanie Smith, conversation with the author, spring 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Smith maintains that these idiosyncratic versions of modernity can be productive, and thereby seeks to undermine the divisions between successful and failed. Moreover, her insistence on not using the word failure in relation to modernity, in favour of fault or idiosyncrasy, is an indication of the way in which she aims to break down simplistic binaries and establish a more complex set of relations as embodied by a recourse to the palimpsest.

Melanie Smith has described her body of work as a giant palimpsest and she has used strategies within her work derived from the logic of palimpsest to undermine the myths of nationality and modernity, specifically through her particular deployment of art history and the disrupted gaze.³ Moreover, for Smith, the palimpsest offers a way to produce something more than a simplistic binary critique, seeing modernity as something that is connected in complex ways even though, within it, idiosyncratic manifestations have arisen.⁴ Smith's statement referred then simultaneously to the interrelated tendencies within her work towards both thematic and material layering, juxtaposition and disjunction, but also to her approach towards this critique of modernity. With this term she also implied, as in works such as the installation *Farce and Artifice* (2006), comprising, among other elements, a number of abstract and kitsch paintings stacked against one another, the superimpositions within modernism and an excessive global capitalism. Smith's installation with its blending of abstract and kitsch paintings brings to mind the earlier, emblematic installation of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980), *Tropicália* (1966–67), in which one of its two favela-like constructions

of similarly monochrome and kitsch panels bears the phrase 'Purity is a myth', summarising Oiticica's response to modernist art exemplified, for both Oiticica and Smith, by the work of Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935).⁵ Smith's installation takes up, therefore, where Oiticica's leaves off, but instead of the aspirations of mid-century modernity, or even the development of a unique and local modernism, it addresses a context of escalated globalisation and extreme artificiality, and the corruptions of an era of neoliberalism. Smith's work begins at the point at which modernist abstraction and the utopian aspirations it stood for have been long obsolete, and yet somehow the corrupted residues of abstraction persist within the environment of the megalopolis, resulting in an entropic abstraction symbolic of collapsing ideologies of the modern, alongside the similarly persisting yet contested symbols of national pride.

In 2006, at the time of Smith's first monographic museum show, Cuauhtémoc Medina wrote that her work 'provokes an overlapping of sensibilities... the haphazard proximity of two processes of modernization... two visual conceptions and two economies that would seem to be at opposite ends of a spectrum and yet, in fact, share the drift caused by a new general orthodoxy of global capitalism'.⁶ Medina was describing the dual influence of Smith's background in eighties Britain, characterised by the politics of Thatcherism and the creation of a post-industrial, neoliberal economy, and her arrival in Mexico in the midst of President Salinas' parallel drive towards capitalist modernisation and privatisation, which ended in political violence and governmental corruption.⁷ Both of these political contexts were marked by neoliberal hyper-consumerism and the dismantling of a commitment to the notion of a collective society (respectively undoing Britain's welfare state and Mexico's post-revolutionary public apparatus) and, partly as a result of this, both produced an art scene in the nineties that was characterised by artist-led initiatives and spaces. Yet this dualism produces not a crude binary opposition in Smith's work but, as both Smith and Medina articulate, instances of overlap or superimposition, marked by aspects of misalignment, so that the palimpsest is an apt simile.

The aesthetics of the palimpsest and its application through a deployment of art history is clearly apparent in her video installation *Estadio Azteca. Proeza maleable*, made in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, which Smith has described as 'an activation of the relationship between chaos and modernity'. In it, three thousand students from Mexican public schools hold aloft cards that together compose mosaic images, though they do so in an unruly way so that each image is imperfect, oscillates and eventually disintegrates. The images, including Malevich's *Red Square* (1915), Jorge González Camarena's painting *La Patria* (1962), widely used on the cover of Mexican Education Ministry textbooks from the sixties onwards, an Aztec jade mask depicting the god Xipe Totec, the 'Lucha libre' wrestler known as El Santo and *The Angel of Independence* (1910) that tops a column commemorating the centennial of Mexico's War of Independence, form an incomplete repertoire of the imagery of the post-revolutionary Mexican construction of national identity. Meanwhile, the

⁵ Malevich was a key reference for Oiticica's earlier abstract-geometric and neo-concrete art, while Smith makes explicit reference to the Russian artist in her video installation *Estadio Azteca. Proeza maleable* (2010).

⁶ Cuauhtémoc Medina 'Preindustrialpost', *Melanie Smith. Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures*. Mexico City: A&R Press, 2006, p. 9.

⁷ Smith is of the same generation as the so-called YBAs or Young British Artists who were at the centre of a resurgent British art scene that developed parallel to the one that formed in nineties Mexico. However, her work has only been infrequently shown in the context of those contemporaries, and her place in any narrative of post-Thatcher British art remains under examined.

stadium's electronic scoreboard interchanges Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) – a work once owned by Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), called by him 'the angel of history' and, consequently, an icon of the left – and the Black Power phrase 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' formulated by Gil Scott Heron (1949–2011) for a 1970 poem of the same name. All this occurs in the stadium designed by Mexican modernist architect Pedro Ramírez Vazquez (1919–2013), which opened in 1966 and was used for the 1968 Olympics. Those Olympics were marked by the Tlatelolco massacre, which happened just prior to their opening, and the Black Power salute protest of African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the games, though this did not occur in the Aztec Stadium. This dense layering of historical and cultural references within a situation that plays with chaos and absurdity constitutes an attempt to dismantle their mythic power and reveal the fictions that underpin modernity.

Understanding the palimpsest as a principle and strategy that is fundamental to Smith's work leads us to reflect on how, throughout her work, Smith utilises the history of art as a means to construct a simultaneous critique of visual perception and, thereby, of modernity. Moreover, José Luis Barrios has directly contrasted the binarism of colonial thinking and discourse – the classifications of civilised and savage, alterity and difference, centre and periphery – with the intricate structure of Smith's work established through her use of shots and montage.⁸ The structure of montage, a form of palimpsest, supports the dismantling of colonial modernity. For this reason, the palimpsest is key to Smith's work, whether painting that effects an investigation of the layering and texture of surfaces, one that could be described as *faktura*,⁹ as a form of entropic abstraction, or via instances of fragmentation, montage, assemblage and superimposition within her installations and films, a tendency to treat each medium as one might the surface of a painting, as a place where things might build up or become eroded.¹⁰

⁸ José Luis Barrios, 'Manao, or, On El Dorado: For a Poetics of the Animal: Potentia and the Saved Night', in *Melanie Smith: Fordlandia*. Mexico City: Editorial RM + Periferia Taller Gráfico, 2014, p. 125.

⁹ This arose in the context of Russian Suprematism and Constructivism, a key reference for Smith, first in Vladimir Markov's (Voldemārs Matvejs) text 'Icon Painting' (1914). See Benjamin Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October*, no. 30 (autumn 1984), pp. 82–119. This principle was also important to the German-Mexican artist Mathias Goeritz and thus reinforces Smith's interest in the Russian avant-garde but also points to the references in her work to mid-century Mexican modernism.

¹⁰ David Batchelor has described Smith's installations of stacked paintings as a form of 'collage-in-the-expanded-field' responding to the palimpsest of the city. Medina, op. cit., p. 64.

¹¹ See Robin Greeley's essay in this publication for a closer reading of what Greeley has termed Smith's 'Collision Aesthetics', p. 61.

¹² These texts are published here for the first time. They are, in themselves, another layer of the palimpsest.

This approach also guided the arrangement of works within this exhibition at MACBA, so that works may be said to abut, contaminate or overlay one another or else be discovered literally behind other works. Although the show encompasses the full extent of Smith's career from the early nineties until today, the works have been arranged non-chronologically and organised into constellations around a number of themes that Smith returns to repeatedly, denoted by deceptively simple key words: Abstraction, Urban, Colour, Body, Archaeology, Nature and Scale. This means that works from different moments in Smith's career can be brought into juxtaposition, showing continuities yet also embracing tensions, conflicts, irrationality and chaos. It produces a thematic montage that also embraces the logic of the palimpsest. Smith's art, then, is characterised by a sense of political, material and thematic texture, collision and layering.¹¹

While Smith embraces a range of media in her work, including film, installation and performance, as well as the inventive and surreal texts¹² included in this publication, they are informed in unique ways with a

persistent reference to painting. Nevertheless, as she says in the conversation with Medina in this volume, she does not describe herself as a painter.¹³ She has related how her work seeks to bring the painterly and the filmic together, blurring the distinctions between the two so that there is a constant oscillation between the membrane of both painting and screen in works such as the *Parres* trilogy (2006) or in her most recent film, *Maria Elena* (2018), which both exhibit a fascination with surface, texture and found abstractions, but also in her series of mural works that constitute painting on the scale of a cinema screen. Likewise, the seven tableaux that comprise *Bucolic Obscurities* (2017) and their incorporation across seven screens in the installation *Fake and Farce* (2018), emulating the series of studies also included, and both seeming to reference the form of a predella, in which Smith has selected only the footage that shows least movement, subverting the normal use of film to record action and thus bringing it closer to painting. The palimpsest also guides the composition of the fragmentary murals in works such as *Fake and Farce*, the latest in a series of such works Smith has made, whereby the seven individual studies are copied by a skilled restorer and muralist, Roberto Mondragon, each 'scene' layered on top of another to create the final mural. Smith sees this as a dismantling of the original paintings and their intention to support a Eurocentric, hegemonic belief system. This subversive intent is reinforced by Smith's recourse in her work to carnival via the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and the comedy of Monty Python (founded 1969). We can, then, also relate the notion of the palimpsest to the way that Smith thinks about comedy as a means to deconstruct a false order embodied in modernity, modernism, reason and capitalism. Although Smith's work has often been spoken about in terms of its relationship to a Latin American modernity, less attention has been paid to the other layers of the palimpsest that derive from her British background, references that have been the subject of some of our conversations during the exhibition.¹⁴ This essay attempts to bring certain of these aspects into view alongside the various other layers of meaning that we find within her often densely composed works.

2. From the Red Square to the Orange: Abstraction and Capital

In some of her earliest works, made in the early to mid-nineties, notably the series known as *Orange Lush* (1994–97), and associated works such as *My World* (1995), Smith worked with the chromatic and textural materiality of the economies of Mexico City. Cuauhtémoc Medina characterised this as her investigation into a 'phenomenology of capitalism'.¹⁵ The series initiated a concern with visual accumulation and chromatic intensity, as well as what was to become a signature shade of orange that derived from its almost ubiquitous presence in the city and its markets (*tianguis*, in the name derived from Nahuatl), heightened artificiality and kitsch, neon and trashiness. The series undermined the paradigm of modernist painting and the purity of the monochrome, illustrating the opposing relation of modernity and postmodernity with colour.¹⁶ Developing from this earlier work, the installation *Farce and Artifice* embodies certain key aspects of

¹³ See conversation with Cuauhtémoc Medina in this volume, p. 103.

¹⁴ One important exception is the exhibition *Sodio y asfalto: arte británico contemporáneo en México* (*Sodium and Asphalt: Contemporary British Art in Mexico*) curated by Ann Gallagher and Tobias Ostrander for the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and MARCO in Monterrey, in collaboration with the British Council, in 2004, in which Smith was the only artist shown who was resident in Mexico.

¹⁵ Medina, op. cit., p. 9. Moreover, in an email exchange with Smith, the artist David Batchelor points out how abstractions have become the default 'upmarket boardroom decoration' where financial deals are made. Outside in the street, other kinds of abstraction, or means to pull apart abstraction into a form of 'after-abstraction', though no less attached to the flow of global capital, attract Smith and Batchelor. See 'Conversation with David Batchelor', *ibid.*, pp. 56 and 70. *My World*, originally a work from 1995 on 35mm slides, has been revisited for this exhibition as a series of photographic prints.

¹⁶ Batchelor has called the monochrome a 'comic genre'. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Smith's work. In it, a series of synthetic abstractions are piled up against one another on a mock theatre or cabaret stage set, and accompanied by two artificial palm trees. In the rear, concealed by the paintings and their stage, the installation incorporates a slide show of images of experimental theatre productions from the seventies and eighties. At the front, on a television monitor is footage of a performance: an Anglo-Saxon woman attempts to learn salsa from a Cuban dance teacher 'in an hour of laboured steps and clumsiness'.¹⁷ The performance highlights the woman's status as an outsider, her 'awkwardness and estrangement'.¹⁸ Inspired by the chance discovery in a Mexico City market of the photographs of theatre performances and the feeling of alienation that they provoked in the artist, the installation addresses the condition of being a stranger, of being misaligned with one's environment. The work embodied the continuing play between farce (implying absurdity, mockery or travesty) and artifice (meaning both artificiality and deception, and ultimately, the 'artifice of reason') in Smith's work, and it is these terms that she applies to her analysis of contemporary society.

In a modest yet significant gesture, Smith recently painted a small abstract panel with a white ground and the form of an imprecise square, in fact an irregular quadrilateral, but instead of an ideologically-grounded red (as in Malevich's *Red Square*, the original title of which was *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*), this one is a synthetic orange. Smith's orange square is both a riposte to Malevich's avant-gardism, following Oiticica's, but also to a mid-century modernity exemplified by Neo-Concrete art and Minimalism. Through her encounter with Mexico City, Smith's work counters and undermines the optimistic belief in modernity that is also embodied in the work of certain British artists: the optical patterning of Bridget Riley (b. 1931), and the precision and bright synthetic chromatism of Mary Martin (1907–1969). Between 1967 and the final year of her life, Martin created a series of at least five versions of a square relief titled *Perspex Group on Orange*, employing a square of orange Perspex to create a Constructionist composition that combines a shade as vivid as Smith's, with fluorescent pink, black, white and transparent Perspex placed according to the Fibonacci sequence. They represent Martin's clearest engagement with machine-made materials, influenced by the American artist Charles Biederman. Smith's work deliberately takes up the issue of these new materials, often painting her compositions both of optical patterning and the grid of Mexico City on Perspex panels and in plastic-based acrylic paints. Therefore we might detect, beneath Smith's negotiation of her immediate environment in Mexico and its national myths, her consciousness of an alternative national myth of sixties British cultural utopianism. In parallel to her own work, this sixties era was deliberately referenced by a generation of British artists of the nineties. While witnessing the attempt of politicians led by Tony Blair to invoke it as their heritage and a basis for a latter-day renaissance through terms such as 'Cool Britannia', they were, in fact, post-punk and post-Thatcher, and following the disintegration of an economy based on industrial manufacturing and its replacement by one of financial industries, frequently testifying, with an acute irony, to the collapse of that myth.

¹⁷ 'Farce and Artifice' described on the artist's website www.melaniesmith.net [access: March 2018].

¹⁸ Ibid.

That these works were inspired by an encounter with the city means they could also be seen as having a relationship to landscape in art, as the opposite of the Romantic landscape – a form of corrupted landscape.¹⁹ Smith explores this corrupted landscape in her work as one that is both subject to entropy and environmental degradation, and examines how this represents simultaneously a kind of ideological degradation, through the phenomena of urban development, political corruption and exploitation (of people and the environment), and through speculation whether with land, commodities or abstract capital. In conversation with artist David Batchelor, Smith makes an important distinction between the way that the realness of traditional landscape painting conceals its Romantic unreality (myth), and the synthetic nature of their own negotiations of the urban landscape which, though artificial, are somehow more real.²⁰ As Smith says, 'my work deals with the idea of a kind of corrupted landscape, which yes, comes from the direct experience of living in one of the most destroyed urban landscapes possible'.²¹ These overlapping ideas, then, are what underpin Smith's approach to the conditions of visual pollution that she encountered in Mexico City and her subversion of the formalist-phenomenological aesthetics of the modern and late-modern movement with a phenomenology of capital.

3. Reflecting Coloniality: Looking-Glass Worlds and Nonsense Natural Histories

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the strange confluence of British colonialism, scientific and naturalist exploration, and a literature of absurdity. While Smith seeks to explore the effects of colonialism and its relation to the modern imagination and the avant-garde, her work has a more oblique root in this literature, written in the context of British imperialism and empire. An important example is Edward Lear (1812–1888), whose enduringly popular nonsense literature was published as *A Book of Nonsense* (1846) and later *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1871), with the author's accompanying illustrations. Less well-known is the fact that Lear produced his nonsense texts chiefly for amusement; professionally, he was a naturalist and topographical illustrator who also gave Queen Victoria drawing lessons. He provided visual complements to the classification of the natural wonders of the colonies, even while his nonsense botany poked fun at scientific naturalism, including sumptuous colour plates illustrating birds for the ornithologist John Gould (1804–1881). Lear's career was enabled by colonial networks, and his literature is peppered with his word-play with Hindi and, as a habitual or even compulsive neologist, with references to imaginary though decidedly Indian-sounding locations evoking 'exotic' travel.²² Such childhood rhymes thus come to be revealed as anything but innocent, instead embodying a Eurocentric mindset that casts the wider world as other to itself and, thus, in the realm of the 'fantastic' or nonsensical. Lear is just one example of how coloniality impacted on the formation of a British national culture and continues to underpin its imaginary. The Mexican counterpart to the scientific Lear is José María Velasco (1840–1912),

¹⁹ Medina (ed.), op. cit., pp. 53–54.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 53–55.

²¹ Ibid, p. 54.

²² Lear travelled to India as a guest of the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, in the years during which the Indian Rebellion was still reverberating and the year after Victoria was declared 'Empress' of India, in two years making two thousand drawings and watercolours. He also travelled through Italy, Greece, Egypt and Corsica. His rhymes bear the traces of his colonial encounters, as in his evocation of imaginary peoples that often sound like versions of the fantastical or monstrous races beyond the borders of the known world that are found on the pages of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*.

most prominent as a landscape painter who made the genre an expression of national identity, but who also brought naturalist and scientific illustration into this nationalist frame. Among his many contributions to *La Naturaleza (Nature)*, the journal he helped found, was his observation and illustration identifying a new species of axolotl, the Mexican salamander.²³

A similar kind of absurdism to that of Lear governed the writing of Lewis Carroll, which shared the leitmotif of travel to a fantastical world that does not conform to the known world and usual expectations, where animals are anthropomorphised, and norms of scale, space and perception are contravened, all made more vivid by the humorous illustrations of John Tenniel (1820–1914). Vision, perception and scale are linked in Smith's work. She has a fascination for scale contrasts, as in the macro-micro shifts from the expansive grid of Mexico City to its market stalls, from the vastness of the Amazon to the insects that inhabit it, from the starry universe to a grain of sand or a salt crystal in the Chilean Atacama. Notions of scale, from natural philosopher Robert Hooke (1635–1703) and his gigantic reproduction of a flea in his *Micrographia* (1645), to David Attenborough (b. 1926), whose television series *Life on Earth* (1979), with its rhetoric of scale and statistics, brought micro and macro views of the natural world into the family sitting room, inform the British relationship with nature, and this is reflected on by Smith, particularly in her works *Xilitla: Dismantled 1* (2010), *Fordlandia* (2014) and *Maria Elena* (2018). Such facets, including undermined, subverted or unusual perception and nonsense naturalism, can also be found within Latin American absurdist literature, most evidently in the work of the Argentine writers Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), yet it is also employed, with reference to Cortázar and Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959), by the anthropologist and sociologist Roger Bartra (b. 1942), when exploring the nature of Mexican-ness or *Mexicanidad*.²⁴ Bartra also evokes Carroll's writing in *The Imaginary Networks of Political Power*, highlighting the contravention of vision in modern power structures. He comments that 'state and power are presented here as a looking-glass in which an inverted image is mirrored, although this is by no means a clear-cut image, since modern history has covered it with cracks, distortions and opacities'.²⁵ Likewise, Carroll became a reference for the writer Celeste Olalquiaga when in the early nineties she aimed to define what was both distinctive and disorienting in the contemporary manifestation of the urban, the megalopolis, and its relation to postmodernity in a way that seems particularly applicable to Smith's work: 'Alice goes through a series of adventures that confuse her sense of physical identity, in an experience similar to that of postmodern culture: she floats among domestic objects that fail to give her any hold – gravity, like referentiality, has been suspended – and is later completely lost in Wonderland, where signs are deceiving, animals and plants talk and transmute themselves... and she grows or shrinks at the arbitrary will of mysterious mushrooms, cakes, and potions... Wonderland is a place where reality and appearance merge into one. In Wonderland logic, time and space are highly evanescent and can only be reconstituted through repetitive linguistic riddles.'²⁶

²³ Daniela Bleichmar, *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, 2017, pp. 188–90. Velasco's illustration is reproduced on the cover of Roger Bartra's *The Cage of Melancholy*, op. cit.

