

NAN SMITH IN CONVERSATION

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Nan Smith's work explores and investigates environmental and health concerns, her thorough research is the foundation for the large-scale installations. Providing a thought provoking narrative, encouraging us, the viewers to look and question what is happening to our environment. *Garden* was the first in this series of environmental works, where extensive research was conducted, this involved gathering expert opinions from nutritionists and holistic medical doctor's as she investigated farming practices. 'Our world is sophisticated and complex. Polluted bodies of water, questionable food sources, fertilizers and insecticides rapidly place the public in contact with toxins not previously encountered. I was interested in how industrialized farming practice use pesticides and fertilization practices versus crop rotation and green picking, effecting food sources and human health. I began researching by reading Michael Pollan's books the *Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*'.

Smith grew up in Philadelphia but now lives in the Florida countryside, which provided the imagery for *Garden*. The backlit photomontages in the installation are of irrigation photos taken close to her home. 'The female figure, a water bearer, casts 'the hat', a symbol for fate, to the

Garden; installation, detail; 2010, Glazed earthenware with china paint decals, ceramic hat, steel cable, 96" h x 48" w x 60" d. Photography John Carlano



Garden; installation, Full view -front; 2010, Glazed earthenware with china paint decals, steel, wood, and backlit photomontages, 132" h x 96" w x 168" d. Photography John Carlano



wind. She carries a vintage American water pitcher on her head. Carefully balanced this washing pitcher, usually seen with a bowl, is a metaphor for cleansing. The figure's upraised right arm supports the pitcher; the arm is fractured, like broken statuary, to indicate a sense of disfunction. 'Fate', signified by her upturned hat, has landed within the field of cosmos daisies. Kosmos comes from the Greek word meaning harmony and the Kosmos flowers have been found to cleanse toxins from the soil'. For Smith the white flowers symbolise harmony and purity.

Smith employs an astute attention to detail with all the elements of the installation made from clay, the ceramic alarm clocks piled up inside the hat indicate the here and now. Ceramic seed packets with Smith's decal labels, her imagined 'Seeds of Hope', detail the practices of a fictitious organic farming company. 'The figure walks forward toward a floating window in the distance. Within it are backlit photos of a female face overlooking the field of flowers and behind her farmland being watered by industrial irrigation. The installation is meant to inspire care for the natural world that sustains us'. This research led her to speak to food scientists about Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) and the development of food to sustain life in poorer countries.

'I am a naturally curious person so when I get an image in my head, a key part of the installation is the research that I conduct to thoroughly inform the artwork. I want to create something that has a social narrative to help the viewer see the issues; I feel I have a personal social responsibility to do this. I want to communicate and layer visual cues, which will inform people'.

Smith has always worked with the life size figure, originally as a hollow form, which spoke about spirituality and the body as a vessel. This exploration led to shrouded forms juxtaposed with full-bodied figures, underglazed, fired and enhanced with air brushed acrylic paint. 'I like the physical presence this scale offers and how it causes the viewer to relate and identify with the artwork. For me we are all related and our relationship to one another and to the world is very important. I don't make the figure as a discrete object I see the world as relative; the figure is always placed into a setting that offers context and narrative. She is the intuitive aspect of existence and reflects our human condition within the environment. The whole social responsibility and connectedness is important to me, if I am going to spend all that time alone in the studio making, I want it to contribute in some way'. Smiths figures are always young women, as they have their future ahead and with the right knowledge, the power and potential to change things.



Mercury (detail/aerial of floor piece); 2014, Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, photo-montages on fabric, wood, metal, 120"h x 144"w x 1"d. Photography Allen Cheuvront.

'In their form and whiteness the sculptures relate to Greek classicism. It's about purity! but there is more. Each is an idealized composite where the body reflects the purity of an ideal state. The sculptures seduce through aesthetics. Beauty creates and sustains visual memory. I am really aware of trying to make something that is beautiful and not sensual and the whiteness freezes the figure in time'. 'I love white because it allows me to render the form with light. I began using tunable LED lights, often used in theatre to create controlled chiaroscuro in the *Mercury* installation. The figure becomes the central feature within the tableaux. She is still and white while her surroundings offer a colour palette, sometimes a sprinkling of jewel-like accents like in *Garden*, sometimes colour brightness like the blue of water surrounding the figure in *Mercury*, sometimes a polychrome colour scheme as in *Spill* where the grey of the oil can transitions to a lighter grey and peach in the clothing to the whiteness of the pure flesh'.

Smith began her career as a painter but loves materials and their processes and finding the most suitable material to bring her concept to life. Her passion is now clay and the majority of elements in Smiths work are clay apart from the obvious use of photography and the necessary staging. Content to work alone, she makes all the work herself. If a project is particularly labour intensive or needs an extra pair of hands, Smith will bring in a student from the University of Florida where she teaches. Where necessary as projects evolve she takes the steps to develop her skills, as with the photomontages printed as large-scale prints on fabric in *Mercury*.

