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Nan Smith

Mercury:
Art and Science

Article by Glen R Brown



INVOKING THE KIND OF AGGRESSIVELY SYMBOLIC PROGRAM that one associates with 16th century fresco cycles and complex ensembles of allegorical statuary, Nan Smith's *Mercury* seizes space and conjures within it a monumental disquisition in which every surface and form participates with ringing clarity. Her installation conveys an intensity of devotion and singularity of purpose natural to religiosity, though its origins lie rather in the hard facts of science. *Mercury* is a product of substantial artistic research (extending beyond the kind of visual study recorded in sketchbooks) to incorporate the data of scientific investigation and encompass discourse with leading international authorities on the effect of methylmercury on the environment, aquatic life, and human health. Not only has Smith orchestrated the details of her installation into a concerted commentary on this effect, but she has also made a point of emphasising the work's connections to a website¹ that presents information on methylmercury's chemical composition, documentation of its influence on the environment, data on its concentration levels in seafood and records of its influence on government regulations concerning the emissions of coal-burning power plants. *Mercury* is thus expansive in more than one sense, extending beyond media distinctions, disciplinary boundaries and geographical borders in



Facing page: **Banner (Detail)**. Photo-montage, ink aqueous print on micro-poly fabric. 24 x 30 x .031 in.

Top left: **Life-scale Figure with Banner Hangings**. Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, gypsum, photo montages on fabric, vinyl wood and metal.

Top right: **Bath Figure**. 51 x 93 x 72 in.

its investigation and description of a toxic by-product of human energy consumption.

The sculptural objects in Smith's installation, nearly all formed from clay, work in tandem, both physically and conceptually, with the two-dimensional components: a horizontal 12 by 20 foot 'Photoshopped-and-printed' depiction of clear-blue rippling water and three vertical banners, suspended freely in space above one end of the installation. The horizontal print, mesmerising in its illusionistic play of light over azure limpidity, serves as a stage for a procession of ceramic fish and automobiles that circulates counterclockwise in a large lemniscate (infinity symbol). In this case, the depicted water simply provides context. In contrast, the banners carry narratives in their printed images of the sea. In the leftmost, a female swimmer glides over an artificial reef of jettisoned automobiles, each a 1949 Mercury 8 bearing the astronomical symbol for the planet *Mercury*. Here the allusions are to the particulate mercury that settles from power plant emissions into freshwater streams and eventually



Above: Installation Detail of Sculptural Elements and Floor Montage. Photo-montage, ink aqueous print on micro-poly fabric. Facing page: Mercury. 2014. Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, gypsum, photo-montages on fabric, vinyl, wood and metal. 120 x 144 x 240 in. On exhibition at the Sameul P Harn Museum of Art.

makes its way to the sea. In the central banner the swimmer breaks the surface to inhale as a school of bluefin tuna navigates the depths below. In the rightmost banner, the swimmer, immersed once more, exhales a stream of bubbles as a pair of smokestacks from a ghostly overlay of a power station seem to invade her nostrils.

For the protagonist depicted in the banners' narratives, Smith employed the same model as for the life-sized white figure (a signature element in Smith's installations) who sits placidly washing her feet as a steady stream of miniature cars encircles her. Made from moulds taken from the body then sculpted freehand to demarcate the features and increase detail throughout, the figure conveys the physical presence of a person, while at the same time its blank monochromaticity clearly suggests something more collective. The white also serves to reinforce the summary nature of the image as an emblem of purification. To facilitate that reading, Smith provided her figure with vessels of ablution cast from a Victorian washbasin and pitcher. There is a stillness about this scene, a protracted-moment-in-time character that Smith likens to the effect of figurines in Parian ware or pure white Sèvres porcelain.

Her figure's appearance has numerous precedents compositionally as well. "It is seen historically in many paintings," she notes. "I looked at a lot of imagery for the way the gesture was portrayed in the bath. I wanted to reference the historical examples, but I also wanted to modernise them. I wanted to use the image for a cleansing, not only to reference cleanliness but to suggest a simple, collective human body as well. It is about the inextricable link between human health and the health of the environment."