²⁴ Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy*, ibid.

²⁵ Roger Bartra, *The Imaginary Networks of Political Power*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992, p. 100.

²⁶ Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*. Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 3–4.

From 1962 until his death, the British collector and patron of Dada and Surrealism, Edward James (1907–1984), worked to create a unique garden in the semi-tropical environment near Xilitla, a town in the Huasteca region of Mexico, approximately 400 kilometres north of Mexico City. Following an unusually cold winter that killed his orchid collection, James was inspired to build concrete organic-sculptural follies throughout the garden, known after its pools as Las Pozas. Smith's film *Xilitla: Dismantled 1*, made with filmmaker Rafael Ortega and shown in the sixteenth-century Capella MACBA, explores this location as an instance of the fabricated ruins of modernity. The film effects an examination or 'dismantling' of the interrelated themes of perception, representation and Minimalist abstraction. More specifically, it references the work of American artist Robert Smithson (1938–1973), and his *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* (1969) through the action of workmen carrying a mirror that serves to displace the image of the garden, and Dan Flavin (1933–1996), through evocations of his neon light sculptures. A further reference underpinning Smith's film is the work of American writer and explorer John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852) and his companion, the British artist, architect and illustrator Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854), whose books, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843), documenting their revelation of Mayan ruins, were bestsellers, and also an inspiration to Smithson. In particular, Catherwood's illustrations provide a colonial-era antecedent to Smith's filmic exploration of James's eccentric ruins, the relics of modernist desire, an exploration through which she seeks to subvert modernity's possessive gaze.

Lear's travels and Carroll's fantastical mirror-land provide a counterpoint to the allusion in *Xilitla: Dismantled 1* to the work of Stephens and Catherwood. Their work is a means for Smith to connect the narrative of entropy and 'ruins-in-reverse', an archaeology of modernity and the future in opposition to the Romantic or picturesque perspective of the ruin, proposed by Robert Smithson, with collector Edward James's involvement with the Surrealist movement and his modernist revival of the nineteenth-century practice of constructing follies.²⁷ Originally a manifestation of the culture of the Romantic picturesque, a folly, as the name implies, refers to the absurd fashion for constructing costly buildings with no practical purpose, often mock ruins, mostly on private landed estates. In Smith's film, Smithson's discourse is thus filtered through her own knowledge of the nineteenth-century absurd, both literary and architectural. In addition, perception and its vicissitudes becomes a central theme in Smith's film, which addresses the complexities of vision in the context of colonial histories. She references Smithson's *Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, using mirrors as Smithson did to reflect and displace the lush vegetation of the Mexican forest, as a way to break the colonial gaze and interrupt it with misalignments, revealing the faults in vision and therefore power, and the opacity of history, as alluded to by Bartra. Over and over in her work we see how forms of visual perception are transgressed, misaligned and hampered.

²⁷ See Robert Smithson's essays 'Entropy and the New Monuments' (1966), 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' (1967) and 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan' (1969) in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996.

The location for Smith's film, *Fordlandia*, is an abandoned town, founded in 1928 in the Brazilian Amazon by the industrialist Henry Ford (1863–1947) to produce rubber for car tyres and parts. Ford was attempting to circumvent the British monopoly on rubber, itself the result of colonial duplicity through which seeds of a plant formerly indigenous only to Brazil had been smuggled out of the country by explorer and bio-pirate Henry Wickham (1846–1928) in 1876. This allowed the British to assume control of rubber production – and the worldwide market – from their colonies in Asia and Africa. As Ford disdained the Europeans, and wanted to avoid reliance on them, he constructed a model American town, named after him, for ten thousand workers, but his efforts ultimately failed and it was transferred back to the Brazilian government and left uninhabited. Smith's film juxtaposes the details of the settlement progressively being reclaimed by the rainforest, the local community of two thousand inhabitants, and the flora and fauna at both micro and macro scales. It collages images to construct an extended filmic essay on entropy, the residues of colonial iniquity, the effects on Latin America of Anglo-American imperialism, and the resistance of nature and the living as inversions of this colonial history.

4. Carnival or Pandemonium: *Bucolic Obscurities*

From 25 March to 2 July 2017, Melanie Smith staged a series of seven performative *tableaux vivants*, collectively titled *Bucolic Obscurities*, at the Tallera of the Sala Siqueiros de Arte Público David Alfaro Siqueiros, in Cuernavaca, outside Mexico City.²⁸ Each restaged a scene or element from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1515) or Peter Brueghel the Elder (1525–1569), with amateur performers. To the rear of this, a skilled restorer painted a mural as part of each of the performances, also composed of fragments taken from Bosch or Brueghel paintings. The scenes were all recorded on CCTV cameras and this footage was later made into a video work on seven monitors. Still later, this was incorporated into an installation, titled *Fake and Farce*, which, closely related to the earlier tableaux and while not involving a pictorial re-enactment with performers, did incorporate a mural and was centred around a sculpture of a giant ear, derived from the right-hand panel of Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500) that depicts Hell. This recourse to a form of *mise en abyme*, or an exposure of the behind-the-scenes or work-in-progress, has become a frequent device in Smith's work, and a means to expose the flaws in modernity.²⁹

Through these works, Smith engaged with the idea of carnival and the grotesque body as explored by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and also drew inspiration from the British comedy group Monty Python. Monty Python was itself formed in part from the tradition of nineteenth-century absurdist literature, as well as that of Surrealism, in the still relatively early years of a post-colonial Britain.³⁰ Smith references their iconoclastic comedy, a mixture of highly educated yet anti-establishment rebellion and anarchic-surreal humour as a basis for her own work,

²⁸ The presentation was called *Obscuridades bucólicas: tableaux vivants, siete activaciones a partir de la obra de Hieronymus Bosch y Pieter Brueghel el Viejo*. A different activation was staged on each date, which were: 25 March, 8 and 22 April, 4 and 20 May, and 3 and 17 June.

²⁹ This series of works relates to a much wider body of work in which Smith has staged the painting of fragmentary murals–under-construction that revisit existing murals by Diego Rivera. Similarly, they call to mind earlier works, such as *Six Steps to Reality* (2002), that show the making of a work as the work itself, presenting to the viewer a situation of seeing behind the scenes.

³⁰ Both Python Terry Gilliam, responsible for the graphics and the animated sequences in the group's films and television, and Smith cite Surrealism as a precedent for their work and a source of a visual language that they draw upon, as well as techniques such as juxtaposition, explored through collage and montage.

commenting: 'the humour of Python is notorious for being childish and hysterical with an infatuation with mud, blood, insanity, mutilation, torture, freaks, rudeness and gestures. But everything has meaning... [and] what distinguishes the Pythons and their extravaganzas is that they create a fantasy world, almost like caricatures, with immense care.'³¹ Likewise, Smith's rendition of Bosch's detached ear is also a reference to the disembodied bare foot of Terry Gilliam's animated opening sequences for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*,³² while fragmented bodies and body parts necessarily have a more sinister connotation in the context of Mexico.³³ In this sense, we might contrast carnival disorder, which is anarchic yet liberating, with an altogether different kind of loss of order, that of pandemonium and violence.³⁴ Smith evokes carnival in her work as a means to counter histories of violence and exploitation, which are represented by Bosch; for this reason she describes Bosch as 'the portal of every psychoanalytic image, of the primitive autoscopy of the oral and of organs in demonic forms'.³⁵ Moreover, Smith says it is 'as if fragmentation were a weapon against the atomisation of the individual in capitalist society'.³⁶ She continues: 'the Pythons use social hierarchy again and again in their movies and sketches: the police; the king; the army; the law; and simultaneously the crazy or the poor are used as identification figures – those who receive the low blow – but these are a series of inversions of the real beliefs of the team who behind this were anti-establishment, anti-war, anti-religious, etc.'³⁷ Smith concludes by saying that Python 'shows us the triumph of error and confusion', tactics that she replicates in her recourse to the fault or flaw, and to chaos and instability.

Likewise, with *Bucolic Obscurities*, Smith reflected on carnival representation through Bakhtin's interpretation of the work of the writer Rabelais, commenting that 'Rabelais is known as the poet of the flesh and the belly, who emerged as a reaction to medieval aestheticism... The manifestations of the material and corporeal life are not attributed to an isolated being, to a private and selfish economic individual, but to a kind of popular, collective and generic body, and above all to a festive body, of the banquet or of joyfulness'.³⁸ And this body is intimately associated with popular culture since 'the bearer of this material and corporeal principle is the people'.³⁹ Moreover, as Smith also highlights, there is a topographical sense to the conception of high and low here: high is heaven and the skies, while low is the earth, or hell.⁴⁰ Carnival is associated with a temporary, ephemeral freedom in which usual hierarchies and concomitant prohibitions, bound up with the preservation of official power and order, are suspended. Bakhtin developed his reading of carnival in the thirties, in the context of the strict governance of the social and political spheres that served Stalin's authoritarian grip on power, while in the sixties Monty Python adopted this same carnival licence as a means to contribute towards stripping away the stuffy, neo-Victorian puritanism of post-war British society. Smith deploys it once again strategically, in the context of the government of Peña-Nieto, as well as to respond to that of a widespread neoliberalism and resurgent populism. Thus carnival laughter is a way to combat the seriousness and hypocrisy,

³¹ Melanie Smith, unpublished lecture notes, 2017, not paginated.

³² This television series was commissioned by David Attenborough in 1969 while he was controller of BBC 2 (1965–69). The series continued until 1974, although he continues to present programmes on the natural world until this day.

³³ In the Terry Gilliam foot we might find a further reference back to Pliny and his fantastical race of sciapods, creatures with a single, enormous foot extending from a leg in the middle of their bodies and which they used to shade themselves. There is a kind of paradoxical elitism in the fact of such classical referents being called to mind by anarchic and anti-establishment humour, yet it testifies to the way in which Monty Python deployed their education against the system that supported it.

³⁴ When John Milton sought a name for the capital of Hell in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), he coined the word Pandemonium, literally a place where all demons live. It has since entered the English language as a term for chaos or lawless violence, or else as a riotous uproar or outburst and general disorder. Conceptually, it stands in contrast to carnival disorder.

³⁵ Melanie Smith, unpublished lecture notes, op. cit.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the violence and intimidation of the holders of power in ordinary life. As Smith points out, Bakhtin stresses 'the importance of laughter as a political defence'.⁴¹

5. Maria Elena

Melanie Smith's most recent project, shown for the first time in the exhibition at MACBA, is the film *Maria Elena* (2018) that was shot in the Atacama Desert, in the Antofagasta region of northern Chile. The small mining town after which the film is titled was founded in the twenties to produce saltpetre, or sodium nitrate, traditionally used both for fertilizer and for explosives.⁴² In combination with a refinery at Coya Sur, Maria Elena was once the world's largest saltpetre works. Now, with a population of five thousand, it is the only surviving producer of natural sodium nitrate in the world. The film continues Smith's ongoing interest in the histories surrounding the application and obsolescence of industrial modernity within Latin America. Smith has previously focused on moments when this history has been touched upon particularly by Britain, in *Xilitla: Dismantled 1* and *Fordlandia*. The film traces the impact in the region of the British, who were heavily involved in the production of nitrates from the nineteenth century onwards through firms such as the Anglo-Chilean Consolidated Nitrate Co., as well as in financial speculation in nitrates as a commodity.⁴³ Such involvement is clearly registered in the layout of the town that reproduces the form of the British flag, the Union Jack. It is again emphasised during the film through a roll call of Anglo surnames (including multiple Smiths) pronounced with a Chilean accent. The Guggenheim family was also involved in nitrate production in Maria Elena, and Smith's film further forms a critique of its nitrate plant investments. Yet, while Smith was drawn to Maria Elena by her exploration of the pursuit of profit that intertwines British, US and Latin American histories of the industrial past and modernity, the objective was not that of documentary, but to create layers of visual referents of this place. Thus the landscape that Smith films becomes a way to represent the impact of coloniality, the politics of the nation state and private capital, and to reveal the abstractions involved in extractionist global capitalism.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² The town was itself named after Mary Ellen Comodon, the wife of the first manager of the local refinery.

⁴³ The links between Britain and Chile through the production and consumption of nitrate was the focus of the exhibition *Nitrate* by Xavier Ribas, shown at MACBA in 2014, in collaboration with the University of Brighton, and at the Museo Universidad de Navarra in Pamplona.

⁴⁴ Louise Purbrick, 'Nitrate Traffic', in *Xavier Ribas: Nitrate*. Barcelona and Pamplona: MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2014, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 30.

Historian Louise Purbrick has investigated the history of British industrial involvement in nitrate production and speculation in the Atacama, which, as she remarks, constituted in effect 'the industrialisation of the desert'.⁴⁴ Purbrick reveals the degree to which this was also a story of colonial power relations and of the nation state, since nitrate played a part in fuelling national rivalries and igniting the War of the Pacific in 1879 and, later, the Chilean Civil War of 1891. Nevertheless, as she points out: 'the Atacama Desert was no longer a national landscape of Peru, Bolivia or Chile but incorporated into a geography of European capitalism; it was a "satellite" of an economic system, a location of mines, a site of extraction of material wealth, the riches of the earth's crust assimilated to capital.'⁴⁵ British interests created industrial colonies in the

Atacama that, like Henry Ford's model settlement in Brazil, Fordlandia, served to feed the production of wealth but also the system itself, not only through the commodity produced but also through the demand it created for industrial expertise and machinery for the plants and railways that facilitated the chain of supply. Purbrick further describes the proto-Fordian division of labour and chain of production: '...the organisation of the desert field factories, the separation and specialisation, was characteristic of monopoly capitalism; division and deskilling of the industrial process was its mechanism of industrial control. Indeed, the taxonomy of tasks barely obscured the essential similarity of industrial work: nitrate mining was a matter of hard labour.'⁴⁶ This system was founded on exploitation that did not end with this labour, however, but was also economic, since the men were paid wages in tokens that barely covered the costs of the goods required for living, which could only be bought from the overpriced company stores, as the seemingly high wages offered were in fact a means to entrap and indebt workers to their employers.⁴⁷ The market was volatile but manipulated by the British speculator-industrialists and, in the early twentieth century, huge profits were made on supplying nitrates to the Allied forces in the First World War. On the eve of the war, substantial supplies were even exported to Germany, though this trade was later blockaded, resulting in the acceleration of German production of synthetic forms. Thus nitrate also became 'an ingredient for the industrialisation of war'.⁴⁸ According to Smith, however, it has now become a different war, on a different scale, since nitrate and lithium have become the ingredients in cell phones, computers and car batteries. The demand for these metals has brought globalisation to the Atacama and is causing a water crisis or 'water war' in this desert location.⁴⁹ This ecological and economic violence is encapsulated in the image of an explosion that Smith conceives of as a kind of 'bomb, splintering history'.⁵⁰

Maria Elena might be considered the last in a trilogy with her earlier films *Xilitla: Dismantled 1* and *Fordlandia*, in that it focuses on a location of the impact of Anglo-American presence in Latin America. However, in marked contrast to these works, characterised by lush, tropical vegetation in their respective settings of a surreal Mexican garden and the site of an abandoned town in the Amazon, *Maria Elena* derives its visual register from the dry, sandy desert.⁵¹ Smith's film, in a similar way to *Fordlandia*, contrasts images drawn from the local community with the industrial plant and installations, and the surrounding landscape. A surprising visual pun arises in the form of the open-cast mine that Smith calls an 'ear' and leads her to return to the fragmented body that she explored through carnival imagery in *Bucolic Obscurities*. The link is intended, as are its quasi-Surrealism and the focus it places on the fleshy body. Close-up shots of the ears of the town's inhabitants as they bathe in a hot spring reinforce the connection. Surreal touches and the absurd body also arise in the silver-covered figures that dart about in the town's theatre, like pantomime representations of salt crystals. Moreover, strange and farcical reversals occur when, as Smith says, 'there is a kind of petrification where the animal becomes rock, crystals

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 33–34. The economies of nitrate, and the 'abstractions' involved in the system of capital, are represented in the film through these tokens, from the archives of the Museo de Antofagasta, issued by companies to their workers, each designated for the kinds of provisions for which they could be used. One such, which occupies the whole screen, is a red token from the Oficina Atacama, for exchange in the 'Pulpería', the name given to the company stores in northern Chile. Another, blue token simply bears the word 'pan' (bread), and another 'agua' (water), that rare commodity in the Atacama. The tokens emphasise the closed system of 'exchange value' in operation in the 'Oficinas Salitreras', or Saltpetre villages, through which they exercised strict control over their workers.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴⁹ Dave Sherwood, 'In Chilean desert, global thirst for lithium is fueling a "water war"', 29 August 2018, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-lithium-water/in-chilean-desert-global-thirst-for-lithium-is-fueling-a-water-war-idUSKCN1LE16T> [access: October 2018].

⁵⁰ Melanie Smith, email to the author, 16 October 2018.

⁵¹ Maria Elena South is officially classified as the location of the driest place on earth.

become stars, a horse's ear, a mountain; scale gets inverted and everything is framed the wrong way round.'⁵²

As in Smith's previous works, a concern with painting or the painterly persists. Near abstractions are made of diverse surfaces and textures, each containing layers of symbolic value. Her eye for the painterly, and with it the camera, is drawn to the large beds or tanks (*bateas*) in which the nitrate and lithium are allowed to crystallise. This chemical process results in surfaces that take on the appearance of enormous *informel* abstract paintings, but these represent what Smith calls the 'dark side of abstraction, the unwanted B-side of our Westernised, unoffensive Ryman white [abstraction], or a Rothko spiritual glow sifted off this gungy, geological terror of the future'.⁵³ This formalism of Smith's images continues a tradition of an aesthetics of pollution that first arose contemporaneous to the era of the advent of industrialisation, beginning with J.M.W. Turner's (1775–1851) semi-abstract paintings and continuing with James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and Claude Monet's (1840–1926) scenes of industrialised landscapes, but which is also filtered through mid-twentieth-century materialist painting and photography. Smith employs this painterly sensibility to return attention to the socio-political and economic realities of industrialisation and its effects. Thus the apparent formalism supports her meditation on the economies of industrialisation and globalisation.

