

Petzel

Katie White, "Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side" *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.



Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side

Katie White

Sep 22, 2026 4:25PM



Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Lexie Morland.



Emily Mae Smith, *Venus (Inner Vision)*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Petzel

Katie White, “Painter Emily Mae Smith’s Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side” *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.

Painter Emily Mae Smith believes that in dark times, it’s best to embrace the shadows.

Last week, the artist — best known for her surrealistic paintings of anthropomorphized broomsticks — opened “Transit of Venus” at Petzel Gallery. It’s her first solo exhibition in New York in over four years, on view through October 24, 2026.

The anticipated show brings together 15 new oil paintings and two carved benches made from 2023 to 2026. The works range in scale from the handheld to the monumental and embrace a dizzying range of formal strategies. Smith reprises her saucy broomsticks, revels in hyperrealism, and takes inspiration from French agrarian tableaux.

These varied works are united by Smith’s use of deep shadow and how she sees that shadow in relationship to painting. In the canvas *Becoming Neolithic* (2026), one of the first works Smith conceptualized while building the show, a towering thicket looms over snowy ground. Hands emerge from its stalks with seeking gestures, reaching toward the sky. The scene is backlit by a setting winter sun. In the foreground, a fox treads over the shadowed snow. It’s one of many paintings in the show that positions the viewer in a place of darkness.

Petzel

Katie White, "Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side" *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.



Emily Mae Smith
Becoming Neolithic, 2026
Petzel Gallery
[Inquire about availability](#)



Emily Mae Smith
Midnight Assembly, 2023-2026
Petzel Gallery
[Inquire about availability](#)

"Culturally, we're in the shadow," Smith said as she walked through the show ahead of its opening last week. "We're in a Jungian shadow-reveal sort of space as a society," where "repressed desires become desperate grabs of power." She feels a sense of obligation to explore this territory. "Whether or not we want to go there, it's there. We have to explore it," she said. "Painting the light from behind is a way of saying: I am the dark side of the image—I'm working from the other side."

Petzel

Katie White, "Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side" *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.

In the years since "Heretic Lace," Smith's last exhibition with Petzel in 2022, the artist has relocated from New York City to the Hudson Valley. She now works in a studio in Kingston, New York, where she feels more connected than ever to her natural environment. At the same time, she feels throttled by the pitch of U.S. political upheavals and speed of visual consumption through social media.

In another new painting, *Only Human* (2026), a bunch of grapes appear in translucent, noxious hues of purple, green, blue, and red. Inside each grape is a human eyeball, sloshing in turbulent water. The grape motif (which reappears in *Shadow Land Zeuxis*, (2026)) references a classical story about the conflation of reality and illusion. Smith's painting is simultaneously funny and disturbing and visualizes the pressures of the attention economy, resulting in a frantic, superficial, and distracted mode of existence, with eyes unsure where to turn.

Petzel

Katie White, “Painter Emily Mae Smith’s Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side” *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.



Emily Mae Smith, *Only Human*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.



Emily Mae Smith, *Straw Woman Problem* (2026). Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

In these times, Smith believes painting can, at the very least, offer a sense of orientation. The exhibition title “Transit of Venus” refers to a rare astronomical event in which the planet Venus passes directly between the Sun and Earth. The planet appears as a small dark spot moving across the face of the solar disk. These transits occur in pairs eight years apart, with more than a century separating each pair. Historically, astronomers used the transit of Venus to calculate the distance between Earth and the Sun. These measurements helped establish the scale of the solar system — and, essentially, our understanding of our place in the universe.

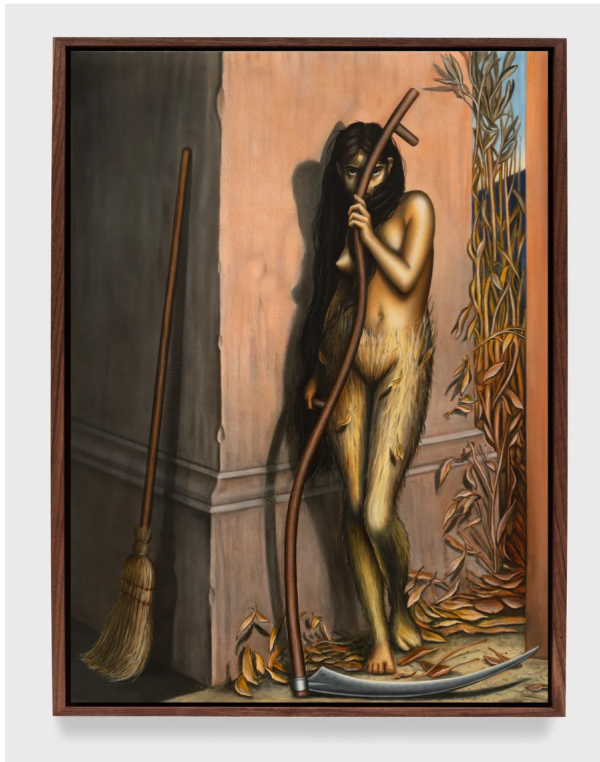
Katie White, "Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side" *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.

Smith's paintings formally reflect this idea. "Venus moves across in front of the Sun and becomes a little black dot. That effect connects to the use of backlighting in my work and the way we can know ourselves by seeing something moving in front of us," she explained.

For the artist, it's essential to imagine ourselves as bodies in motion, to embrace transformation amid rising authoritarianism in the U.S. "Trying to stay unfixed is a purposeful way to resist the painful transformation we're having in society right now," she said. "Being unfixed is dangerous, and people want to eliminate it." For Smith, the "Venus" of the exhibition title refers equally to the Roman goddess, herself an adaptation of Aphrodite, and a historical embodiment of this embrace of ambiguity and multiplicity. "Venus was used by different people, for different reasons, across time and history," the artist said.

