

# MERCURY

## A REVIEW

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Like all animals, humans communicate. Uniquely, humans use media—words, images and symbols to achieve this end. This allows humans to express far more abstract and subtle messages than most animals. American sculptor Nan Smith's installation *Mercury*, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, USA, through January 5, 2016, the installation is set up in the following manner. There is a central figure of a woman washing her feet while sitting on a bench. Behind the woman are three banners that hang from the gallery ceiling. She sits in a pool of water. The main image in the water is a large infinity symbol comprised of model cars of an American automobile brand. Also included on the water are cans of tuna as well of different fish of varying sizes.

On the surface, the work is a very straightforward and earnest documentation of a certain type of pollution: the release of methyl mercury into the global ecosystem. As a bi-product of coal fueled power plants, the toxin is released into the atmosphere. It ends up in the food supply through fish - particularly Bluefin Tuna. A more interesting element is how varied and nuanced humans can be when exchanging messages. Smith compels the viewer not as much through the content of the message as through the complexity with which she delivers it. *Mercury* includes several different rhetorical divides from direct and economic imagery to complex forms of irony.

*Mercury* (detail of fish and cars); 2014, Glazed earthenware, glazed porcelain, photo-montages on fabric, vinyl, metal.



*Mercury*, detail, view of figure with hangings; 2014, Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, photomontages on fabric, metal, wood, 121" h x 120" w x 144" d.

Smith demonstrates her skill as an image-maker in the central banner in the triptych behind the figure. She reduces the essential theme of the exhibition into a single juxtaposition of two images: a power plant above, and single female swimmer below. The details of the narrative are not articulated, but the main point is clear. Human production of power presents a threat to human survival. This woman swims directly to the viewer as if trying to escape the influence of the power plant. Smith skillfully encapsulates the entire work in this one image.

Contrasting this didactic simplicity is the complex irony of the central visual puns in the work. The cars that make up the infinity symbol are 1949 Ford Mercury 8 Coupes. Even this detail reflects a particular rhetorical type—scholasticism. This line of cars was manufactured by the Ford Motor Company from 1939 to 1951. Smith uses the model of the car to specify the threat posed by coal production. The process of creating electricity from coal releases methyl-mercury into the atmosphere. It finds its way into the human food chain primarily through seafood. This specific detail requires a good deal

of highly specific knowledge. Since the last Mercury 8 was manufactured 65 years ago, very few people would be able to identify the car by its appearance alone. The key detail to unlock Smith's narrative is an extremely esoteric fact.

The use of the car also creates a good deal of satire. Before being used to name a chemical or car, Mercury was a Roman God, considered the patron God of commerce. This is reflected in a shared etymology, the name Mercury derives from the Latin 'merx or mercis'. This is the same root for words like merchandise and mercantile. He is most commonly represented in art with winged feet and is known for speed. This creates an irony that the key to decoding the specific poison that Smith protests is also a celebration of commerce. Commerce is the engine that drives the use of coal to make electricity. So within the use of the term Mercury - Smith references both cause and effect.

The element mercury is most commonly used for thermometers, devices that measure temperature. Over the last decade or so, global warming has been a huge concern to the scientific community. Although an accepted science throughout most of the world—it is heavily disputed in the US. This political dispute reflects the influence of the Koch brothers. The Koch brothers are two coal magnets who have shaped the American political debate over climate change.

This irony is picked up in another detail within the image. The central figure is shown washing her feet. The feet are the part of the body where many of the toxins that we ingest or breathe are filtered out. The figure sits on a bench and has one foot on the surface of the water. So in a way, the toxin is being placed back into the eco-system through the process of being cleansed

*Mercury* (full view); 2014, Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, photo-montages on fabric, wood, metal, 2014, 120”h x 144”w x 240”d



*Mercury*, detail, figure in profile; 2014, Glazed and painted earthenware, wood, 49”h x 72”w x 45”d



from the body. Additionally, the figure '8' can be read as a vertical positioning of the infinity symbol '∞', suggesting that we are in an infinite loop.

*Mercury* both fits into and continues Smith's oeuvre. Throughout her career, Smith has used the ability of clay to mimic almost any surface or form to create trompe-l'œil images. Her work never has been just about simple illusionism, however. This device is a tactic Smith uses to examine complex issues. *Mercury* continues this dynamic of deceptive simplicity.

Nan Smith is a Sculptor and Professor at the University of Florida Ceramics Program.

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Photography Allen Cheuvront.