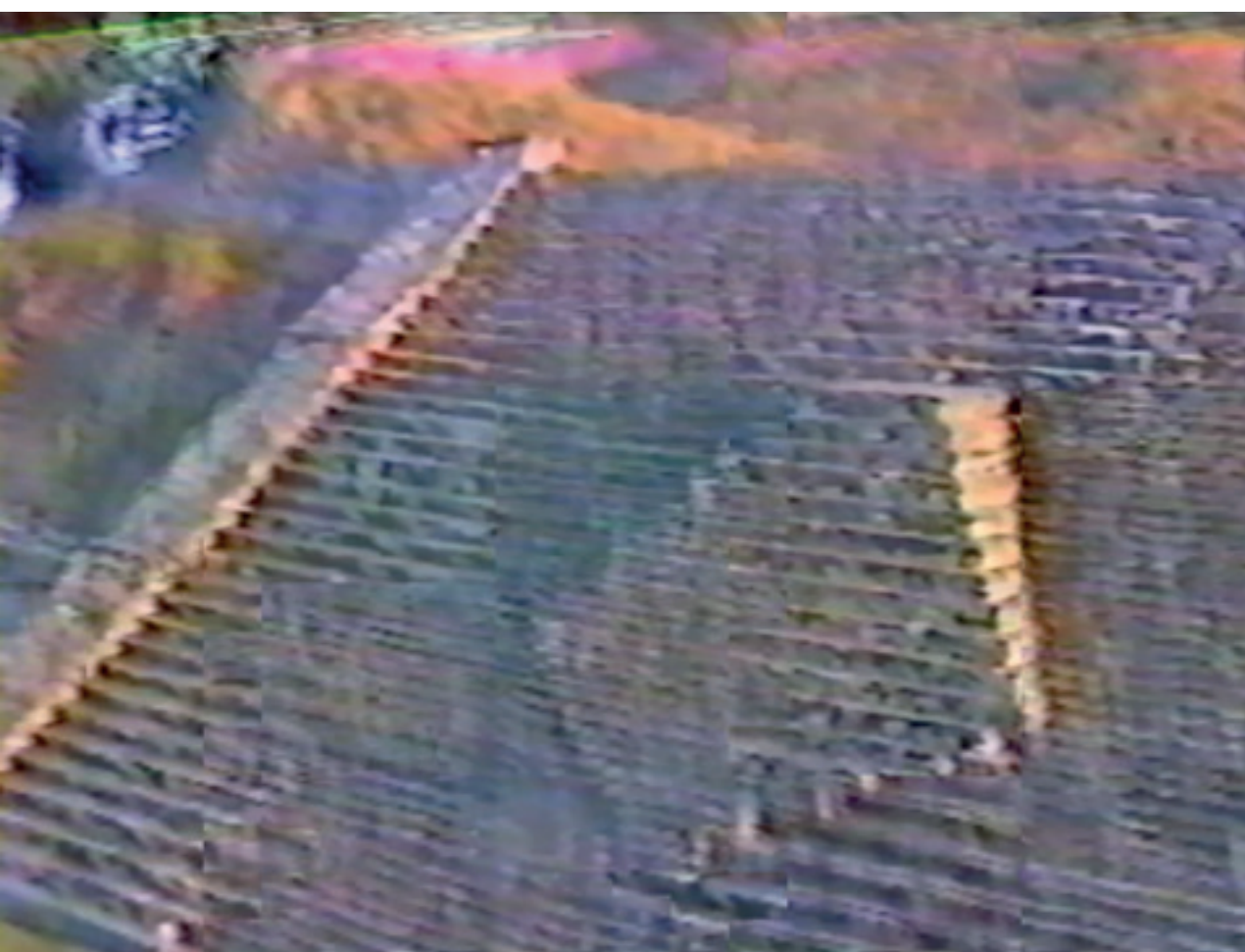
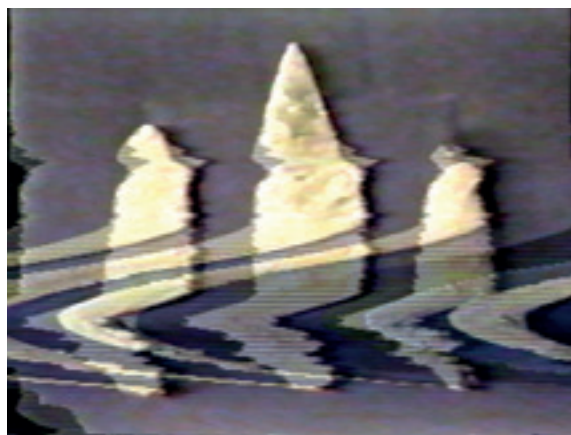
This latest work manifests Smith's multifaceted investigation of the nature of surfaces that sets up parallels between the painterly, the filmic and the political opacities of modernity. The painting of Turner, whose work was made at the beginning of the industrial revolution, at the opposite end of this era of modernity, shares this attraction to surface and opacity (both aesthetic and political). Turner's paintings are complex examinations of the impacts of industrialisation and new developments in science, including meteorology, cloud classification and the optics of natural phenomena; he was fascinated by the visual manifestations of scientific discovery. A painting such as *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* (1838) embodies the complexities at play in his oeuvre, since it addresses themes of class, coloniality, nationalism, impending industrialisation, and scientific and artistic radicalism, but it also embodies what has been identified as the critique of industrial society to be found in his late work.⁵⁴ Through her own investigations of surface, Smith establishes an affinity with Turner's painting, yet while her Xilitla paintings that accompany the film exhibit an exploration of surface that at first seems closest to Turner, in *Maria Elena* she translates this exploration into the language of film (oscillating its visual register between degrees of sharp and soft focus, close-up and panorama) and, with it, explores a critical history of industrialisation that complements that begun in Turner's work. Smith has articulated her relationship to politics specifically through her intention to eschew an activist politics in her art, which she considers a form of mimetics of politics itself, and instead follows her acute political consciousness to create complex, layered meditations, which she intends to raise rather than answer questions.

⁵² Melanie Smith, email to the author, 16 October 2018.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The HMS *Temeraire* was a 98-gun Royal Navy ship that had become notorious first for an act of mutiny. It failed, and some of the mutineers were tried and executed. Subsequently, the ship joined Admiral Lord Nelson's 1805 blockade near Cadiz and during the ensuing Battle of Trafalgar came to the aide of Nelson's ship, thus earning a reputation for heroism. Turner does not allude directly to either of these things but shows the ship being pulled by a steam tugboat to be destroyed, leading it to be interpreted as a representation of the decline of Britain's naval power and an elegiac tribute, but also as the passing from the age of the sail to that of steam and industrialisation. The politics of class and nation are embedded in the work, and it was voted the nation's favourite painting in a popular poll in 2005.











Truncated

But the monster does manage to weave a cocoon.

Neither generic nor individual, neither an image of the divinity nor an animal form, the body truly became whatever. The one who is saved and the one who is lost have the same arms and legs. So that there is the possibility of rejecting all identity, we dislocate, unbind, undo it. We may not belong.

A cut.

The next scene is dark and cold, the next scene is called 'havoc'. A smashed-up face is still a smashed-up face; a stump, a limb; a traumatised psyche remains a traumatised psyche. Yet destruction, too, is formative. Destruction has its own sculpting tools. Man has short fingers but in order for your new fingers to form, a separation between the fingers must also form. A body without recompense or scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet. Neither access nor body, the deserting of selfhood, the distancing of an individual who becomes a stranger to herself. A hitch, a detour that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected. A moulting of the inner sculpture. The formation of an identity that flees itself, that flees the impossibility of fleeing itself. Identity abandoned, dissociated again. No place. It has no body of bark, no armour, no branches. In retaining the same skin it is forever unrecognisable.

It was the fact that they became new people, belonging to a different species. As if, in the evening, the form could be left hanging like a garment on the back of a chair.

MS





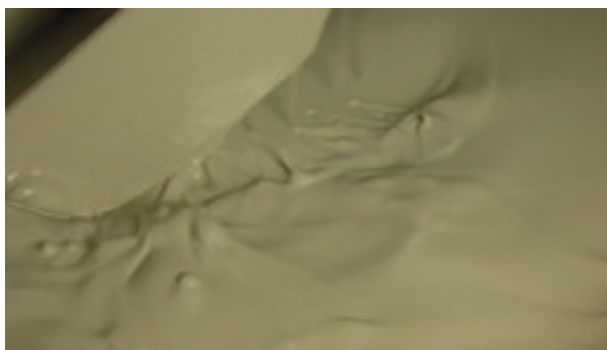
























Ordered Life: The Faithful And The Infidels

They came from another republic, they said, by way of penance for their estrangement. Bread-masters, cup-bearers, busy merchants, carvers and cooks, combating violence and tyranny, supposedly confirming peace. They regarded their superiors as the foremost of social forces, undervaluing altogether the value of their lower denomination. Only some bones were found in the place they once occupied, and the people were convinced that the word of the immaculate being had consumed and saved them at the same time. They wandered about for seven years, without sleeping in a bed; there had been 1,200 of them, but their king, their queen, and all the others had died on the way. The faithful and the infidels.

Later that era, things changed. They established bizarre accoutrements and pompous staging, their whole chivalrous culture was marked by an unstable equilibrium between sentimentality and mockery. Stylish life decorated by ideal forms, a world disguised in the fantastic gear of the Round Table. The demonstration of the solvency of the state took the form of entertainment at the fair. There were no grounds to ascribe any economic basis other than mere greed of one's neighbour's riches. What haunted their imagination was tangible yellow gold. In the blind passion with which they followed their lord or their party, the unshakeable sentiment of right tried to find expression. All things presented themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms, producing a perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness. Solemnities of a political character also led to abundant weeping.

Select families disputed fiercely the same precedence; reparation and retribution were extreme, and assumed the character of revenge. Within the community, the sick, the poor and the insane were objects that deeply moved pity, born of a feeling of fraternity akin. Bad fare and poor lodgings, continual noise and disorder, swearing and quarrels, jealousies and injuries, the gates of hell. Noisy manifestations of sorrow fell on deaf ears, and all things connected with deceased people had to bear witness to unmeasured grief. In one case, a state robe was left on the feet of the beheaded and suspended corpse, which was dug up and exhibited in the market place covered with a scarlet

hood, lined with fur. Another Minorite (because he lashed out against the ministry) was guarded night and day in the community, by women posted around the building, armed with ashes and stones, their passionate souls vacillating between tearful piety and frigid cruelty, between respect and insolence, between despondency and wantonness.

No artisan would be melancholy enough to be able to picture it.

But then a third path to a world more beautiful appeared, trodden in all ages and civilisations, the easiest and also the most ungrounded of all: that of the dream. A promise of escape from the gloomy actual was held out to all; only having to cover life with fancy, to enter upon the quest of oblivion, sought in the delusion of ideal harmony.

MS





On the Undecidable Tension between the Possible and the Impossible

The image of a refusal to 'smooth' the consistency of the world, to choose once and for all between the continuity or the discontinuity of space, of time, of matter in general, be it mineral, living or historical, speaks of the radicality of the baroque alternative.

–Bolívar Echeverría¹

The function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth.

–Walter Benjamin²

Collision Aesthetics: An Introduction

Since moving from England to Mexico in 1989, Melanie Smith has positioned her work along two axes – or perhaps it is better to say two fault lines – whose dialectical tensions have provided the artist with a platform from which to interrogate contemporary conditions of experience in Latin America.

One axis is representational, tracing the productive aesthetic collision between the austere language of Minimalist painterly abstraction in which Smith trained as an art student in England, and, as she puts it, the 'baroque, excessive, saturated culture' of Mexico's contemporary reality.³ This involves, on the one hand, an ongoing reassessment of the aesthetic legacies of the historical avant-garde as these have been filtered through that confrontation. From *Spiral City's* recalculation of the modernist grid by way of Mexico City's mushrooming megacity sprawl, to *Estadio Azteca's* (2010) pixelated disintegration of Kazimir Malevich's *Red Square* via mass schoolchild pandemonium, to *Xilitla's* jungle revamp of everything from Surrealism to Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, Smith continually conjures up the utopian aspirations of the historical avant-garde in order to put them through the grinder of Mexico's own equivocal encounters with modernist ambitions. Smith takes as an open question whether and how these representational manoeuvres can be resuscitated as legitimate bases for addressing current historical conditions of globalised capitalism, especially as these are experienced in Mexico and, more broadly, in Latin America. Her work persistently queries to what extent and in what form these critical

¹ Bolívar Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*. Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1998, p. 15.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 1925, translated by John Osborne. London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 182.

³ Melanie Smith, 'Finding Possibility in What Might Seem Impossible' [online]. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 17 December 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Diado-qXe7Y [access: 3 March 2018].

aesthetic strategies might still encapsulate the twin drives of the historical avant-garde: its enfranchising goal of articulating an emancipatory collective experience and its critical aim of laying bare the contradictory structures of capitalism to strip away the false dream of inherent social destiny. In this multi-layered filtration, Smith frequently mobilises her engagement with post-war US and European artists such as Dan Flavin, Yves Klein, Gordon Matta-Clark and, in particular, Robert Rauschenberg. The result is a conceptual and critical expansion of the idea of modernity well beyond any conventional aesthetic, historical or geographic limitations.

On the other hand, Smith's collision aesthetics brings these critical strategies into dialectical engagement with a panoply of Latin American aesthetic addresses to the distinct character of the region's modernity. Some reference canonical modernist artists. *Orange Lush's* quasi-spatialised 'appendages' recall 'how [Brazilian Neo-Concretist] Lygia Clark was thinking of the affective way in which objects connect bodies'.⁴ And Smith's video-installation-painting projects *Tlacochohuaya* (2015) and *Corporis et Legis* (2017) involve 'counter-restoring' certain murals by Diego Rivera. Other references gesture towards popular culture (e.g. Mexico's El Santo and La Patria; Cuban salsa) or colonial and pre-Conquest cultures (e.g. Aztec, Inca and Mexican Baroque art). But, overwhelmingly, Smith's Latin American visual allusions have to do less with artistic practices than with the material cultures of everyday life and their socio-historical situatedness. These range from the hilariously inventive strategies by which the citizens of Lima improvise material solutions in the context of economic scarcity (*Bulto*, 2011) and to the physical decay of Henry Ford's failed utopian industrial complex in Brazil under the relentless onslaught of the Amazonian jungle (*Fordlandia*, 2014), to the alienating geometries, synthetic chromaticities and consumer junk generated by Mexico's vast informal economy and urban megalopolis sprawl (*Spiral City*, 2002; *Tianguis II*, 2003).

Smith's is thus an aesthetic praxis profoundly invested in exploring materialities in relation to procedures of perception. Therefore the second axis operating in her work tracks the multiple economic, political and social crises imposed by a globalising neoliberalism, and how its exigencies have impacted collective experience and the public sphere. Smith's own trajectory, transiting from the free-market bleakness of Thatcher's Britain to Mexico's drama-filled neoliberal upheavals of the eighties onward, has given her singular insight into the geopolitical and geo-economic conditions governing the erosion of subject-object relations and material-perceptual encounters in our current era. In Latin America, the friction between increasingly abstract forms of capital circulation and concrete social realities has produced a 'space-time compression' that is exacerbated by the long reach of the region's colonial history.⁵ This underpins the chronic condition of not knowing 'when we are' and its corollary, the 'difficult[y] stating where we are', to cite Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz – a representational crisis fully in the crosshairs of Smith's aesthetic production.⁶

⁴ Melanie Smith quoted in Cuauhtémoc Medina (ed.), *Melanie Smith. Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures*. Mexico City: A&R Press, 2006, p. 72.

⁵ The phrase is David Harvey's now classic formulation of neoliberalism-induced 'space-time compression' as a factor of contemporary life. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989, pp. 284–307.

⁶ Claudio Lomnitz, 'Time and Dependency in Latin America Today', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 111, no. 2, spring 2012, p. 348.

Paradoxically, for Smith these conditions of intense precarity have enabled a remarkable aesthetic experimentation.⁷ Over the course of her production from the nineties to the present, she has moved from a powerful dystopian interrogation of urban alienation to an exploration of what Marxist theorist Bolívar Echeverría labelled the 'baroque ethos' of modernity.⁸ Less a utopian strategy than a heterotopic alterity, the baroque is 'essentially an eccentric form of modernity'.⁹ A baroque attitude towards modernity therefore opts for a 'negative, dysfunctional behaviour' that turns the real-world sacrifices demanded by capitalism into imagined constructions doubly lodged in modernity's intrinsic inconsistencies and in a related ambivalence towards the very fact of representation.¹⁰ 'A strategy of radical resistance,' writes Echeverría, 'the baroque ethos is not, in itself, a revolutionary ethos: its utopia is not in the "beyond" of an economic and social transformation in a conceivable future, but in the imaginary "beyond" of an unbearable *hic et nunc* transfigured via its dramatisation.'¹¹

Smith delves into these socio-economic-representational formulations of Latin America's contradictory baroque condition via her long engagement with abstraction in relation to a geo-aesthetics of globalisation. Such an artistic trajectory demands a very high degree of aesthetic and intellectual rigour if it is not to slip into the condition that underpins the vast majority of artworks produced today: that is the facile search for momentary gratification in a world ruled by market forces. If, as Walter Benjamin stipulated, artworks are 'to make historical content... into a philosophical truth', then they must wrench open false constructions of history, in dialectical interplay with an equally rigorous interrogation of representational form, in order to posit new aesthetic configurations adequate to lived experience. In what follows, this essay reviews some of those critical aesthetic strategies as they appear in Smith's work.

'Corrupted Minimalism'¹²

Smith's work of the nineties and early two thousands consistently chronicled the emergence of a new visual aesthetic responding to Mexico's reckless plunge into the global circuits of neoliberalism, exploring the disparity between the cacophonous visuality of feverish consumerism and the grim aesthetics resulting from the aggressive erosion of any state-sponsored social safety net. Works such as the 1994–97 *Orange Lush* series, for example, register the dystopian drama of spectacularised excesses of kitsch commodities cohabiting with an aesthetics of poverty generated by Mexico's dysfunctional modernity. *Orange Lush I's* hyper-saturated chemical chromatics hybridise the uncompromising severity of Minimalist abstraction with the baroque extravagance of cut-rate consumer glitz spawned by the explosion of Mexico's informal economy in the wake of the country's NAFTA-based neoliberal turn. Cheap imported plastic objects – everything from buckets, shoes and shopping bags, to telephones, plastic flowers and even toilet seats – become ubiquitous orange emblems of the demise of Mexico's earlier pretensions to a fully

⁷ Notably, Smith arrived in Mexico at the culmination of a decade in which the presidential election fraud of 1988, political assassinations, the state-imposed introduction of neoliberalism in 1982 and the resulting catastrophic peso devaluations all contributed to a massive crisis of representation across Mexican society. Neoliberalism also resulted in the collapse of long-standing state patronage of the arts. Although privatised patronage of the arts emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century, the nineties were, paradoxically, a unique period of inventive creativity for Smith and her colleagues, free from both market pressures and the previous state-imposed mantra of cultural *mexicanidad*.

⁸ Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*, op. cit., p. 32.

⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Three Metaphors for a New Conception of Law: The Frontier, the Baroque, and the South', *Law & Society Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1995, p. 576.

¹⁰ Bolívar Echeverría, 'Multiple Modernity' [online], paper presented at the Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference, Loyola University, New Orleans, 2001, p. 8. <http://www.bolivare.unam.mx/ensayos/Multiple%20modernity.pdf> [access: 6 February 2016].

¹¹ Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*, op. cit., p. 16.

¹² Melanie Smith quoted in *Melanie Smith. Spiral City & Other Vicarious Pleasures*, op. cit., p. 89.

modernised production economy and its turn towards the socio-economic precarities of intense consumerism and unregulated shadow economies. In *Orange Lush*, industrialised colour-as-readymade is made to confront riotous chromatic sensuousness – a sensory overabundance derived not from expressivity or material plenitude, but from Mexico's impaired modernity. This confrontation locates the effects of neoliberalism not in an optical impoverishment of experience (and its artistic analogue, the anti-aesthetic), but rather in a dystopian theatricalisation born of socio-economic and geopolitical disparities.