Petzel

Katie White, “Painter Emily Mae Smith’s Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side” *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.



Emily Mae Smith, *The Locust II*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Emily Mae Smith, *Transit of Venus*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Smith’s anthropomorphized broomsticks have long served as a nod to the historic position of women in the arts, a winking reference to feminine labor and the male gaze. In this exhibition, Smith’s most iconic motif loosens and morphs, at times, into a Venus-like figure. She sees her painting *Becoming Neolithic* as an adaptation of the broomstick, as well as *The Locust II* (2026), which reimagines the 1872 painting *The Grasshopper (La Cigale)* by French painter Jules Joseph Lefebvre. While Lefebvre renders his nubile young woman as helpless, cowering, naked, and alone, Smith gives her a broomstick and a scythe that serve as a protective weapons. In the

Katie White, “Painter Emily Mae Smith’s Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side” *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.

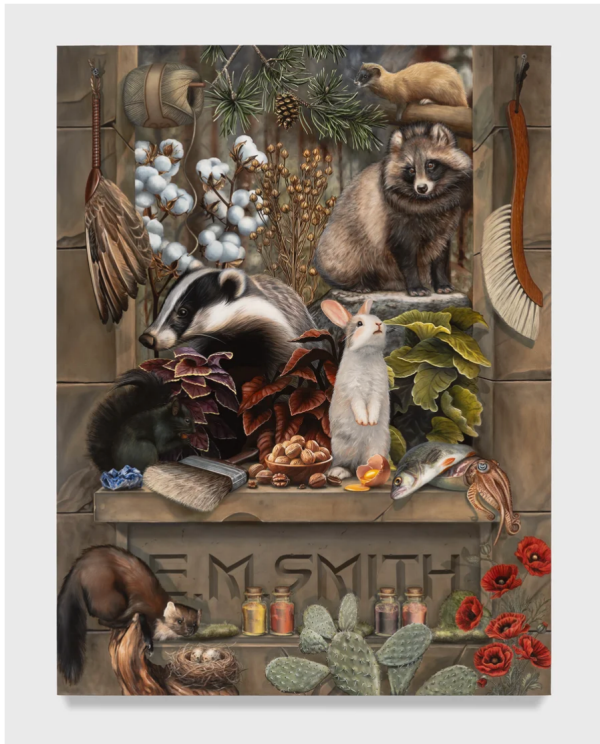
painting *Venus (Inner Vision)* (2026) meanwhile, Smith makes the handle of her torso-like broomstick translucent. The figure’s organs — brain, liver, stomach — and circulatory system are visible, like a version of the “anatomical Venuses” created in 18th-century Florence, wax visions of idealized young women used to teach anatomy. “I wanted to take the idea of a Venus and literally give her interiority,” said the artist.

In these paintings, translucency aids in Smith’s attempt to reenchant people with the magic of painting. “I wish people would consider what it takes to make a painting, and how painting can exist in the world in a complex, fabulous, magical way, and not just as trading cards on the internet, or auction-house commodities,” she said. “So there’s this desire to see inside and make that beautiful.”

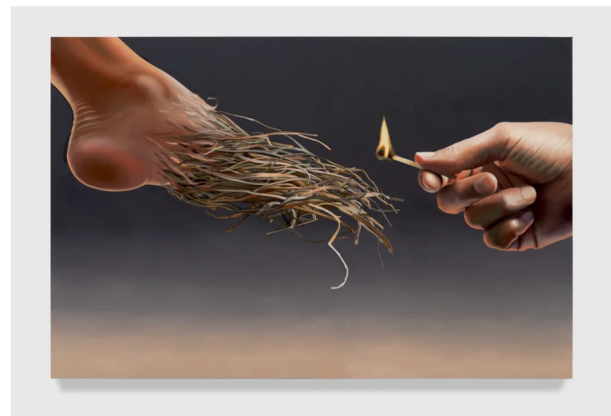
Understanding the materiality of painting, she thinks, might be one way to do that. In *Sacred Conversation* (2026), Smith brings together the animals and plants whose materials become the tools of painting — from badger and sable hair used in brushes to walnut oil, flax, cotton, and cuttlefish-derived sepia. The imagined ecosystem of creatures that could never coexist in nature becomes a kind of portrait of painting itself and its entanglement with the natural world. The structure of the painting, meanwhile, riffs on paintings by Giovanni Bellini and the Renaissance tradition of the *sacra conversazione*, the gathering of saints. It is a moment of bright light among shadows.

Petzel

Katie White, “Painter Emily Mae Smith’s Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side” *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.



Emily Mae Smith, *Sacred Conversation*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Emily Mae Smith, *The Changeling*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Smith believes that we are living through a moment of societal transformation whose repercussions are still coming into view. “In my last show, I was really interested in my place in painting as a person, as a woman painter, in my own time — how do I belong, what are the problems of trying to belong inside this thing,” Smith said. “Now, I’m asking, what is a painting to the world right now, when it all feels like it’s on fire?”

Petzel

Katie White, "Painter Emily Mae Smith's Surreal Visions Embrace the Dark Side" *Artsy*, September 22, 2026.

One of the final works completed for the show, *The Changeling* (2026), depicts a foot held aloft against the dark sky. It transforms from flesh to straw, and a hand reaches toward it with a lit match, like an inverse of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (ca. 1512) .
Flames are imminent. But they also bring much-needed illumination. ■

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-painter-emily-mae-smith-s-surreal-visions-embrace-dark-side>