Since 2010 the environmental themes have been the driving force of the work, addressing issues around land and water. A comprehensive body of research is undertaken for each project, including interviews with scientists. The *Mercury* installation looked at industries in the USA who are responsible for the pollutant Methyl Mercury and more specifically Smith wanted to look at those that are close to where she lives, this turned out to be the coal industry. A suggestion from a scientist she was working with led her to set up a website, which documents and answers a range of questions about Methyl Mercury - what is it? How does it get into the environment? What do the scientists know about it? What is going on politically with the government? How can we protect our health? 'The questions took me to scientists that were not just local, I had a residency in Israel and I visited several marine labs, some of which

H2O, Full view, 2016, Glazed and painted earthenware, sintra, 24" h x 24" w x 24" d. Photography Allen Cheuvront.



focused on Methyl Mercury and were breeding Bluefin tuna for their research, they kindly allowed me read the research data. The website remains online and documents the scientific information I gathered, political issues of Mercury and Air Toxins Standards legislation in the US, health impacts, which seafood is greatly impacted by methyl mercury etc... www.mercuryartscience.com. It was politically very sensitive at the time and still is as a new Mercury Toxins Legislation was introduced by President Obama, capping the amount of admissions that can be let into the environment from coal producing power plants'. 'Methyl Mercury gets into the brain barrier and cannot be removed; we saw evidence of this in Japan in a fishing village with 'Minamata' disease. It is clearly a terrible toxin, the reason I picked the Bluefin tuna is that it lives a long time, eating small fish that may have mercury, which then gets into the fish tissue. I learned they have a way to eliminate it but if they get too much just like us, their bodies fail, so it stays in the fish'. The Monterey Aquarium where she spent time observing the Bluefin Tuna for accuracy in the making process, provide a handout advising women if they are pregnant to avoid certain fish - sushi, swordfish, tuna, a watch list is available on her website.

Invited to make a piece for an exhibition, *H2O* is a small piece in the scheme of Smiths normal installations and explores the global water shortage and how it affects, in particular, women and



Summer's Over; full view; 2011, Glazed and painted earthenware, china paint overglaze decal, wood, plastic, 62 ½" h x 25 ½" w x 59 ½" d.
Photography Allen Cheuvront

Spill, full view, front; 2013, Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, metal, rubber, wood, 81" h x 40" w x 64" d.
Photography Allen Cheuvront



children. The figure is emerging from a pool of water with ceramic castings of plastic bottles surrounding her; it talks about the pollution of our natural waterways. It is the prelude to a larger installation she is currently working on. 'Only 3% of the earth's water is pure drinking water, in 3rd world countries it is being pumped from shared 'Aquifers', for bottling plants for waters that we buy, causing family wells to go dry leaving the locals with no water'. Smith talks of how young women unable to find clean sources of water for their children to survive have killed themselves because they feel they have failed their families.

Layering symbolism and metaphors expands her social narrative, with some more obscure than others. The Gulf Menhaden fish reoccurs in many of the works – *Summer's Over*, *Spill* and *Mercury*, scientists at Cedar Key provided specimens from which the fish were sculpted. 'Dr. Andrew Kane of the University of Florida, who worked on the Gulf Oil spill team suggested I consider this key fish for *Summer's Over*. It is thought likely that the impact of oil within the aquatic biota can bio-magnify from this species up the food chain. The Gulf Menhaden, a small bait fish called 'the most important fish in the sea', has the ability to clean toxins through the gills. (H. Bruce Franklin's most recent book), is the food source for larger species as well as the source for fish oil and omega 3 acids used for human consumption'.

In *Summer's Over* the puddle spilling from the bucket shows the figure's inner emotion with a decal image of her screaming with fish and an oil rig in the background, representing a collective response of Floridians during the recent coastal oil spill. Alongside a ceramic rendition of a sandcastle-protecting wall, symbolising the human efforts of containment. Smith carefully selects the gesture for the figure, wanting to create a sense of emotion, to reference art history, and to draw this into a contemporary posture. The found clothing is often altered to fit the figure and selected to indicate today's culture. The process is labour intensive for each piece, 'I want everything to be as representational as possible, a trompe-l'œil, it is not a caricature. It has to work close up as well as far away'. With the research complete, taking time to work out the logistics, the firing processes, the installation and lighting are, as important as the making to Smith, constantly challenging her practice, from the rubber moulds used in the making of the ceramic straw hat in *Garden* to the cross-legged seated figure in *Mercury*.



Summer's Over, detail; 2011, Glazed earthenware with china paint overglaze decal, 5" h x 18" w x 28" d.
Photography Allen Cheuvront

'My work is a result of my philosophy and wish to contribute positively to society. I think it is important for the public to realize that art can be a research practice. As an artist working in a university setting I feel blessed to have the resources to keep learning through research and to share this information through public outreach: exhibitions, publications, videos of art works'.

Nan Smith is a sculptor and Professor of Art who teaches at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she maintains her private studio. The *Mercury* installation was exhibited at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art and supported by research awards funded by the University of Florida's Scholarship Enhancement and Research Incentive Funds.