Tianguis II (2003) and *Spiral City* (2002) provide contrastingly spartan but no less powerful critiques of modernity's alienating contradictions. Both works disrupt that quintessential modernist trope, the flat monochrome painted canvas, contaminating its claims to purity by displacing it onto the gridded forms of Mexico City's monstrous urban sprawl. *Tianguis II* pulls us horizontally through the empty, tarp-covered stalls of one of the city's many street markets, dual video screens switching abruptly from colour to black and white, from long stretches of flat abstract planes to sudden pockets of space. The two-screen format generates a formal tension between doubling and difference, between recurrence and divergence, between stasis and movement. Thus the video's interchange between the static rectangular frame and its optical-temporal disruption problematises the historical association of that frame with perspectival conventions of looking (the frame as a transparent window onto the world). It also overturns prevailing concepts of time as a linear sequence (and the modernist correlate, time as progress), producing instead a relentless and disorienting temporal presentness.¹³ We seem simultaneously to move forward, backward and nowhere at all. Eliminating both the market's usual cache of mass-produced goods and any human presence (along with any hint of labour), *Tianguis II* strips away any sentimental illusion that the public space of the street might still harbour an authentic collective experience tied to Mexico's deep history.¹⁴

Spiral City, in the hands of Smith and her colleague, filmmaker Rafael Ortega, reconceptualises the space-time critique of *Tianguis II* in relation to Robert Smithson's industrial-ruin-landscape, *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Like Smithson's concept of entropy, an 'inexorable and irreversible implosion of any kind of hierarchical order into a terminal sameness', *Spiral City*'s helicopter coil above Mexico City reveals the city's current condition as an apocalyptic monotony of endless, undifferentiated city blocks.¹⁵ The space-time of progressive modernist space, with its promises of a dynamic future, has collapsed into its Janus face: the bleak grey space-time of the eternally identical.¹⁶

In the paintings that form part of the larger *Spiral City* project, Smith carries this dialectic between entropic urbanism and visual form into a critique of the current representational capacities of painting and the photographic themselves. *Painting for Spiral City 17* (2004), part of a long series of such works, replicates a still image from the video in

¹³ On the non-linear character of time in Latin America, see Steve J. Stern, 'The Tricks of Time: Colonial Legacies and Historical Sensibilities in Latin America', in Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History*. New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 135–50. David Harvey has described the uneven temporal character of late capitalism as discontinuous heterogeneous temporalities where 'many different senses of time get pinned together'. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, op. cit., p. 202.

¹⁴ *Tianguis*, derived from the Nahuatl word for an open-air market, references a tradition stemming back to the Aztec.

¹⁵ Yve-Alain Bois, 'Publishing "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey"', Robert Smithson marks "entropy" as a generative concept of artistic practice in the late sixties', in Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2016, p. 581.

¹⁶ Additionally, as Smith's inclusion of an eighteenth-century colonial map of Mexico City in the dossier for the *Spiral City* project indicates, the concept of the grid as a progressive, rationalising structure formed the basis for the Enlightenment's colonialist attempts to impose a 'civilising' regularity on the 'barbaric' disorder of Latin America's indigenous peoples and natural landscapes. See Richard Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World 1493–1793*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, especially pp. 1–44. This concept of the grid as rationalist and progressive was, of course, adapted to the utopian aims of modernism across a broad range of political ideologies.

acrylic enamel paint on acrylic safety glass. By blurring the forms, the image performs a double manoeuvre, oscillating between the individualised painterly gesture and the facticity of the photograph, that places the historically-conditioned perceptual function of each medium in an ambivalent relation with the other. On the one hand, painterly gesture (along with all its outmoded cognates centred on the myth of heroic resistance to the reification imposed by mass culture) is radically suppressed by grounding the image in the evidentiary optical structure of the photographic. On the other hand, by smudging the rigid rectilinear contours of houses and streets, *Painting for Spiral City 17* reintroduces painterliness (albeit in an industrially modified form, the airbrush), thereby undercutting the hegemony of the photographic as the quintessential visual technology indispensable to constructing contemporary collective society.

Topothesia

Since 2010, Smith has shifted her earlier, more purely dystopian explorations of the time-space warp of Mexico's plummet into neoliberalism towards an activation of the concept of heterotopia in relation to the foundered dream worlds of modernism's utopias. From *Estadio Azteca*'s chaotic mass subversion of both the universalising modernist pretensions of the monochrome and the nationalist spectacles of Mexico's state-sponsored modernisation and to *Fordlandia*'s tropical ruination of Henry Ford's dream of exporting the 'civilising' mission of US industrialism to the Brazilian Amazon, to *Bulto*'s absurdist parody of capitalism's utopian claims to rationalism and efficiency, a central concern for Smith has been to use the unsettling character of heterotopia to probe the idealised purity of utopia.¹⁷

Utopias and heterotopias, as Michel Foucault demonstrated, are intimately interlinked even as the one functions as the antithesis of the other. 'Utopias', wrote Foucault, 'afford consolation' because '[t]hey present society itself in a perfected form'. Conversely, 'heterotopias are disturbing' because they are spaces of difference and contrast.¹⁸ Heterotopias are real spaces that contest and invert other spaces, whether those are the imagined 'non-places' of utopias or the hegemonic spaces of existing societies. They are 'aporetic spaces that reveal or represent something about the society in which they reside through the way in which they incorporate and stage the very contradictions that this society produces but is unable to resolve'.¹⁹

Critics have often viewed Latin America as a site of heterotopic inversions of modernity's utopian imaginaries, where those utopian visions are concretised in all their ambiguity, contingency and contradictoriness.²⁰ As Ticio Escobar has pointed out with regard to the Americas, utopia – with its connotations of the non-place, the nowhere and the impossible – can be productively re-signified through a multiplicity of practices, by placing its 'not-possible' into dialectical tension with

¹⁷ Smith's heterotopic critique is as much formal as philosophical or historical. All these works are produced by means of a percipient contamination of media that generates multiple registers of representational medium-time-space displacement. The conventional terms 'film', 'multimedia' or 'installation' are hopelessly inadequate to the task of describing these works.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *Diacritics*, spring 1986, p. 24; Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Pantheon Books, 1970, xvii–xix.

¹⁹ Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (eds.), *Heterotopia and the City. Public space in a postcivil society*. London: Routledge, 2008, p. 25.

²⁰ See, for instance, Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Reflexión heterotópica: las obras', in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea (eds.), *Heterotopias: medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918–1968*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000, pp. 23–43; José Luis Barrios, 'Red Square Impossible Pink. Frame and Affect on the Alterations of Modernity', in José Luis Barrios (ed.), *Red Square Impossible Pink: Melanie Smith*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes/Turner, 2011, p. 17. Critics have noted this model's paradoxical rejection and reinforcement of Latin America's 'peripheral' status. See Daniel R. Quiles, 'Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from "Latin America"', *Artforum Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 1, spring 2014, pp. 62–78.

the 'possible' of concrete acts and realities.²¹ This is the terrain of the heterotopic; it is also the terrain of politics and representation. It has implications for how representation (political and aesthetic) can insert the 'risk of the not-possible' into the pragmatism of the 'possible', argues Escobar, thereby opening 'a margin for the unforeseen' that can disrupt 'the calculations of instrumental logic and the Messianic certainties of an inescapable historical destiny'.²² Whereas Foucault remained deeply suspicious of any concrete emancipatory mobilisation of the utopian impossible (hence his remark about 'consolation'), Escobar is less pessimistic. In his view, the 'open time-space of an expectation' let loose by utopia can be illusory in the Foucauldian sense – that is, never realisable within the horizon of actual circumstances. But it can also be emancipatory, not least because of its power to 'disorient a [purely pragmatic] way of thinking about politics' and thus open up new imaginaries. And it is towards exploring what Escobar terms 'the undecidable tension between the possible and the impossible' of the heterotopia-utopia matrix that Smith has recently turned her aesthetic production.²³

Reading this matrix in relation to the problem of representation, Smith homes in on the unexpected juxtapositions and incongruous 'misplacings' that characterise the heterotopic.²⁴ Hence, for instance, her fascination with Henry Ford's hubristic twenties' fantasy of exporting his industrial capitalist model of the American dream to the Amazonian jungle. Doomed from the outset, Fordlandia succumbed to the US industrialist's arrogant refusal to consider local agricultural, topographic and labour conditions in his quest to 'industrialise' the 'whole jungle'.²⁵ Beset by everything from vipers, leaf blight and insects with 'claws just like lobsters', to crocodiles, malaria, worker riots and madness, Ford's socio-economic experiment was soon abandoned to the creeping ravages of nature.²⁶

Smith's *Fordlandia* (2014) operates on the socio-political and aesthetic schisms opened by the failure of Ford's utopian chimera. The film deliberately opens a set of tensions between subject and form that pushes the contradictions of Fordlandia rather than papering them over. Smith underscores the 'negative, dysfunctional behaviour' at the heart of the baroque attitude to modernity described by Echeverría, not just of people and nature, but also of time and space, even of rational syntaxes of size and perspective. Among the many interwoven aesthetic formulations that Smith uses, three in particular – temporality, spatial cognition and colour – serve to allegorise the fiasco of Ford's pipedream of exporting US-style modernity.

In terms of temporality, Smith's film deploys a multilayered presentness that nullifies the Fordist compartmentalisation of time into assembly-line production, the calibrated workday and 'free' time made available for consumption. From the film's long takes of sloths, crocodiles and snakes that equate cinematic with animal stasis ('animals are so locked up in their present' notes Smith), to the motionless

²¹ Ticio Escobar, 'What Happened at Curuguaty? The Coup and the Limits of Hegemonic Thought' [online], *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (2018), p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2017.1420637> [access: 3 March 2018].

²² Escobar, 'What Happened at Curuguaty?', op. cit., p. 5.

²³ Ibid, p. 6.

²⁴ Anthony Vidler, 'Troubles in Theory Part VI: From Utopia to Heterotopia', *Architectural Review*, vol. 236, no. 1412, October 2014, pp. 102–07. Vidler's model of heterotopic space resonates with Roberto Schwarz's concept of 'misplaced ideas' as a productive characteristic of Brazilian (and Latin American) modernity. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas. Essays on Brazilian Culture*. London: Verso, 1992.

²⁵ *Time Magazine*, cited in Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Co., 2009, p. 5.

²⁶ Constance Perini cited in Grandin, *Fordlandia*, op. cit., p. 197.

'journeys' across the Amazonian waters in which time seems stationary and topography static, *Fordlandia* erodes the Fordist equation of time with progress.²⁷ Equally undone are European colonialist narratives of search, arrival and possession, embodied in everything from the hunt for the mythical El Dorado to Alexander von Humboldt's late eighteenth-century botanical expedition. The film does not move from one point to another, from urban city to rain forest, from 'civilisation' to wilderness. 'There's no arrival', Smith points out; 'you're just there'.²⁸ The passage of time equates neither to movement nor to production or progress. Labour is high absent in the film, supplanted by endless waiting. Labour's production of commodities, symbolised by Fordlandia's decrepit factory buildings, has effectively gone backwards in time, into ruin.

Space-time, and spatial cognition: *Fordlandia*'s long filmic stretches of monotonous plane and boat travel link non-productive time with heterotopic space. 'The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*', Foucault reminds us; 'the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea.'²⁹ Indeed, disruptions of the instrumentalised time-space configurations for which Ford was known occur throughout the film. Night shots intersperse total darkness with fugitive glimpses of impenetrable rainforest. Close-focus shots of painted fingernails, rusting machine gears and foreheads beaded with human sweat alternate abruptly with panoramic vistas of endless jungle, producing severe and disorienting shifts in visual scale. Extreme close-ups of mosquitos biting flesh, ants devouring a moth and the almost imperceptible twitches of a frog breathing insert cognitive ruptures that sabotage any rationalist, human-scale spatial perception.

Colour is also liberated from its subsidiary descriptive role and redeployed as a structuring element. From the shimmering pea green of the Amazon's waters marred only by the shadow of a tiny plane, to the neon orange of hammocks interrupted by a slice of pink T-shirt, to a man's tan cheek and eyebrow balanced against abstract rectangles of acid green and orange, Smith uses colour to move us into a discrete realm of experience that stresses visual relationships over material things. Colour is loosed from its secondary, decorative function to become semi-autonomous, a protagonist in its own right. The film tracks numerous geometries of visual experience: milky-white cross-hatching incised into rubber trees; a green-grey square of river framed by the black interior of a ship's hold; the vertical red stripe of a young woman's T-shirt strap balanced against the luminous turquoise of a curtain. Yet in Smith's hands colour is never predetermined or stable. As in *Estadio Azteca*, in which Smith sought to 'break that utopian moment of abstraction' embodied in Malevich's monochrome, *Fordlandia* gives us colour generated not out of a utopian universalism, but rather out of the messy particularities of experience.³⁰

²⁷ Melanie Smith, author interview, January 2018.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', op. cit., p. 27.

³⁰ Melanie Smith, author interview, January 2018.

Whereas *Fordlandia* critiqued the failure of Ford's utopian dream of industrial progress, *Xilitla* (2010) treats an antithetical utopia: British Surrealist Edward James's fantasy garden, Las Pozas, constructed in the rainforests of Mexico's Huasteca region in the decades after the Second World War. Deliberately built as a ruin, James's private Eden refused the utilitarian functionalism then being touted as the architectural solution to the urban chaos of Mexico's rapid modernisation.³¹ Instead, it courted a 'spatio-psychical' uncanny: the haunting return of modernism's repressed underside in the form of myriad bizarre, psychically-charged sculptures and strange architectonic structures collapsing under the inexorable weight of tropical flora.³²

In *Xilitla*, Smith cinematically 'disassembles' James's surreal dreamscape, transmuting its oneiric utopianism into heterotopic critique by heightening its dysfunctional excesses.³³ Through the hallucinatory aporias produced by the film's image-movement-sound disruptions, *Xilitla* opens a conceptual ambiguity commensurate with modernity's inherent paradoxes. Modern societies, argues Echeverría, face the challenge of inventing everyday life strategies to counteract the contradictions of capitalism, to 'make liveable a world that otherwise would be unbearable because of its inner contradiction'.³⁴ In Latin America, this has resulted in a 'baroque ethos' whose irrational eccentricities stand against capitalism's civilisational project. Not the traditional leftist model of trenchant resistance, but one of inefficiency and impairment, writes Echeverría, 'it is a very ineffective and subordinated version of modernity because it does not organise the world in order to improve the capitalistic mode of economic reproduction'.³⁵ The baroque ethos produces aesthetic constructions generated both by modernity's innate inconsistencies and by a corresponding equivocacy regarding representation itself. It 'refus[es] to "smooth" the consistency of the world, to choose once and for all between the continuity and the discontinuity of space, of time, of matter'.³⁶ 'This uneasiness with the very fact of representation that prevails in the baroque representation of the world', argues Echeverría, 'is similar to the uneasiness of modern everyday life' as it is experienced in places like Mexico.³⁷

It is this troubling representational ambivalence that Smith exploits in *Xilitla*. Her persistent dislocation of strategies of painting and sculpture into the medium of 'movement-image' produces a disturbing sensation of sensual extravagance coupled with the uncanny.³⁸ Thus, for instance, Smith exacerbates Las Pozas' oneiric quality by filming at twilight or in the early morning, suffusing the entire film with a melancholy blue-green tinge that plunges much of the landscape into shadow. This eerie half-light is punctured at certain points by useless architectural monstrosities, at others by fireworks or Dan Flavin-like bars of fluorescent light. Cement structures resemble the fossilised remains of giant prehistoric plants. Momentary flashes of a young girl clothed in an orange bathing suit lend a subaqueous eroticism to the landscape. Throughout, mirrors

³¹ On Mexican functionalist architecture and its relationship to the so-called 'Mexican miracle' of rapid economic modernisation, see Cristóbal Andrés Jácome, 'La construcción del orden', and George F. Flaherty, 'Tlatelolco inquietante, yuxtaposiciones incómodas', in Rita Eder (ed.), *Desafío a la estabilidad. Procesos artísticos en México/Defying Stability. Artistic Processes in Mexico, 1952-1967*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014, pp. 314-27; pp. 400-17.

³² Anthony Vidler, 'Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture'. *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 1, winter 2003, p. 3.

³³ Melanie Smith, *Xilitla: Dismantled 1* [online]. <http://melaniesmith.net/xilitla.html> [access: 3 March 2018].

³⁴ Echeverría, 'Multiple Modernity', op. cit., p. 6.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*, p. 15.

³⁷ Echeverría, 'Multiple Modernity', op. cit., p. 9.

³⁸ Barrios, 'Red Square Impossible Pink. Frame and Affect on the Alterations of Modernity', op. cit., p. 17.

double, fragment, replicate and splinter the jungle into cryptic doppelgängers, at times rendering the tropical vegetation half-human, as if the trees and vines had legs and were walking. This deliberately disordered opticality is itself ruptured by the jarring noises sporadically unleashed, producing a grating tension between sound and image.

Xilitla's use of mirrors, a clear reference to Robert Smithson's *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* (1969), transforms Las Pozas into an optical-spatio-psychical construct, a heterotopic dialectic of the possible and impossible. Inversions abound, upending the nature and the relational arrangement of places and things. Perception is cast adrift; space is at once real and unreal.³⁹ Signs multiply and proliferate, taking on an extravagant superfluity of meaning. Smithson's description of his own mirror experiment could be transferred wholesale to *Xilitla*: 'Bits of reflected jungle retreated from one's perception. Each point of focus spilled into cavities of foliage. Glutinous light submerged vision under a wilderness of unassimilated seeing. Scraps of sight accumulated until the eyes were engulfed by scrambled reflections. What was seen reeled off into indecisive zones.'⁴⁰

It is also tempting to think of *Xilitla* as a filmic recalculation of Las Pozas' surreal psycho-architecture through the lens of Smithson's concept of 'ruins in reverse': that is, as built forms whose dilapidation serves as 'the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures'.⁴¹ And it is with this idea that we might conclude. Smithson, of course, derived the concept from the crumbling remnants of Passaic, New Jersey's frustrated dreams of a glorious industrialised future; it became central to his model of entropy: the gradual 'collapse into nondifferentiation' of modernity's hierarchised order.⁴² Edward James, by contrast, deliberately built Las Pozas as a ruin, as a critique of – and escape from – modernisation's relentless technocratic-industrial rationalism. Both, albeit from differing perspectives, viewed disintegration and ruin as the heterotopic counterpoint to 'a culture that teaches us to live progress as an annulment of time, to found territory in an elimination of space and to use technology as an annihilation of chance'.⁴³ In *Xilitla*, Melanie Smith mines these perspectives for a baroque ethos that 'authorise[s] the imaginary decentring of the pragmatic order of things'.⁴⁴

But another visual episode from *Xilitla* shows Smith also situating herself with regard to Gordon Matta-Clark's architecture, a positioning that probes the never-resolved tension around a set of concepts: production/destruction; form/*informe*; rational/irrational; utopia/heterotopia; modernism/baroque. *Xilitla* lingers in several long shots on a set of circular industrial cuts in the tiered floors of Las Pozas' central building whose precise formal abstraction seems strangely at odds with the Gaudí-like anti-functionalism operating elsewhere in James's surreal Arcadia. Dubbed 'Matta-Clark with a mirror' by one of Smith's film team, the cinematic shots conjure up the intersecting circular cuts of Matta-Clark's *Office Baroque* (1977) that opened a vertiginous spatial drop through five storeys of an Antwerp office building.⁴⁵ Smith rediscovers

³⁹ This is reminiscent of Foucault's equation of mirrors with heterotopia: '...when I look at myself in the mirror at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.' See Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', op. cit., p. 24.

⁴⁰ Robert Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror Travels in the Yucatan (1969)', in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 129. As Rosalind Krauss notes, mirroring was also bound up with entropy and a 'structural blindness' in Smithson's work. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, 'A User's Guide to Entropy', *October*, vol. 78, autumn 1996, p. 41.

