

Petzel

Will Heinrich, "Turning Around the Easel," *The New York Review*, November 5, 2026.

The New York Review

Turning Around the Easel

Will Heinrich

The painter Emily Mae Smith hands over her brush to a character borrowed from pop culture —a gesture with symbolic depth.

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Though she emerged as an artist well after the latest so-called death of painting in the 1980s, Emily Mae Smith believed there was still room for a female artist in the canon, and she determined to literally paint her into appropriated old master scenes. But since no single age, race, or body type could represent all women, she chose a symbolic stand-in: Mickey Mouse's much-abused broomstick from *Fantasia*, an instrument of domestic labor that also evokes a paintbrush. Its smooth sepia curves were appealing to paint, its distinctly phallic appearance was pretty funny, and it provided Smith with a recognizable brand to turbo-boost her career.

Her unnervingly crisp, hyperrealistic broomstick scenes borrow from Surrealism—last year she was the subject of an exhibition at the Magritte Museum in Brussels—as well as from poster art, comic books, and other types of popular illustration. At first sight the images are so arresting that they can seem to be the most important part of the work, and their medium of only incidental significance.

Smith, now forty-seven, establishes her premise at the very beginning of her second solo exhibition at Petzel, composed almost entirely of work made this year. Hanging by the doorway is a fifteen-inch riff on a painting by Gerrit Dou, a student of Rembrandt. The Dou shows a man seated between an easel and a sunny window with a book in his lap, writing. In Smith's version, *Petite Muse at Work*, her sinuous broomstick replaces the man and takes a brush to the canvas-within-a-canvas herself. Just as Dou did, however, Smith turns her easel away: we see only that the broomstick is painting, not what. When it comes to representation, in other words, what matters is not so much what's being said as who gets to say it.

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In *Only Human*, an enormous bunch of multicolored grapes reflects light like so many Christmas ornaments; inside each sphere is a human eyeball gazing out. And in *Sacred Conversation*, inspired by Giovanni Bellini's sixteenth-century work of the same name, a group of small, furry animals gathers on a stone ledge above the artist's name. Crisp, delicate, and rendered with exaggerated precision, these animals are a pleasure to look at. You don't need to know what a rabbit, a squid, and a bowl of walnuts have in common to enjoy seeing them together. Like all of Smith's work, they also photograph well. But that undemanding pleasure is also crucial to her underlying argument. Like any good oil painting, *Sacred Conversation* has a magical translucence that can be seen only in person. And what a rabbit, a squid, and a bowl of walnuts have in common is painting itself: they make rabbit-skin glue, sepia, and walnut oil.

In a few canvases, Smith has allowed her broomstick to transform into something more closely resembling a woman. *Transit of Venus*, which gives the show its title, pictures her reclining languorously against a stack of hay with fully formed arms and legs. Huddling behind a scythe in *The Locust II*, she even has breasts. Both paintings feel like cautious partial releases of the sublimation that characterizes most of Smith's work.

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At first sight *The Changeling*, in which a hand holds a lit match to a naked foot whose toes are transforming into straw, looks like another example of this kind of experiment. It could be a portrait of female desire, a suggestion that it's the flame itself that makes the body combustible—or, if you read the hand as male, an invocation of power imbalance between the sexes. The slick, abstract, energetic brushstrokes that represent the straw are also about as apt a representation of libido as you could come up with in the language of painting. But those apparently unconstrained squiggles also represent, and demonstrate, painting's capacity to record sensual gestures. Every stroke was made by the artist's hand; following one with your gaze, you essentially relive her experience. And they convey texture, too: you can almost feel the slippery movement with your eyes.

Insisting that there's still room for a woman in the canon is, of course, an argument about sexism and access in the art world in general. But for Smith it's more fundamentally an argument about painting. The easy pleasure of her fantastical scenes may get you in the door, but the real point is in the way they're rendered—the depth, the tones, the shimmer. Whatever else may be happening in the world—Photoshop, AI image generation, even, at some point, eyeballs floating in giant Christmas ornaments—painting is inexhaustible. ●

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