That environment – an environment explicitly in need of cleansing – is referenced by Smith's watery blue stage and the life-and-death story unfolding there in the scores of ceramic objects dispersed across its surface. The two circles composing the lemniscate are only loosely symmetrical. One is more erratic than the other and surrounds a less serene arrangement of objects. More of the 98 silver ceramic automobiles cruise that half of the circuit, and all of these vehicles bear red vinyl symbols of Mercury. Methylmercury, liquid at room temperature, is a toxicant formed when inorganic mercury comes in contact with the kinds of anaerobic organisms that inhabit both freshwater and saline aquatic environments. While this process can occur naturally, a significant hazard arises when mercury in any form is introduced to bodies of water in high concentrations through human activity. The tragic consequences of industrial release of methylmercury into Minamata Bay off Japan between 1932 and 1968



and the illegal dumping of inorganic mercury into the waters at Grassy Narrows, Ontario, Canada in 1970 demonstrated in horrific terms the effects of methylmercury on human health: defects in fetuses and neurological disruption in children and adults that, in severe cases, led to madness, paralysis and death. These high-profile disasters are not, however, the subjects of Smith's installation, which focuses instead on the less obvious poisoning of aquatic environments that has continued despite the warnings raised by these tragedies.

Inorganic mercury is a trace constituent of fossil fuels, the combustion of which releases mercury into the atmosphere to settle and eventually make its way into bodies of water. In the US, the vast quantities of coal consumed each year by power plants are the largest source of anthropogenic mercury emissions. In Smith's installation the endless parade of automobiles refers to the mobility of this particulate matter and its accumulation in the world's oceans and seas where it is converted to methylmercury. Biomagnification, the process by which mercury works its way up the food chain, is referenced by Smith's inclusion of life-sized glazed earthenware fish: Atlantic herring from cold northern waters, warm-water Gulf menhaden and the Atlantic bluefin tuna that feed on both. Within the more ominous loop of the installation's lemniscate, four juvenile-sized tuna drift on their sides in indication of debilitation and death, while stacks of canned tuna

at the circle's centre leave no doubt as to the identity of the consumers on the next level of the food chain. "We eat it, and we don't even know how much ingestion of mercury is too much," Smith asserts. "The Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, which has the largest number of bluefin tuna in captivity, hands out a watch list of potentially dangerous seafood. They say that tuna is only dangerous for women who are pregnant, but doctors can't agree on how much is too much. They don't know."

A certain amount of mercury can be safely absorbed by the environment, removed from internal organs through the body's own detoxification processes, and even scrubbed from industrial emissions before they are released into the atmosphere (in the case of power plants fitted with the appropriate technology). The more optimistic half of Smith's lemniscate acknowledges this potential through three healthy bluefin tuna that swim within the circle of cars that moves from a crash site (where the two sides of the lemniscate meet) in orderly fashion around the circle and through a tunnel of stacked, slipcast representations of Kirk's natural soap, from which they emerge with the mercury symbols on their tops no longer red. Perhaps the optimism of this part of the scene, before the mercury symbols revert back to red, and the general serenity that encompasses the installation as a whole, even in its most troubling passages, reflects something of Smith's elated frame of mind when in 2011, nine months into her research





on methylmercury contamination, she learnt that the Environmental Protection Agency had announced its Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) to limit toxic emissions from power plants in the US.

Encouraging as that news was, Smith has not lessened her efforts to investigate, understand and disseminate information about the risks of methylmercury and the ongoing challenges presented by environmental contamination in general. Undoubtedly, the uncertainty of a political climate in which public health protections are under increasing attack has been a factor in her continued dedication to increasing awareness of the mercury problem, but beyond that there is surely the passion that one typically acquires after years of immersion in the study of any topic. Smith is an example of the kind of artist for whom research involves more than investigating new materials and techniques or studying those employed by past masters. Her personal communication with scientists in labs in Nevada, California, Florida and Israel (the latter during an Association of Israeli Design Artists residency in 2012) combined with study of data and scientific information found in primary reports and secondary resources has given her art a wealth of content that links it to broader social concerns. More than personal expression, her work has become a means of seamlessly uniting her profession as artist with an informed layperson's perspective on scientific research. Through this blending of art and

*Facing page, top left: **Floor Piece Showing Car Wash (Detail)**. Glazed earthenware, porcelain, vinyl and photo-montage on fabric.*

*Facing page, top right: **Nan Smith Portrait**.*

*Facing page, below: **Floor Piece and Bluefin Tuna, Atlantic Herring, Mercury Cars (Detail)**. Glazed earthenware, porcelain, vinyl, metal and photo-montage on fabric.*

*Above: **Bench Still Life (Detail)**.*

Glazed earthenware and wood. 7 x 14 x 24 in.

*Below: **The Signature of Nan Smith**.*

science, the former is made relevant to broad issues of human importance and the significance of the latter is made accessible in everyday human terms.

ENDNOTE

1. mercuryartscience.com.



Glen R Brown is a Professor of Art History at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, US.

Nan Smith is a sculptor and Professor of Art who teaches ceramics at the University of Florida in Gainesville where she maintains her private studio. The "Mercury" installation was supported by research awards sponsored by the University of Florida's Scholarship Enhancement and Research Initiative Funds.

Photos by Allen Cheuvront.