⁴¹ Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *The Collected Writings*, op. cit., p. 72.

⁴² Bois and Krauss, 'A User's Guide to Entropy', op. cit., p. 58.

⁴³ Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*, op. cit., p. 14.

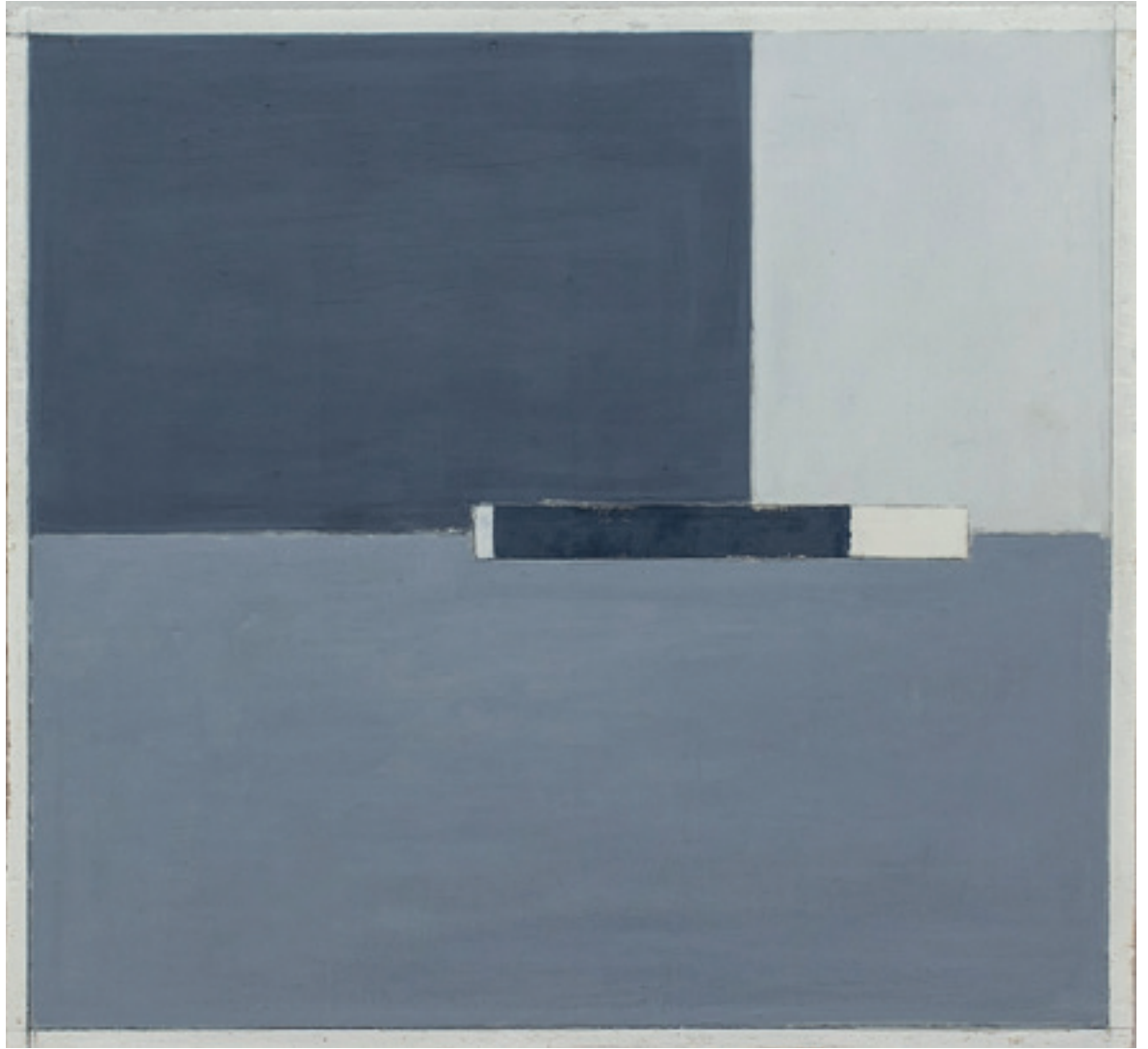
⁴⁴ Bolívar Echeverría, 'El ethos barroco y la estetización de la vida cotidiana', *Escritos. Revista del Centro de Ciencias del Lenguaje*, no. 13–14, 1996, p. 162.

⁴⁵ Paola Santoscoy, 'Bitácora de filmación', *Xilitla. Melanie Smith*. Paris: Ediciones El Mojado, 2012, p. 42.

the dialectical tension mounted by Matta-Clark between form and its breakdown; between, on the one hand, a Corbusian technological rationalisation of space and, on the other, the baroque preoccupation with the dissolution of boundaries, the collapse of perspectival order and the transgression of rationalist space.⁴⁶

For Smith, as for Matta-Clark, the aim is not to choose between architecture's utopian ambition to define universal accessibility to public space and its negation, architecture-as-ruin; the first has devolved into architecture-as-corporate-spectacle, while the second risks a naïve return to architecture-as-resistance. Rather, the goal is to place the two in uneasy convergence such that the fissures register the representational ambivalence at the heart of the intrinsic contradictions of modernity's emancipatory project as it has been co-opted under capitalism. Smith's remarkable insight is to have recognised, across all her image-movement-sound interventions, the productive capacity of that indeterminacy to generate an aesthetics appropriate to contemporary experience.

⁴⁶ On baroque space, see Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 85 and 89.



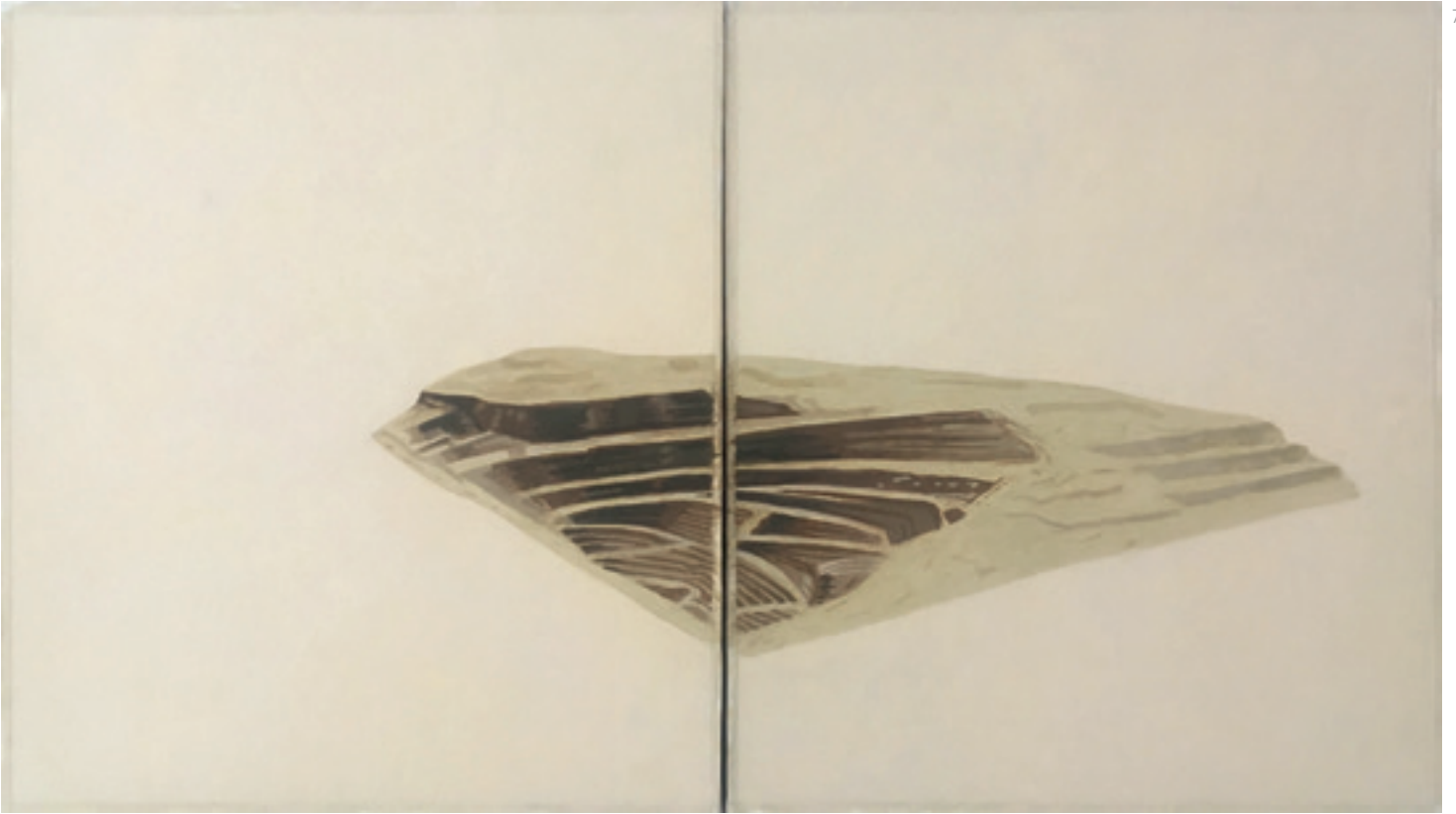














Blue

This tale begins with a Liberal leader and his innovative exploration of the colour blue. Not Nick Clegg and the Tories, but William Gladstone and his concern about Homer's use of colour in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Homer never described the sky as blue. The sea was 'wine-looking'. Oxen were also 'wine-looking'. And, to Gladstone, the sea and oxen were never of the same colour. What Gladstone first imagined as a screen becomes a blue tide, blue words, panes whose transparency is replaced by a blind and permanent blueness. The brief sound is like a colour swallowed by a crack. But what colour? It occurs to Gladstone that the word 'face' creates its own blue eyes. Gladstone's eyes in the screen like letters jumbled up under the open sky. His explanation was that the Ancient Greeks had not developed a colour sense, and instead saw the world in terms of black and white with only a dash of red. All the literary shit eventually falls by the wayside. Throwaway phrases. Blue apron, blue tooth, blue dart, blue air check-in online, blue cross shield. The word blue slid off the carpet, so rather than change the word, they changed the colour. Why everyone and their mother started using blue hair dye. Blue is a mother with a secret life. Pure blue, in the middle.

I hear others shifting around, lit-up faces framed by the rectangle. Glow of immanence. No, I'm an individual with the ability to know which way is north at all times, even in the dark. In fact, she barely used colour terms at all and when she did they were just peculiar.

MS



















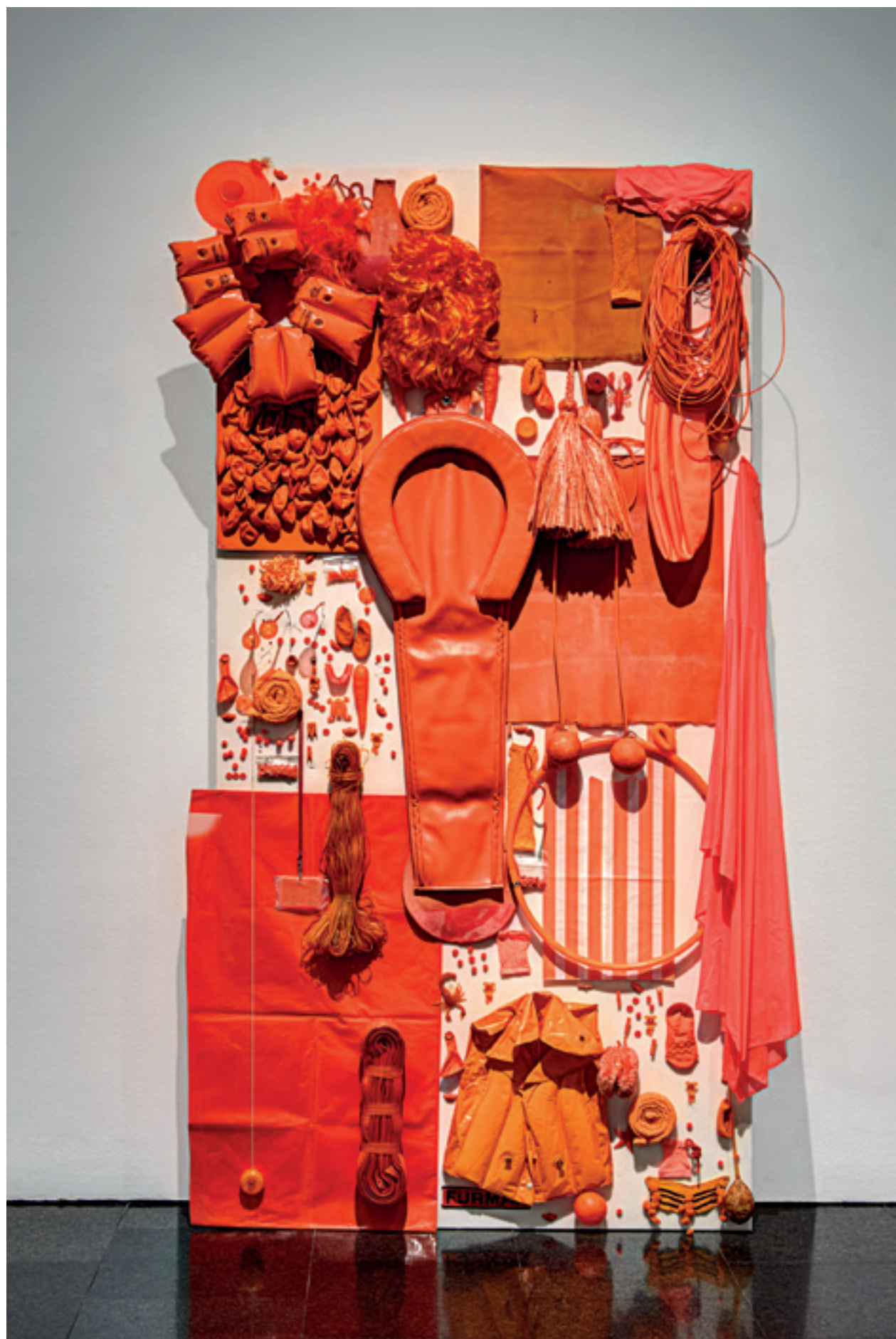














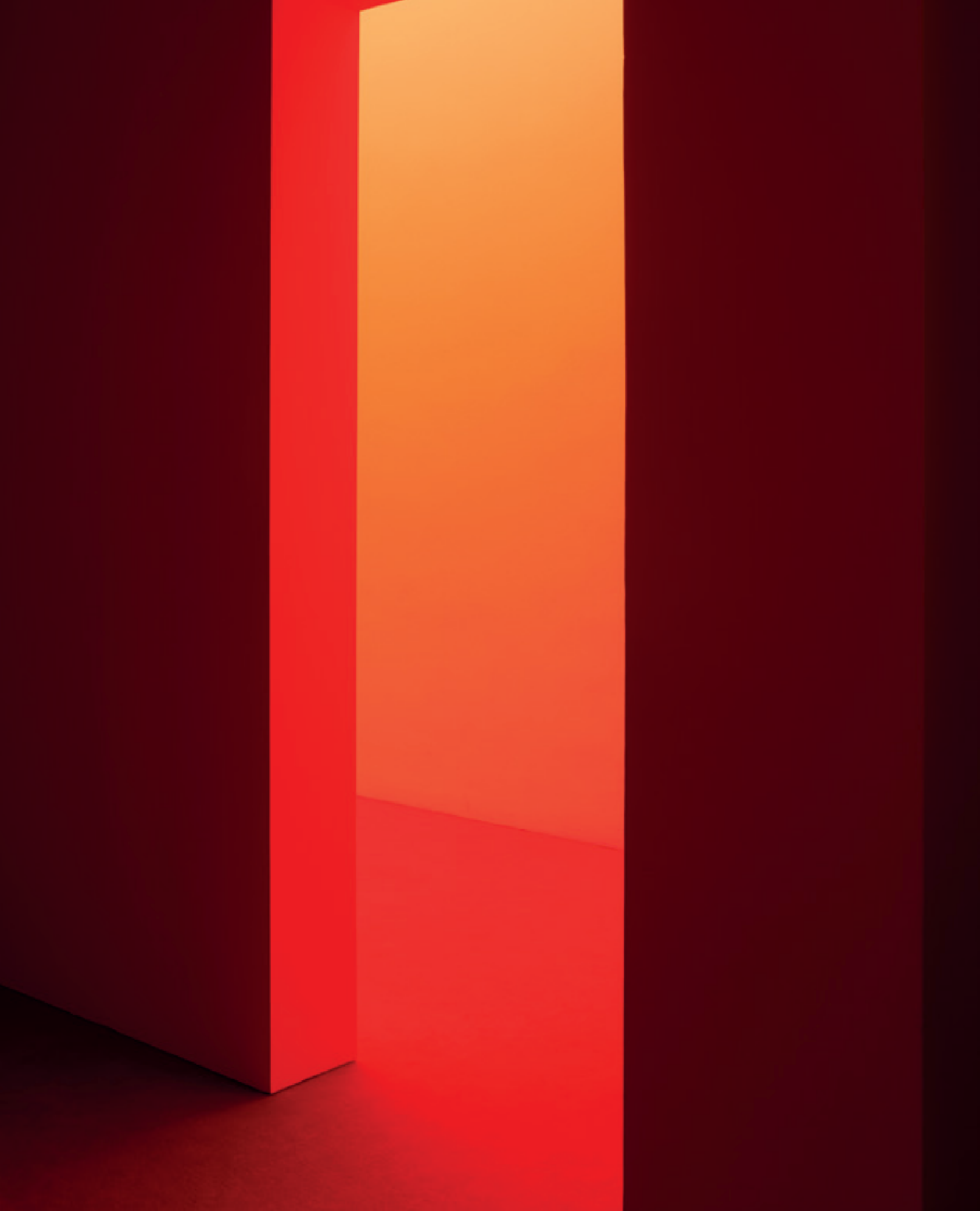
Overspill

People are tired. Stuff swells; bursts. Orange cones cordon off all the unmarked areas. Order but no connection. A monkey with a waistcoat eats off a stained tablecloth. Plastic, piled with no vanishing point. The man at the desk stamps all the forms with a concrete block. An area is punctuated with things and it has many of them in different places. In this scene the road looks ashen, deathlike grey with big empty signs. Every word is useless, like the fake policeman who stands at the entrance, stalking the passageways that are filled with the smaller than averages. We have metal teeth, cavernous drains and indigo sky, but no edges; squashing the displaced wherever they don't fit. Thousands of people who can't find their left shoe roam the streets. The images travel all over her temple, between the feeling and the felt, in the seam that separates life from the unwanted. Like the light in my head, things churn up. In some spots, traces of recent movement can be dug up. A screen where illusion is projected. One of them advances in the foreground, but the rest of them get mangled in the soundtrack. They read the international news but it doesn't get any better. Impossible to embody, that's where I feel comfortable. Here, the importance of the concept of the sublime, where the murmur of silence and the unspeakable territories get reconciled. The sadness of nature and the loss of no sign. In black and white it somehow felt more ideal.

MS











CM: It seems clear that around 2010, or slightly before then, there was a logical shift in your work. For one thing, you started a series of pieces that were far denser in their allegorical content, and I'd also say more 'distant,' with respect to social documentation: your research moved away from its object-driven photographic foundation, from the urban setting, and from the question of artificiality, shifting instead toward an interrogation of historical/symbolic spaces as signifiers of modernisation on multiple planes. For another thing, it seems to me, these works sought a kind of oblique gaze that resulted in pieces like *Farce and Artifice* (2006),¹ which question a type of unplaceable taste, a political/visual enigma.

