
SALLY SMART
PAINTING IN THE DARK

2005



Studio
installation view

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KALIMAN GALLERY

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Gallery Hours
Tuesday – Saturday
11.00 – 5.30



Bloom (Night Piece) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm



Ghost Gum Tree (Painting in the Dark) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 313 x 233 cm



Ghost Tree 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm



Mothology (Marsyas) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm

The format and figures that occupy Sally Smart's recent paintings are informed by art historical and personal stories, imbued with aspects of feminism and psychoanalysis. As such, a surrealist element pervades Smart's imagery, articulated by shadowy human and natural motifs that hover on nebulous backgrounds rendered in shades of dark. Yet these are not passive dream-like works: they are confronting both in their raw and visceral fabrication, and in their intensely intimate portrayal of mnemonic and melancholic psychological states.

There is an uncanny sense of inhabitation in these works – a sense of being inextricably bound into intimate stories and complex environments that intersect physically and psychologically in our individual and collective memories. Unexpected shifts in scale and depth disarm the unsuspecting viewer. In comparison to the diminutive scale of some of the artist's historical sources, including Cubism and Surrealism, Smart's paintings are huge. Their scale, narrative disquiet and prevailing blackness are engulfing.

The artist's and indeed the viewers' physical relationship to these theatrical and evocative vignettes is ambiguous: are we inside looking out? Or outside looking in? As if unwittingly dragged into a stage performance without knowing the actors' roles, we struggle to maintain a conventionally objective viewpoint from beyond the picture's surface. This lack of distinction between inner and outer realities is an extension of the performative process inherent to the making of these paintings: drawing on a repertoire of collage images made from felt, fabric and photographic elements – which here include spider webs, insect wings, women's skirts

and disembodied legs with shoes carefully laced – Smart's canvas is a malleable entity, ever-shifting in response to the artist's intuitive movements through and around the picture plane. Nothing here is pinned down until many options have been explored.

This co-existence of finite and abstract elements, of the real and imagined, is as seductive as it is disorientating. We are like Alice in Wonderland, drawn into an unpredictable and occasionally threatening dreamscape of symbolically-laden narratives. Or is Alice in fact the protagonist, submerged by the oversized insect wings that she's sprouted, or entangled in the branches of Goya's deathly tree from the Disasters of War? If there is an autobiographical element to these works, it embraces the experience not only of the artist, but of an audience engaged in philosophical, postcolonial and environmental discourses.

The tree of life is an ancient theme in many cultural contexts; the family tree is similarly central to humanity's perception of self. It is not coincidental, given the current world situation, that Goya's famous series is invoked here, nor is the tree devoid of local political symbolism, particularly given Smart's rural Australian background and interest in the iconic value of the native gum.

Painting in the Dark is a multi-layered series of work in many ways. Besides the physical layering of Smart's collage process, the phraseology of the title suggests a searching into the mind and imagination. Then there is the recurrent use of silhouette forms, which not only bring a historic and spectral character to the paintings, but which in their indeterminate features reveal the vagaries and hidden depths of human existence.

This depth of intuition and knowledge resides in the subconscious, particularly in dreams. Smart's dream evocations are haunted – not by the spooks of popular cinematic culture, but by humanity's historic and emotional baggage. In *Mothology (Marsyas)*, for example, a human skull protrudes from the body of a pink-coloured insect, itself bound to a vertical structure with vaguely defined horizontal protrusions on either side. The skull is upside-down, the withered head of a human cocoon. The painting, though based on images of the flaying of Marsyas (most famously Titian's), is also a kind of inverted, feminist re-reading of the Crucifixion that takes on board the theory of evolution and the tragedy of human mortality. While the cruciform creates a compositional link to old master religious paintings, Smart compels us also to ponder an alternative view of history, one that taps into memory and intuitive knowledge rather than mythological or spiritual doctrines. In other words, these are always invocative and affective rather than rhetorical or didactic works.

In another feminist re-reading of a historically male-dominated culture, *Girl Anachronism* subverts the folklore image of ocean pirates. Here, it is a female that skips the sea vessel, the painting's primary splash of colour a lolly pink skull-and-crossbones flag flown at half-mast. Another singular female is *Ms O.K. (1990 Dream)*, a soliloquist with a large bison head filled by thoughts elsewhere, preoccupied by an enormous pair of insect wings. This is one of the most minimal paintings in the series and is darker than others, both in its lack of narrative detail and, more literally, in the reduced, sombre palette of dark browns, blues and greys. The reference to

beasts in the history of art – including the cast of forbidding, ghostly creatures that haunt Goya's dark works and Fuseli's *Nightmare* – establishes a dialogue with art history yet does so using an indisputably contemporary visual vocabulary. Similarly, *Morphology (Daphne)* refers to the natural world – its central (female) human form flanked by branches, insects and spider webs – and to art historical interpretations of Greek mythology, in which Daphne famously morphs into a tree to escape the amorous attentions of the pursuant Apollo. Thus, Smart's Daphne straddles past, present and fictitious realities.

The slippage zone between knowledge and emotion, between the conscious and subconscious, is conjured throughout *Painting in the Dark*. Morpheus, the god of sleep and dreams, pervades the series, though in spirit not in form. Smart is equally concerned with the biological resonance of the prefix “morph”, specifically morphology, the branch of biology concerned with the form and structure of organisms. None of the narratives here is definitive, nor are the figures quite human. These are evolving structures, somewhere between human, beast and insect, between narrative, feeling and imagination.

This text is an adapted version of the essay accompanying the exhibition of Sally Smart's *Painting in the Dark* at ARCO, Madrid (Greenaway Art Gallery), February 2005.



Group Therapy (Theory of Telepathy) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm



Ms. O.K. (1990 Dream) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 260 x 182 cm



Girl Anachronism 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm



Morphology (Daphne) 2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas with
collage elements / 213.5 x 183 cm

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