MS: What interests me isn't necessarily the sum of the parts; I think that's what you mean when you say that *Farce and Artifice* was a kind of conundrum, where the parts don't add up, like a story that doesn't have a beginning or an end... the pictorial touches the image as if 'behind the scenes'. That has always happened in my work: creating something is represented in the 'making of', like in *Six Steps to Reality* (2002). That oblique gaze appears in *Xilitla* (2010) and the idea of the mirror as a representation of how biased perception really is.

After I left Spain and returned to Mexico in 2008, I decided I wanted to work on the idea of the gaze – not just in one direction or another, but slanted, through different perspectives and points of view, if you like. I think that was quite a conscious decision on my part.

¹ *Farce and Artifice* is a performance, with an accompanying slide show of found images from 1970's left wing theatre productions. An Anglo-Saxon woman and a Cuban dance teacher come together on the dance floor in an hour of laboured steps and clumsiness. The woman embodies the awkwardness and estrangement of learning the steps as an outsider.

² Located near the town of Xilitla, located in the Huasteca region, in the state of San Luis Potosí, in Mexico, Las Pozas, is the garden of the collector of Surrealism Edward James (1907–1984). It is the setting for *Xilitla: Dis-mantled 1*. The garden contains numerous surreal architectural constructions or follies that James built in this semitropical setting between 1962 and his death.

CM: *Xilitla* is an essay you made in collaboration with Rafael Ortega that explores the cinematographic possibilities of this place.² The video includes moments in which we see a distorting mirror pass by, as if trying to capture something that somehow turns out to be trapped inside itself. It has the advantage of placing the viewer in very direct engagement with a subject I'll try to present right away as 'the appreciation of tropical entropy', a line Robert Smithson explored in a type of inversion of the chronology of monument and ruin. Your film insists on the idea of a time that tries to flow in many directions at once: on the one hand, it's the circular time of the jungle, buildings wearing down, the mix of historical moments experienced by the buildings themselves and their moulds, Edward James's dream. But it's also the time of fantasies in this ghostly jungle. I get the sense that this experience also set forth a kind

of temporality in which your work began to inhabit a very strange space: neither the present nor the future nor the past in general, but rather a type of compressed time.

MS: Yes, I've thought about that. *Xilitla* is called *Xilitla: Dismantled*; it's like dismantling time. From *Xilitla* onward, my videos have something dreamlike about them. They don't have a beginning or an end, and they don't offer answers; they raise questions, but nothing is resolved. Things are inserted from other perspectives. It was unconscious at first, and I'm growing more aware of it: whenever I make a video or a film, it's like suspending time and thinking about the present, too. I think it's a space in which the past and the present – maybe the future, too; I'm not sure – are somehow superimposed. The fact of dismantling and using jump cuts in such a surprising way, the idea of suspending time and space in the present, is something that leads me to this 'other' space that I'm always searching for somehow. I think it's connected to the state of being a foreigner.

CM: I think it's very much present in the sort of 'death made eternal' that appears in your reconstruction pieces. That is, your pieces that centre on restoring a work of art that doesn't exist, as if you were painting it backwards.

MS: I call it – along with the person I work with, a restore – 'counter-restoration'. It means creating something new out of a past that runs in the opposite direction, as the 'restoration' itself does. It means making a new surface – of the copy, you could say; of something that did exist, but which creates serious gaps in the story. In having a restorer work live on one or several fragments of a wall, my goal has been to slow down cinematographic time and make it coexist with pictorial time.

CM: I'd like to think that these tactics emerge from a studied, well-understood observation of our strange relationship with that archaeological/touristic/emotional space, the relationship that leads us through our experience of history – but which connects, in parallel, with a certain skepticism on your part when it comes to thinking that such a relationship could be productive.

MS: On my part? In the end, it isn't productive. I feel that what I'm saying about the act of erasing, adding in, taking out, and putting back in, is ultimately redundant, which prevents it from being a productive time. Yes, as you say, the story never ends; at the same time, it never began, either.

CM: In much of your work, it seems to me that there's an attempt to capture a very fragile state of almost arriving at the moment of the flaw...

MS: Or even producing the flaw, right?

CM: Yes, in dialogue with precarious social and cultural forms, amid an incomplete modernity, a tragicomic modernisation, or an unfulfilled sphere of desire. How do you understand that place?

MS: I think it's also a very dangerous place. The words 'precariousness', 'Mexico', 'Latin America'... they're like recurrences or occurrences that mean the work can be viewed with a certain touch of exoticism, which leads to an understanding of irrationality and precariousness as Latin traits. I'm very conscious of that. I don't understand precariousness or 'the flaw' as something negative, as an essentially failed modernity: these conditions we're forced to experience, produce, and understand can, I think, be positive circumstances, and I don't see them as defects or negative things in any sense.

CM: Your work doesn't generally indicate, much less express, that 'incompleteness' or erosion; what it does is explore the aesthetic that emerges from this particular state. It's hard to find a useful term, but it seems that you understand the 'beauty' or the 'seduction' of this context.

MS: Or, better put, the surface. The texture and surface... Yes: I think my work is to constantly deconstruct questions about the 'front side/back side' of politics, the surface, or the painting, so that I can explore what exists around the political and, let's say, physical 'framework'. Naturally, these questions contain the 'B side' of a society's construction, or of how a piece is physically made. I often show what's behind the construction of a project, a culture, or a society. And those questions, curiously, come from my training as a Minimalist, of understanding that 'B side' in industrial or synthetic production... When I came to Mexico, I realised I couldn't restrict myself to talking about that neat, whole, cleanly defined surface. And I think this has gradually spread, little by little, from the limits of industrial production toward nature. I think I'm looking for the absence of the sign on the surface, instead of looking for it in the concept. That's why I shatter any rational meaning of production, planting a bomb on it, right?

All of this is normal for me; it's my world and it's normal. I think any artist, if you ask them the same question, will respond that we see all these worlds we create as perfectly normal. And that precisely is our strength and our failure. We stumble in the way that we produce, and we go forward. That's the very strength of the work.

CM: There are two or three moments where the work seems to suggest a state of over-fullness and nausea: you look saturated, fed up, your mouth full of plastic. You're fascinated with an emetic moment, when it's impossible for a person to eat her own soup.

MS: And what about the piece for La Tallera?³ How do you see that piece, then? The work with the remnants.

CM: But everything has to do with a saturation.

³ *Obscuridades bucólicas* were a series of seven performative works made for La Tallera, the venue of the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, a former studio of the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) located in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Each of the performances, which took place on select days through 2017, manifested a live tableaux (or *tableaux vivant*) each time drawn from a different painting by Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450–1516) or Peter Brueghel the Elder (c.1525/30–1569). Siqueiros's ex-studio became a workshop, where carpenters, students, local seamstresses, scenographers and a restoration specialist, came together with students from the local theatre school and musicians. Each tableaux also involved the live creation of a mural by a restorer from fragments of Bosch and Brueghel paintings. The activity was simultaneously recorded on nine different security cameras as well as through still photography.

MS: Yes, that's it. I constantly create collisions in historical time, between certain formal instances... I don't see the piece for La Tallera as a performance, or a painting, or theatre, or music: it's a kind of sum of what it isn't. It's like a residue, all stuck together, somehow, where I finally feel that I'm composing in space and time. I'd been cooking up this piece for a long time, ever since *Estadio Azteca*,⁴ with all the pleasure it brings me to work in circumstances that overwhelm me, when people don't always do what you want them to do. My work always plays with the idea of accident, that something could happen at any moment when you're not working with professionals, but at the same time you're guiding the whole process. I draw from a totally different sense of history, forging this bond between the European past, Bosch, medieval times, and I bring it into a contemporary situation, to Mexico, with living bodies, producing a kind of cheap mimesis of those original paintings.

And going back to your question, yes, there's something emetic, unconscious, that I don't exactly understand as I'm producing it. I hope it creates some kind of tension or... what was it you said? Fascination, when I'm unable to gather all the threads.

CM: Sometimes I look at your work and I find myself thinking about something I don't want to describe as courage, but rather as a kind of negative condition: with some pieces, you have to forget about what's absurd and shocking, to suspend your common sense. It's a state you have to...

MS: To get into... yes, it's like I'm challenging myself to something that I'm not sure can be solved. I set up the premise, I ask myself questions, but I don't set out any answers, and... yes, it means moving around like a dog. With that innate sense that the questions I'm asking myself are the right ones, and which emerge from the very beginning when I work.

CM: Could you tell us what those questions are?

MS: The pictorial framework, now situated in a geopolitical framework, in a relationship between what is 'behind' and what is 'ahead,' and what is it that happens beyond the illusion of the pictorial framework... I don't know if these questions are clear to everyone, but they're clear to me, and they've been clear since *Spiral City* (2002),⁵ with the grid. They're questions about the Minimalist framework, about what happens when you shift the piece's physical framework into a different context. *Estadio Azteca* (2010), *Red Square* (2011),⁶ Bosch, the mirror in *Xilitla*. I constantly reference art history and present a peculiar condition about what I've experienced here.

CM: I think it's quite apparent that these questions aren't about painting, but about... what would you say? The framework of representation? Because Melanie Smith sometimes paints, it's true, but she isn't a painter.

MS: No, I don't think I'm a painter. I think that representation breaks with certain ideas about the context of my work and its development in

⁴ *Estadio Azteca. Proeza maleable* (2010) is a video installation that addresses the relationship between chaos and modernity. In it 3,000 students from Mexican public schools hold cards aloft that together compose mosaic images.

⁵ *Spiral City* (2002) is a film responding to American artist Robert Smithson's earthwork and related film, both titled *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Whereas Smithson's film follows the movement of the artist along the in turning spiral, *Spiral City* plays off the counterpoint of Mexico City's grid, working against the upward movement of the camera flying in widening spirals. The film is a testament to a city that is subject to a crystalline like erosion, whereby structures build upon each other and collapse, as well as being a haunting cartography of the future. The series also includes several black-and-white photographs and a series of paintings. Together they compose a document of an apparently limitless urban expansion, where the abstract contemplation of mass is inseparable from its social experience.

⁶ This was the name given to Smith's Mexican Pavilion exhibition in the 54th Venice Biennale (2011) in which she presented three projects: *Estadio Azteca*, *Xilitla: Dismantled* and *Bulto*.

the nineties: the periphery, the centre, and their understanding as two different modernities. What has happened in my work, I think, is that it broke with a sense of the gaze between 'here' and 'there'. That gaze doesn't exist for me anymore. It's a hybrid of representations: a modernity that was or is constructed in this different way. Which leads to all these complex questions about my relationship with art history.

CM: What I'm understanding here is that you feel strongly about stressing that this modernity isn't a copy of European or American modernity, but rather a very paradoxical construction, dense, difficult to capture, because the reference point was never European and Western artistic authority.

MS: What I'm getting at is that I think this flaw, as we've always perceived it, isn't in itself a flaw; it's a possibility... I hate the word 'potential' because it's repeated all the time in the language of the art world, and it's over-interpreted, but I can't come up with another word to describe it. I think in my work I always draw from the resource of the flaw as something I'd like people not to view as such; I'd like them to understand that the backstage *is* the stage. Or that this extra, who isn't an actor, is just a person onstage. It's a way of building everything that deconstructs: the note, the music, the performance, the painting... I work with all of these elements as 'discordant narrative.'

CM: It's like you're demanding that the viewer position herself before this difficult ensemble of things – which isn't a whole, which lacks the absoluteness of a whole – as the possibility of feeling entirely able to use it, travel through it, think about it, absorb it, register it, laugh at it, implement it. A person doesn't look at it and say, 'What a great piece!' Because what you end up saying is, 'What a strange and special moment!'

MS: But don't you think that this lack of definition is important? That if something is powerful, then to some extent it's inexplicable? Because these are the very circles we turn around that lack of definition, which produces another series of questions. When I look at a work of art I can't define, a piece I don't entirely understand, it leaves a mark on me; it leaves me with something. That's one of the problems I have with some contemporary art: it adheres too closely to predictable canons, or black-and-white political canons. That doesn't prompt me to ask any more questions; it leads me somewhere I've already been.

CM: I think another question is necessary here: what does one do with the piece? In the sense of an 'empirical benefit' established by a certain tradition.

MS: Yes, well, I don't think there's any benefit to my work. Of course, the utility of a 'lack of utility' is very valuable to me, but I don't know... I think that, on the contrary, the feeling I have when I observe people's reactions to my art is sort of the opposite: people interpret a thousand different things about what I do, and maybe the path taken by my work hasn't been exactly...

MS: Going back to *Spiral City*, it's been a kind of spiral that moves like a vortex, travelling outward from the nucleus, which in my case has been Mexico City, toward the limits of the Amazon, of Chile – in the project I did in the Atacama Desert. It collects a series of substrates along the way, but it always returns to the same essential questions. My questions have never been linear; they're always spiral-shaped.

CM: Is it possible that some of your viewers might succumb to that fascination and somehow ask themselves, 'Does this have an affect on my culture?' Forget about social utility; the question is: where does Melanie Smith's work lead culture?

MS: Let's go back to the trace. These traces that appear in my work: the luxury of being able to look inside and outside the 'here'. The work leaves certain signs behind, and they're inevitable: going into the Palacio Nacional, the Estadio Azteca, Xilitla... bringing in Diego Rivera, Henry Ford, these figures... there has to be a certain echo.

CM: Let me take a step back. I understand that you're exasperated with most contemporary art, not because you'd rather go back to a prior art, or an essential art – that doesn't even cross your mind – but because you feel it's resulting in literal work, work that's trapped by its own concepts.

MS: I struggle with the capital-P Political we can see in lots of art, and I wonder about the motives beyond that 'P'. I'd like to understand politics from a different perspective than the one assigned to it by contemporary art. I feel that politics is now in everyone's full view, and I think contemporary art often becomes a kind of pretext to tell the audience what we already know. We artists have a propagandist way of manipulating what's clear to everyone else and is already understood as politics. In my opinion, that reduces its power; I think politics is elsewhere.

I feel that this is what I always come back to, to the place of 'non-meaning,' or to losing the sign. If we can accept that everything about politics has been a failure, that nothing can be saved, and if we think of the sign as another place altogether, then maybe we'll be able to think differently. And that's why I come back to the idea of the trace, to this 'something' that's left behind, that overflows.

CM: This state of indeterminacy, this un-concreteness, this illegible aesthetics... doesn't it merely serve to justify work that's poorly executed and can nonetheless be over-interpreted? Does your technique serve to obscure?

MS: No. Because if you take the time to understand my work a little, I think there are very clear questions, a series of thoughts unfolding over the years. I don't want to cause confusion; I don't want these things to be mere fluff, you know? I just want to show that these lateral questions can be the decisive ones.

CM: It seems to me that the way you work rests on an idea of film that, on the one hand, involves a logic of the *tableau vivant*, or of a pictorial image supported by a fixed image. And, on the other hand, it's connected to capturing a social texture rather than an action or situation. There's a point where they're clearly not documentaries.

MS: I think that between *Xilitla*, *Fordlandia*,⁷ and now in my new project based in Chile, there is definitely a similar line of research that tries to figure out, in filmic terms, the urban or industrial extension located in three specific places: the Huasteca region of San Luis Potosí, the Amazon and the Atacama Desert, respectively. It's a film-based approach in which I look for a certain pulse in the landscape. For starters, different kinds of landscapes, with their particular qualities and vibrations. And, at the same time, research into the factors behind the onset of these places' mechanisation or industrialisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the last two projects I've done with Julien Devaux, we discussed the idea of removing the sky, of not offering a classic description of the landscape itself – because as soon as you take out the sky, there's a completely different sense of scale. I think a certain error of scale automatically produces a very different description, because you're outlining it, in the case of *Fordlandia*, through a crocodile's eye, a bird's feather. Or, in the case of Chile, through a fragment of an archaeological vestige from the regional museum of Atacama or Antofagasta, and the tiny grains in the sand might suddenly look like the sky. When I film, I think directly about experiments with scale, describing vibrational qualities of the surface, so I can understand a relationship among textures and surfaces before I can understand the place itself. It's like traveling backwards.

CM: Your comments clarify to me, in a way that none of what you'd said or what I'd read about these pieces could really orient me: the fact that, yes, these textures, these materialities, these sudden areas of rust, life or transformation, construct the site of your work against the convention of landscape that has existed since the Roman era, which defined it as a moment of contemplating the horizon.

MS: I see it as baroque. Removing the horizon is a tactic I've used since *Spiral City*, and it's also baroque. This loss of perspective, these pictorial games and layers I'm always working with, and which have been there from my early pieces onward, involves the kind of monad⁸ I'm creating inside the work. It's something that comes to mind when you mention the suspension of the future and the past. If such a game exists, it allows you a certain luxury in the form of the painting-fragment you can't understand as a whole. In suspending one moment, I'm making a temporal construction.

CM: Physically, there's also the fact that the audience has a circular relationship with the stage. The best way to see and witness those Tallera works was to walk around the stage.

MS: Exactly, and I think that's also a very medieval tactic. Like those theatres that went around the town, where there was a kind of central

⁷ *Fordlandia* was a film made in an abandoned town of the same name, founded in 1928 on the River Tapajos in the Brazilian Amazon by the industrialist Henry Ford (1863–1947) to produce rubber for car tires and parts.

⁸ Philosophical term used to express the simplest indivisible unit. According to the Leibnizian system, monads are the basis for all of existence, comprising autonomous spiritual substances endowed with self-movement. Their connectedness constitutes pre-established divine harmony and the totality of all things.

stage, but everyone had to walk around and look at other parts of it, other stages aside from the main one. I feel very strongly about not situating the spectator; I want to involve them cinematographically and pictorially.

CM: There's no hierarchy among the fragments, either. Every detail is equally banal and equally essential to your composition of the place.

MS: I think it has to do with the frame, which is crucial to me. I'm thinking about my Chile piece, which lends importance to banality through the frame and reduces the importance of the great landscape. That's what I prefer: an inversion of importance.

CM: If you'll allow me the hyperbole, it's as if you'd transformed the traditional landscape into an immense *naturaleza muerta* [still life; literally, 'dead nature'], as we say in Spanish.

MS: I don't know... maybe the term *naturaleza muerta* is too pleasant.

CM: *Still life*.

MS: *Still life*... in the background, that is... and I bring into the foreground what used to be in the background.

The project for La Tallera has lots of phases. I'm in the second one now, because I'm working on a final video, drawn from all these activations, that will be presented as a series of paintings. The painting/video combination has a double purpose for me. When you mentioned the still life just now, it made me think of this project's intention, which is related to the gaze; like the Bosch paintings, for example. We appreciate the singular moment, nuclei of worlds in one single moment, which in a way is the luxury of painting, isn't it? The eye can appreciate multiple moments all at once. By contrast, you have to take in moving images consequentially. Sorry, I meant sequentially.

CM: No, no, consequentially is good; that's spot-on, actually. You have to observe consequentially.

MS: So with La Tallera, the ultimate intention is to level out these two experiences. When it came to the capture of footage/of the activations from nine CCTV cameras, what I did was to extract the static moments in the action, so that they're the only ones that are replayed simultaneously on seven screens.

CM: One thing that characterises your videos is precisely the fact that the sequences have no consequence.

MS: Very good, okay.

CM: They have that monadic appearance that can sometimes be pretty unsettling; at other times, it's comical... there are moments in your films

where I'm on the verge of saying, 'This is going to turn into a structural film and I'll get stuck in the texture.' And then something suddenly happens where...

MS: I don't let you.

CM: It's a kind of unconsummated violence, where you're always trying not to move past a certain moment of tension so you don't turn into Tarkovsky.

MS: Yes, yes... I'm playing, and at the same time I'm dismantling lots of cinematic conventions. You might suddenly be able to imagine that you're watching a Tarkovsky film, but in the end there's an interruption, a sudden change. Also, in the way I film, I think there's lots of professional infrastructure, we could say. But during the shoot, the moment I find most interesting might be when the camera isn't rolling at all. They're formal techniques I use to make a sort of melting pot of tools and... use them badly. It's all there, but twistedly, yes.

CM: Something that happens in these videos, I feel, is there's a very basic storyboard that gets more complicated during the editing process. What I mean is that your storyboard is a guide for the shoot, but it doesn't predetermine the editing.

MS: No. It's also intentional. Before I get to work I research a piece for reasons that can be historical, aesthetic, or in accordance with the landscape, the place. In truth, the process starts with editing for me. I have this series of actions, of images, of visual elements I know I want to recreate, but I don't have the slightest idea how they'll turn out in the editing. Which is why the editing phase is maybe the most creative one for me. I don't know what the editing will be like. I think it's important for these elements to be gradually constructed, for them to come to life in the editing.

CM: Unlike other artists, I don't see you necessarily following a practice of making drawings or sketches that result in a painting. Painting also seems to be a product of editing, a studio work, like a postproduction.

MS: It really depends. There can be paintings, like in the project for La Tallera, that started before the video, but there are also parallel processes: sometimes the pictorial image appears when the editing starts, or before... In my last four or five projects, the studio process ran parallel to the editing process, and the images appeared right then or afterward. I don't stress over what that relationship will be like.

I think I'm in a very important phase of my work right now, one in which I distance myself from the idea of painting as a finished-rectangle-hung-on-the-wall... When I work with restorers who make the paintings live, when the video is going to be shown, I start to somehow translate or interpret the pictorial moment as a filmic moment and vice-versa, in very different temporalities.

CM: Those of us who have seen *Parres I* and *II*,⁹ and your installations from the early two thousands, understand that you see the pictorial object as the subject of a staging. However, you've now delegated painting to become a live story, one in which the result is provisional and unfinished.

MS: I don't distinguish between the lack of completion in painting and in a filmic image; I feel there's a parallel. Obviously in very different temporalities, but it's a way to translate these kinds of loopholes that appear in films into the pictorial space.

CM: Let me dramatically change the subject here. Twenty years ago, it was very clear that you were part of the Mexico City scene. Now I feel – and this is a peculiarity, not a defect – that you're running in your own lane.

MS: Can I take that as a compliment? [Laughter]

CM: Does it feel different to work this way? Am I exaggerating? When you work, do you see yourself as part of a constellation? There's a kind of complexity and silence that it's difficult to equate with other people's work around you.

MS: So I will take that as a compliment, because I now feel that silence can be a virtue. In a certain sense, it could be taken as a kind of feminist comment: not needing to be a protagonist, say, in a predictable way, and not clarifying things in a predictable way, but maintaining a very complex backdrop to your questions.

CM: The feminist sense in which the silence of that voice opposes a dominant argument, or in the sense of violence and power?

MS: Both. As we've said, I think that if this voice or this 'political' word can be freed from that capital 'P', the political voice can be complex and even dark and interwoven... I don't feel any need for the limelight... I'm looking for a certain contingency in my work.

CM: That's a very interesting word. Do you mean what's contingent about the work itself? What's unexpected or delicate? Is it an area of resistance... to meaning?

MS: It's something I've felt, something I haven't mentioned much, but yes; I'm a woman, I'm white, I've grown up in a time when many male figures have been very dominant and conspicuous within this same scene, and my response hasn't been to go against, but rather to create certain contingencies that combat this dominion.

CM: I'm interested, though, in how you've transformed your relationship with art history. I imagine you sitting with Smithson and talking about details of *Hotel Palenque*, but I can't imagine you having a beer with Brueghel.

MS: [Laughter]...Never!

⁹ Parres is a small town on the outskirts of Mexico City, halfway to Cuernavaca. It is a town that has left immutable and imperceptible traces on the highway between the two locations. The series comprises three videos transferred from 35mm film. Each film involves a performative action in front of a static camera, that last for the duration of one roll of film, with no cuts or edits. This lack of editing in the construction of the film suggests a structure prior to the advent of the language of montage in early cinema, as well as the idea of a duration that produces an intensity in the contemplation of a dystopian and melancholy place. In *Parres I* and *III* the pictorial monochrome finds its cinematographic counterpart – at the same time the artifice of that cinematic construction is also revealed. *Parres II* is a bucolic self-portrait in which rain covers the screen, activating a kind of monochrome outside the traditional frame painting.

CM: Could it be that I'm mistaken, and instead of being a dialogue with art history, it's a dialogue with those images in the present?

MS: Of course it has to do with the images in the present, and it's like a great palimpsest, a mega-jumble, that I'm creating out of loopholes and lapses. I'm also making a kind of atlas of images that have been somehow relevant in my own story, or which I'm making relevant in the present.

CM: But I feel like it has more to do with the fact that these images organise the culture of your colleagues and your viewers, more than the importance Bosch has for you. Or am I wrong?

MS: No, you're not wrong. And it's not about Diego Rivera,¹⁰ either, or Henry Ford, or Edward James... it's a certain transformation or challenge I'm building on top of their history. Edward James, painting landscape in an exotic way; Henry Ford, in that exercise of wanting to build Detroit in the south. In the end, they're very macho endeavors. This kind of interruption of landscape... the same with Bosch, his perception of the people, the masses...

CM: They're conflicts with culture more than with art history, with how art is inscribed into an imaginary set, and the imaginaries shaped not by art but by...

MS: By a certain cannon.

CM: But that leads to what may be my last question, and it's about your long, incredibly long relationship with something we don't yet have a name for, which is kitsch, industrialised taste, second-hand culture, *Ersatz*...

MS: I think I've been dragging around all these twists and turns of surfaces, plastics and kitsch, and I put them into a fold of the spiral, but I arrange them in different ways as the work proceeds. It doesn't go away; it just settles in different contexts.

CM: There's an increasingly strategic and less cynical approach to kitsch. There's something in your early work in which your inclination toward bad taste shared a wink with your audience: situating itself in the secondary consumption of that kitsch, sharing a space that once saw itself as full of refinement.

MS: I can't stand the word 'refinement'. Culture in general is like that 'refinement' of things, and I always feel that I'm attacking it somehow.

CM: You haven't gotten over your British class conflicts. [Laughter]

MS: I never will.

CM: It's the 'bonfire of the vanities.' [Laughter] I get the sense that there's a level of complexity in getting into all this second-degree culture

¹⁰ In an earlier work, *Corporis et Legis* (2017), Smith approached the work of the muralist Diego Rivera. It was an installation realised in the Palacio Nacional, Mexico City, which houses some of Rivera's most important murals. Smith's work invites the viewer to contemplate the constitutional history of Mexico, as a process-based piece, where body and law dialogue, and values of liberty, justice, equality and solidarity are revealed as desires of the present and future of society. In this process that Smith calls 'counter-restoration', two restorers were employed to reproduce seven sketches, on a double-sided wall made from fragments of Rivera's murals. Over a six month period, working in the space, they paint and erase one sketch over another, forming a palimpsest that opens up different interpretations, histories and implications for the murals.

that's perceived as full of meaning and possessing extraordinary powers. There's something much more ambivalent in your approach to this kind of ordinary taste.

MS: Yes, and I think it's a mimetic relationship, too. There's always a wannabe element in all of this, and it's something that has always fascinated me. That's why I use extras much more than actors, because an extra is a wannabe: he appears in the background, and to a certain extent he wants to be an actor, but he doesn't have the know-how. This element of having to know, or semi-know, how to act in front of a camera, but not knowing how to be totally accountable, is something I find very interesting. It also comes up in the act of painting spaces, because it's like bringing in someone who isn't an actor, but who's doing the work, painting and stripping, building and taking apart. I'm always interested in playing with this element of 'being or not being'. The ambiguity between the wannabe and what he really is or could be. I find this very interesting. I don't think I answered your question.

CM: No, I think you did... at the same time, I get the sense that you expect – and with a certain graciousness, I'd say; not without hope – that your public will follow you in this intricate game. You assume they're with you in these games.

MS: Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. I think a good example was the Palacio Nacional, the piece I made with two restorers who re-worked fragments based on Diego Rivera's mural. Lots of people visited that exhibition in general, and at the end, in the last part of it, you had to cross a patio to come into my hall, and I was told that many people went in and thought they were in the wrong place. They'd say, 'No, no, no, it's not here! We have to go back through the whole exhibition; there are some workers doing something completely different...' Yes, I do expect the viewer to understand, with a certain degree of surprise. Once you've come in, it takes you five seconds to grasp that the restorers are copying something inside a display case, and so you realize it's a piece, too – but that element of farce found in a mock-up or what's behind the scenes, the doubt over whether it is or it isn't, it speaks, especially in that context, of playing with a stage that far exceeds the exhibition room alone. I do ask them to follow me, but I don't think there's anything wrong with asking for that.

CM: I was asking in the sense that there's something very complex about how one needs to follow you into a space that is, let's say, questionable, in order to obtain a very intriguing result.

MS: That's a question I'm not sure I can answer. I raise questions and I don't know if it's necessarily my duty to answer them. I think it's good if the work is intriguing, and I think the viewer's job isn't necessarily to 'understand', but to try to make something happen in her own head.



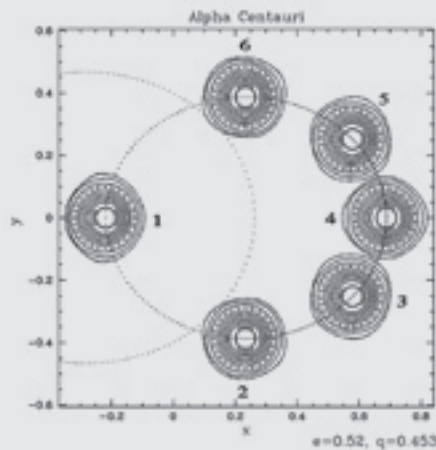




Pinpoint

So, here's the deal, it is like this:

The diagram is something informal, it goes from point to point, but in a multipointed way. But I think all diagrams come from other diagrams, like forces that come from other forces. Or like us, who go from stratum to stratum hoping to find an unstratified element, or a new kink. No, we are not stratified, we're unstable; diffuse like the throw of a die or the turbulent dominion between the local and the infinite. A salient feature in a mass of data. We are diagrams, like dots that become lines, and lines become rectangles; logical inferences connecting items of information revealing something previously unknown: conjoined relational forces. A society of mutations.



He decides to sit down for a while and think it over. The fuzzy images of points of force and the multiplicity of mutations disappear in the background of different vectors. On a computer screen there's a call for new particles and more strategies, and the wavy lines that make him feel uneasy. Low-cost mobile sensors that could solve the problem, although it might take around thirty thousand years to get to our closest star. Sometimes they see tiny things emerging, and then they disappear like in micro-physics or power that exfoliates. If only I could think of my finger as a stockpile of different horsepowers, or imagine my neighbour's over-enlarged forehead as the next best political posture. There's a kind of shakiness in all of that; I mean, trying to get your head round it may no longer be a question of scale.

Then there was an awkward pause

“...”

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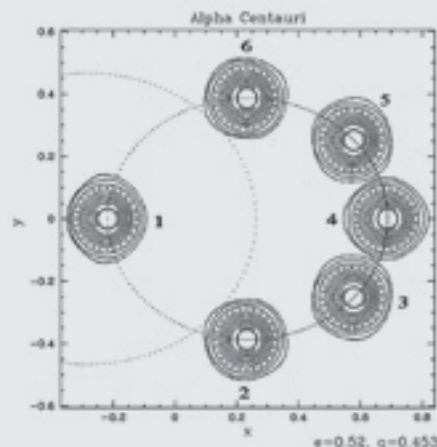
• • •

They find an area around a tower that receives signals and a device that aims to tackle carbon copies. In a remote atelier, the painter insists on outlining a black dot on the background: tear-jerking memories for a morse code that isn't perceived, written, enunciated, characterised, classified, or known in its same form. I believe we're on the cusp of high-tech's greatest days.

●

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The diagram is something informal, it goes from point to point, but in a multipointed way. But I think all diagrams come from other diagrams, like forces that come from other forces. Or like us, who go from stratum to stratum hoping to find an unstratified element, or a new kink. No, we are not stratified, we're unstable; diffuse like the throw of a die or the turbulent dominion between the local and the infinite. A salient feature in a mass of data. We are diagrams, like dots that become lines, and lines become rectangles; logical inferences connecting items of information revealing something previously unknown: conjoined relational forces. A society of mutations.



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REPEAT INFINITELY
REPEAT INFINITELY

MS









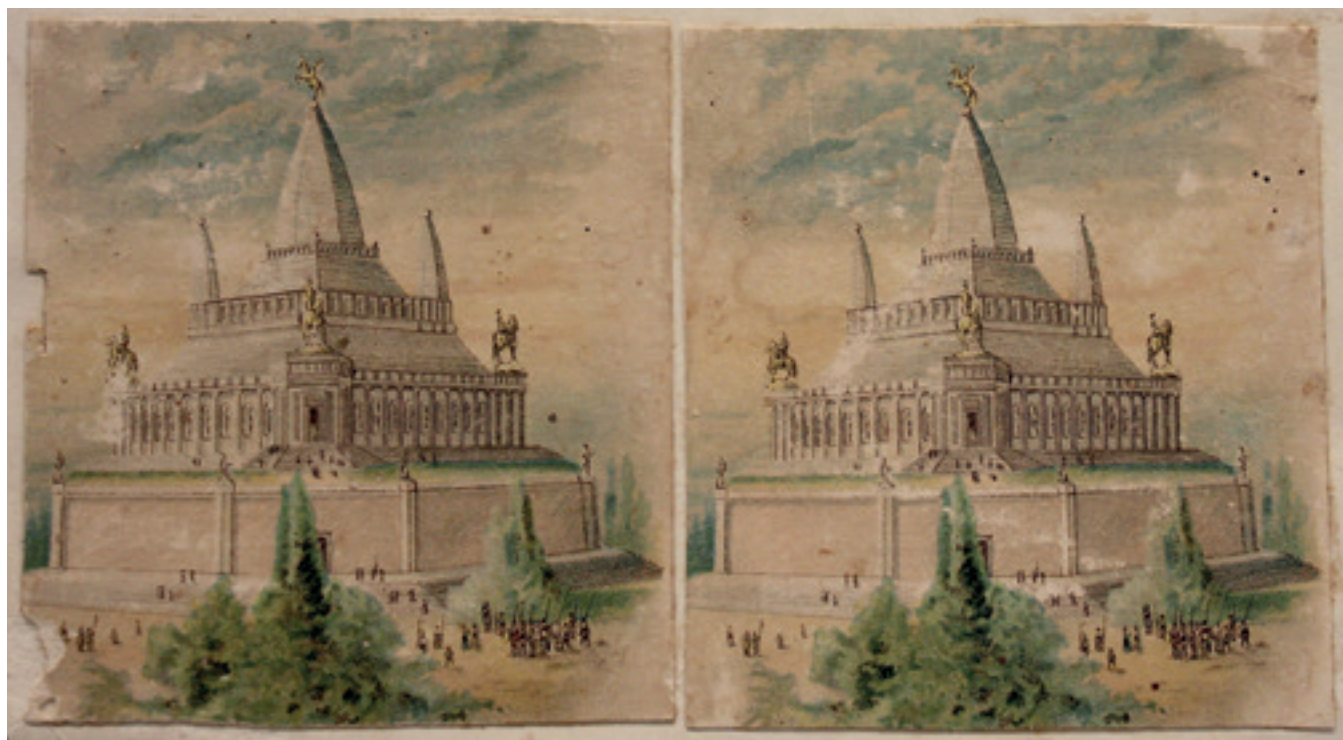












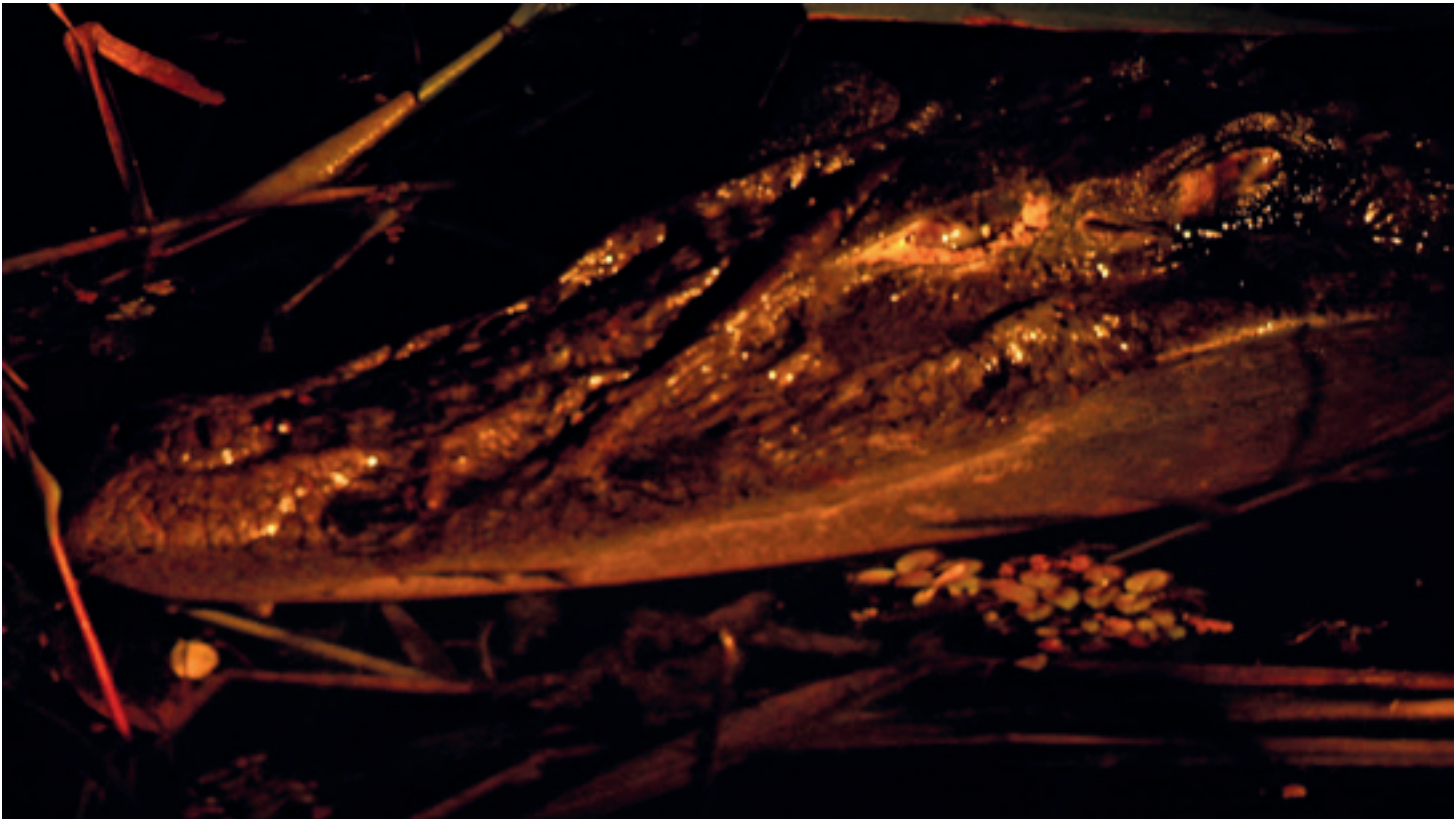




My Cultured Friend (A Steady Beacon of Hope for All Mankind) XXXX

But to return to my story. The crocodile began by turning the unhappy XXXX in his terrible jaws so that he could swallow his legs first; then bringing up XXXX, who kept trying to jump out and clutching at the sides of the tank, and sucked him down again as far as his waist. Then bringing him up again, gulped him down, and so again and again. In this way XXXX was visibly disappearing before our eyes. At last, with a final gulp, the crocodile swallowed my cultured friend entirely, this time leaving no trace of him. From the outside of the crocodile we could see the protuberances of XXXX's figure as he passed down the inside of the monster. I was on the point of screaming again when destiny played another treacherous trick upon us. The crocodile made a tremendous effort, probably oppressed by the magnitude of the object he had swallowed, once more opened his terrible jaws, and, with a final hiccup, he suddenly let the head of XXXX pop out for a second, with an expression of despair on his face. In that brief instant the spectacles dropped off his nose to the bottom of the tank. It seemed as though that despairing countenance had only popped out to cast one last look on the objects around it, to take its last farewell of all earthly pleasures. But it had not time to carry out its intention; the crocodile made another effort, gave a gulp and instantly it vanished again – this time for ever. This appearance and disappearance of a still-living human head was so horrible, but all the same – either from its rapidity and unexpectedness or from the dropping of the spectacles – there was something so comic about it that I suddenly quite unexpectedly exploded with laughter. But pulling myself together and realising that to laugh at such a moment was not the thing for an old family friend, I turned at once to XXXX and said with a sympathetic air, 'Now it's all over with our friend'.

MS





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SUNSWITCH



CAUTION -
NOTE POSITION OF LARGE
LEADING LUG IN RELATION TO
5 MOUNTING LUGS

List of Works

Works in the exhibition	
[p. 95]	<p><i>Orange Lush I</i> 1995 Plastic and wooden objects 244 × 124 × 25.5 cm Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich</p>
[pp. 5, 45 and 94]	<p><i>My World</i> 1995/2018 Inkjet printing 15 items, 25 × 20 cm each 53 items, 20 × 25 cm each Courtesy of the artist</p> <p><i>Painting for Spiral City 5</i> 2002 Acrylic on acrylic 160 × 140 cm The Fundación ARCO Collection/IFEMA. Long-term loan of CA2M</p> <p><i>Photo for Spiral City II</i> 2002 Gelatin silver print 133.5 × 158.5 cm The Jumex Collection, Mexico</p> <p><i>Photo for Spiral City III</i> 2002 Gelatin silver print 133.5 × 158.5 cm The Jumex Collection, Mexico</p>
[p. 123]	<p><i>Photo for Spiral City IV</i> 2002 Gelatin silver print 133.5 × 158.5 cm The Jumex Collection, Mexico</p>
[p. 117]	<p><i>Spiral City</i> In collaboration with Rafael Ortega 2002 Video, colour, sound, 5 min 50 s Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich</p>
[p. 74]	<p><i>Painting for Spiral City Series 13</i> 2003 Acrylic enamel on acrylic 140 × 160 cm The Catherine Petitgas Collection, London</p> <p><i>Tianguis II</i> 2003 Dual channel video, colour, sound, 5 min 15 s Collection of the artist</p>
[pp. 14–15 and 16]	<p><i>Parres I</i> In collaboration with Rafael Ortega 2004 35 mm film transferred to video, colour, sound, 4 min 20 s</p> <p><i>Parres II</i> In collaboration with Rafael Ortega 2005 35 mm film transferred to video, colour, sound, 3 min 42 s</p> <p><i>Parres III</i> In collaboration with Rafael Ortega 2006 35 mm film transferred to video, colour, sound, 4 min 33 s Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich</p>
[pp. 10, 11 and 52 bottom]	<p><i>Farce and Artifice</i> 2006 Installation and slides transferred to video Video, colour, sound, 57 min 10 s Collection of the artist</p>
[p. 127]	<p><i>Parres Cero</i> Parres Zero 2007 Inkjet print on paper 90 items, 28 × 35.5 cm each The Jumex Collection, Mexico</p>

Anillo

Ring
2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
70 × 55 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

[pp. 13,
72–73, 124
and 125]

Estadio Azteca. Proeza maleable

Aztec Stadium: Malleable Deed
2010
Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega
Video, colour, sound, 10 min 29 s
Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
Produced by Fundación Televisa, Mexico
Production: Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega
(Direction); José Luis Barrios (General
Co-ordination); Marcela Flores (Production
Co-ordination); Joaquín Silva (Assistant Director);
Ángel Rincón, Norma González and Mauricio
Rodríguez (Directors' Assistants); Tania Pineda
(Melanie Smith's Assistant); Estrella Fernández Solís
(Logistics Advisor); Rodrigo Valero (Still photo);
Pablo Portillo (Guitar); Francis Alÿs (Making-of);
Natalia Almada (Making-of); Benedeta Monteverde
(Image Production Co-ordination, MUAC); Sol
Henaro (Co-ordination, MUAC)
Institutional acknowledgements: Fundación
Televisa, Museo Universitario Arte
Contemporáneo, Instituto Nacional de Bellas
Artes, Coordinación Nacional de Artes Plásticas,
Museo Nacional de Arte, Secretaría de Educación
Pública and Centro de Estudios Tecnológico
Industrial y de Servicios

Bulto 2

Package 2
2010
Oil on wood
35 × 40 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

[p. 86]

Bulto 3

Package 3
2010
Oil on wood
48 × 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Estructuras de la entrada

Entrance Structures
2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
47 × 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Gargoyle

2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
45 × 55 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Matta-Clark

2010
Inkjet print on paper
110 × 80 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Monkey

2010
Oil on wood
40 × 40 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Regency

2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
70 × 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Selva II

Jungle II
2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
55 × 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

Tower

2010
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
20 × 15 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

[pp. 128–29
and 131]

Xilitla: Dismantled 1

2010
Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega
35 mm film transferred to video, colour, sound,
12 min
Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
Produced by Patrick Charpenel & Isabel and
Agustín Coppel Collection, Mexico
Production: Colección Charpenel, Guadalajara,
and Fundación ciac, A.C. (Production); Melanie
Smith (Direction); Rafael Ortega (Image); Paola
Santoscoy (Curatorship); Jorge Zúñiga (Assistant
Camera); Rodrigo Valero Puertas (Still photo);
Finella Halligan (Production Co-ordination)

in Mexico City); Zaira Teresa Liñán Zorrilla (Production Co-ordination in Xilitla); Héctor Pacheco (Production Assistant); Paola Santoscoy (Continuity); Roberto Oviedo (Gaffer); Javier Márquez (Dolly Grip); Carlos Orozco Luna "El Oso" (Lighting); Gustavo Patiño and Fridolin Schoenwiese (Live Sound); Oliver and Mila Ortega (Sound Assistants); Hugo Álvarez Mata, Alfredo Hernández Hernández, Sebastián Hernández, Vicky Hernández Hernández, Hilario, Bernardo Pérez Bautista, Julio Romero Castelán, Ignacio Soto and Sarita Villalobos Córdova (Production Support); Alfonso Cornejo (Image Editing); Melanie Smith and Alfonso Cornejo (Editing); Jorge Romo (Colour Correction); Alex de Icaza (Sound Design); Juan Cristóbal Cerrillo (Organ)

[pp. 43, 51
top, 88–89,
90–91, 93, 116
and 133]

**129 Thoughts on Insubstantial
Subjects and Matter**

2010–18
Diverse materials
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

[pp. 41, 44,
46–47 and 101]

Bulto

Package
2011
Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega
7 channel video, colour, sound, 36 min 46 s

Bulto. Secuencia camión

Bulto. Truck sequence
3 min 33 s

Bulto. Secuencia banco

Bulto. Bank sequence
3 min 31 s

Bulto. Secuencia mitin

Bulto. Meeting sequence
1 min 57 s

Bulto. Secuencia huaca

Bulto. Huaca sequence
2 min 48 s

Bulto. Secuencia mar

Bulto. Sea sequence
3 min 42 s

Bulto. Secuencia carretera/duna

Bulto. Road/dune sequence
2 min 57 s

Bulto. Secuencia escuela

Bulto. School sequence
1 min 8 s

[p. 132 centre]

Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
Produced by MALI, Lima and Fundación Jumex,
Mexico
Production: Tatiana Cuevas (Curatorship);
Rossana del Solar (Production); Vanessa
Chiappo (Production Assistant); Valeria Quintana
(Co-ordination Assistant); Javier Becerra (Live
Sound); Hugo Vásquez (Still photo); Musuk
Nolte (Still photo, MALI auction); Ignacio Dasso
(Assistant Camera); Carlos Sánchez Giraldo
(Second Camera); Mariano Lingar (Transport);
José Quintanilla (Transport); Jehú Quintanilla
(Transport); Adver Bernaldo Bonifacio (Transport);
Rafael Ortega (Post-production Co-ordination);
Melanie Smith and Alfonso Cornejo (Editing);
Federico Smuckler (Audio Mixing); Jorge Romo
(Colour Correction)

Xilitla

2011
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
80 × 100 cm
The Catherine Petitgas Collection, London

Enchantment

2012
Oil and acrylic enamel on MDF
40 × 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

[pp. 35, 36, 37,
38 bottom, 39,
48 and 49]

Irreversible/Ilegibilidad/Inestabilidad

Irreversible/Illegible/Unstable
2012
Melanie Smith and Frida Mateos
Polyester resin, raw clay, terracotta and
polychrome expanded polystyrene (EPS)
Dimensions variable
Museo Amparo Collection

Skulls 2

2012
Oil and acrylic enamel on canvas
70 × 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Collage 1

2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter
Kilchmann, Zurich

- Collage 5**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- [p. 140] **Collage 6**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 12**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 13**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 15**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 17**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 18**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 22**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- Collage 23**
2014
Collage on paper
43 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
- [pp. 92, 117 bottom, 126, 135 bottom, 137 and 138–39] **Fordlandia**
2014
Video, colour, sound, 29 min 42 s
Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich and Galeria Nara Roesler. Produced by Milton Keynes Gallery, United Kingdom
Production: Melanie Smith (Direction); José Luis Barrios (Curatorship); Julien Devaux (Cameraman); Raúl Locatelli (Sound Engineer); Leonide Principe (Still photo and guide); Vanessa Marino (Production); Tania Pineda (Production Assistant in Mexico); Pedro Bueno De Capitani (Production Assistant in Brazil); Felix Blume (Sound Post-production); Alfonso Cornejo (Editing Operation)
- [p. 84] **Fordlandia VII**
2014
Acrylic enamel on acrylic
150 × 180 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- [p. 132 top] **Fordlandia VIII**
2014
Acrylic enamel on acrylic
150 × 180 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- Empty Body 4**
2015
Oil and encaustic on canvas
32 × 25 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino
- Empty Body 9**
2015
Oil on MDF
25 × 23 cm
Collection of the artist
- Diagrama 11**
2015
Acrylic enamel and encaustic on MDF
40 × 28 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Diagrama 12

Diagram 12

2015

Acrylic enamel and encaustic on MDF

33 × 26 cm

Collection Bridget and Patrick Wade

Diagrama 43

Diagram 43

2015

Acrylic enamel on MDF

30 × 37 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Diagrama 22

Diagram 22

2015

Acrylic enamel on MDF

30 × 37 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

[p. 52]

Peluca 3

Wig 3

2015

Oil on MDF

24 × 26 cm

Collection of Kendall Ayers

Diagrama 24

Diagram 24

2015

Acrylic enamel on MDF

35 × 42 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Diagrama 45

Diagram 45

2016

Oil and encaustic on canvas

30 × 37 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Diagrama 27

Diagram 27

2015

Acrylic enamel on MDF

42 × 36 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Diagrama 45

Diagram 45

2016

Acrylic enamel on MDF

30 × 36 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Diagrama 28

Diagram 28

2015

Acrylic enamel and encaustic on MDF

33 × 26 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

Diagrama 47

Diagram 47

2016

Oil on MDF

27 × 38 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Diagrama 34

Diagram 34

2015

Oil and encaustic on MDF

28 × 40 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Diagrama 49

Diagram 49

2016

Acrylic enamel on MDF

36 × 30 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Diagrama 39

Diagram 39

2015

Acrylic enamel and encaustic on MDF

32 × 29 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

[p. 42]

Diagrama 57

Diagram 57

2016

Oil and encaustic on MDF

42 × 36 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Diagrama 40

Diagram 40

2015

Acrylic enamel and encaustic on MDF

35 × 42 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino

Diagrama 60

Diagram 60

2016

Oil and encaustic on MDF

37 × 32 cm

Collection of Kim and Scott Martin

- Diagrama 61**
Diagram 61
2016
Oil and encaustic on MDF
26 × 24 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino
- [p. 87] **Diagrama 62**
Diagram 62
2016
Oil and encaustic on MDF
37 × 32 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino
- Diagrama 64**
Diagram 64
2016
Oil and encaustic on MDF
36.5 × 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- [p. 71] **Diagrama 65**
Diagram 65
2016
Oil and encaustic on MDF
30 × 32 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino
- Diagrama 66**
Diagram 66
2016
Oil and encaustic on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist
- Fragment VIII Diptych from the work of Bosch**
2016
Oil on MDF
36 × 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- [p. 85] **Fordlandia Series II-5**
2016
Oil on MDF
29 × 35 cm
Ringer Collection, Switzerland
- Fragment XIV from the work of Bosch**
2016
Oil on MDF
28.6 × 31 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- [p. 79 bottom] **Map of Fordlandia, circa 1930**
2016
Oil on MDF
34 × 52 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- [p. 79 top] **Mapa de la Ciudad de México 1875**
Map of Mexico City 1875
2016
Oil on MDF
41 × 55 cm
Private Collection, Mexico City
- Peluca 6**
Wig 6
2016
Oil on MDF
26 × 24 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo
- Empty Body 12**
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist
- Diagrama 67**
Diagram 67
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist
- Diagrama 69**
Diagram 69
2017
Oil on MDF
37 × 32 cm
Collection of the artist
- Diagrama 70**
Diagram 70
2017
Oil on MDF
37 × 32 cm
Collection of the artist
- Diagrama 72**
Diagram 72
2017
Oil on MDF
37 × 32 cm
Collection of the artist

Fragmento gris I

Grey Fragment I
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Fragmento verde I

Green Fragment I
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Fragmento verde II

Green Fragment II
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Fragmento verde III

Green Fragment III
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Fragmento verde IV

Green Fragment IV
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo

Obscuridades bucólicas 1

Bucolic Obscurities 1
2017
Chromogenic print
80 × 120 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galería La Caja Negra

[p. 134]

Obscuridades bucólicas 2

Bucolic Obscurities 2
2017
Chromogenic print
80 × 120 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galería La Caja Negra

Obscuridades bucólicas 3

Bucolic Obscurities 3
2017
Chromogenic print
80 × 120 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galería La Caja Negra

Peluca 8

Wig 8
2017
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Diagrama 73

Diagram 73
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Diagrama 74

Diagram 74
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Diagrama 75

Diagram 75
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

[p. 75 bottom]

Diagrama 76

Diagram 76
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Diagrama 78

Diagram 78
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Diagrama 79

Diagram 79
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm each
Collection of the artist

[p. 78]

Diagrama 80

Diagram 80
2018
Oil on MDF
38 × 34 cm each
Collection of the artist

[pp. 54–55]	<p><i>Fake and Farce</i> 2018 Mural painting (acrylic on pine plywood), in collaboration with Roberto Mondragón 375 × 750 cm 7 channel video, 10 min 55 s (EPS) Expanded polystyrene, paper, paint, iron, wood (sculpture) 223 × 360 cm Courtesy of Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City. Videos produced by Proyecto Siqueiros–La Tallera. Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico. Collection of the artist (sculpture).</p>	<p>Camera); Carlos Echaverría (Drone); Felix Blume (Sound Engineer); Sol del Valle (Cultural Management); Alexia Tala (Curator); Alfonso Cornejo (Editing/Operator); Antonio Ramírez (Colour Correction); Tania Pineda (Pre-production in Mexico); Felix Blume (Sound Post-production)</p>
	<p><i>Sketches for Fake and Farce</i> 2018 Pigment on laminated MDF 7 panels, 37.5 × 75 cm each Collection of the artist</p>	<p><i>María Elena II</i> 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>
	<p>[p. 96] <i>Fragmento naranja I</i> Orange Fragment I 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>	<p><i>María Elena III</i> 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>
	<p><i>Fragmento naranja II</i> Orange Fragment II 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>	<p>Works reproduced only in the publication</p>
	<p><i>Fragmento naranja III</i> Orange Fragment III 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>	<p>[p. 119] <i>Painting for Spiral City 19</i>, 2004</p>
	<p><i>Fragment XXXI from the work of Bosch</i> 2018 Oil on MDF 38 × 34 cm Collection of the artist</p>	<p>[p. 12] <i>Grey (Negative) Rectangle on White Background</i>, 2008</p>
		<p>[p. 38 top] <i>Mud maps y mundo(s)</i>, 2014</p>
		<p>[pp. 98–99] <i>Orange Lush IV</i>, 2014 (original 1994)</p>
		<p>[pp. 81 and 102] <i>Skype</i>, 2016</p>
		<p>[p. 60] <i>Fragmento XXVI a partir del trabajo del Bosco</i>, 2017</p>
		<p>[p. 53] <i>Obscuridades bucólicas 4</i>, 2017</p>
		<p>[p. 59] Video still frame from the activation of <i>Obscuridades bucólicas 3</i>, 2017</p>
		<p>[p. 8] Video still frame from the activation of <i>Obscuridades bucólicas 2</i>, 2017</p>
		<p>[p. 134 bottom] Video still frame of <i>Obscuridades bucólicas 2</i>, 2017</p>
<p>[pp. 17, 18–19, 20, 50, 51 bottom, 75 top, 76, 77, 82–83 and 135]</p>	<p><i>María Elena</i> 2018 Video, colour, sound, 24 min Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich and Plataforma Atacama Collection of Rocio and Boris Hirmas Production: Sol del Valle (General Production); Ricardo Soto (Production Assistant); Felipe Echaverría (Production Assistant); Julien Devaux (Cameraman); Sebastian Echaverría (Assistant</p>	

Biography

Melanie Smith was born in England in 1965. She lives and works in Mexico City. Her work, in diverse media, has reflected on the extended field of painting within the history of art and its entanglement with the moving image. In earlier pieces she illustrates the idiosyncrasies of multitudes, chaos and aberrant forms within urbanism. The spiral is a recurring form of thought mode, working as a double helix that encompasses and constellates relationships between industrialisation, the body, archaeology, tragicomedy and nature. She is interested in the parts that do not add up, like stories that do not have a beginning or an end, and productions behind the scenes amid an incomplete modernity. Mostly, her work shatters any rational significance of production, as a way of thinking through contingent forms and being.

She has exhibited at numerous institutions including PS1 and MOMA, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool and Tate Modern, UK; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Museo Tamayo, and MUCA Campus UNAM, Mexico City; Museo Amparo, Puebla; The Modern, Fort Worth; and SITE Santa Fe Biennial, Santa Fe. In 2011 she represented Mexico at the 54th Venice Biennale. A survey of her work was shown at Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes, in 2014, travelling to the CAC, Vilnius and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. In 2018 she was included in the Liverpool Biennial. *Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice* was presented at MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2018, and travelled to MUAC Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, Mexico City, and Museo Amparo, Puebla, Mexico in 2019.

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MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona
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ISBN 978-84-92505-98-2
LD B 27773-2018

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Image of the cover: *María Elena*, 2018

