

THE SHIP'S WAKE

Nothingness has no center, and its borders are nothingness.¹

Nothing, Not Much

Peter James Smith's paintings are concerned with the architecture of a liminal space in which the concrete and abstract, the specific and universal are intermingled. It is an impossible space which proposes a tentative, almost mystical unity between the abstract order of language and the material substance of the world that shimmers beyond it. A space of inclusivity and engagement at the intersection of the traditionally opposed domains of the poetic and theoretical.

In his work the art / science interface is neither acquiescent nor resistant. Both streams address the way in which boundaries of knowledge and the imagination define our comprehension of the world. Phases of scientific enquiry into our existence on earth and in space are melded with images of nature. The traditionally held differences between artistic and scientific endeavour are understood as elements of a constitutive relationship between shifting terms. Incompleteness, complexity and irreducibility are embraced rather than eschewed.

What I find inexpressible, what I find mysterious and am unable to express, is the background against which whatever I could express has meaning.²

Peter James Smith's art explores and reflects upon its own ideological framework and poetica – to provide a space for uncertainty and possibility, to engage questions about the construction of value and meaning, and to create a potential bridge to an amorphous world for which there is not yet concept or language. By making evident how it functions, it plays with the limits of Wittgenstein's descriptive language in order to deal with questions of value and meaning which lie somewhere beyond.

Navigating the void, European voyagers to the Antipodes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shared a utopian vision engendered by early scientific discoveries. Expeditions of scientific and territorial discovery were fired by the desire for knowledge and experience: to map and picture, to classify and possess, to locate limits and to make predictions. Adrift, with no sight of land, they positioned themselves through calculation and timepiece. Their sails like signs of the unknown, beckoned the imagination. The prospect of mythical lands lay in wait.

Illumined by Darkness

In Smith's paintings the land is shadowed. Blackness surrounds. The landscape is reduced to silhouetted forms, highlighted only in the foreground to frame a sense of spatial recession into distance. From this pool of blackness, as if out of the wilderness or subconscious realm, reflective expanses of nature emerge. A horizontal sliver of life is obliquely illuminated by the setting sun. Flecks of light are reflected on translucent surfaces captured at a precise moment of illumination. The light, not bright or intense, is gently spread to lend our view a revelatory, spiritual quality and cinematic sense.

*For both art and life depend wholly on the laws of optics, on perspective and illusion; both to be blunt, depend on the necessity of error.*³ The indeterminate space of blackness gives rise to a sublime sense of the possible failure of an idea. Action entails accident. The counterpart of discovery and invention is disaster. The shuttle explodes. In this silent space of rupture limits are confronted. Smith's depicted worlds contain a certain vulnerability. The ship's wake harbours the shadowed stillness of the shipwreck. A nostalgic backward glance, the figure of the shipwreck is also a kind of arrival. The window created by the Hubble Space Telescope leads us on, even after Challenger's loss. For at all times we are still compelled to build new ships to reach new frontiers.

*Suspended in flux, in contortions of disorder... the earth mourns itself. Continents torn in half and turned into coastlines, call for themselves across the sea... Everywhere the past juts into the present; mountains burst from one era to another, or crumple up millennia, time joining at its end.*⁴

Smith's landscapes are hinterlands, existing at the threshold of consciousness, at the edges of our tamed civilized lands. Black holes in space are the new wilderness. The apparitions of comets, once interpreted as omens or signs from the gods are now understood through the tracking of their orbital elements as a series of predictable events.

*Everything which shows, sees... thus the lightning which lights, looks.*⁵ In a poetry of reflections the visible seems to have been exchanged for vision itself. Translucent currents of water and air, invisible earth-shifts, the velocity and distance light travels in space, clusters of stars, cloudbursts, comets, flower blooms and obsolete timepieces under glass...

Allusive non-correspondences like invocations, these complex patterns and details introduce the sacred and a certain opacity or mystery. We perceive a faint sense of longing and recognise the archaeological limits of memory and experience.

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

*Point to one end, which is always present.*⁶

Smith's painting gives the feeling of a certain materiality. His images are like evidences of events; traces of something real. Time itself has been inscribed in the object or landscape. Like a votive image, the miniature is an imitation. It's time is the infinite time of reverie.⁷ Encased in glass, the miniature world is preserved only while its boundaries are intact. The object resonates within the picture space as contextual disjunction threatens trespass. Nature is shifted to the sphere of the inhabited memory and we perceive a sense of wonder in the dialogue between inner and outer, between the art work's boundary and the self.

The Gradual Instant

Journeying and looking back... A 'pleat' of time – of speed and slowness – the painter's lie.⁸ Through the act of looking our fleeting perceptual world is fixed, momentarily. The illusion is sublime, transparent, coherent and complete. Air, water, sky and earth are united in a wide and tranquil vision to be dissolved in visibility.

A ship in a bottle. A picture of that which is about to become a memory. The uniform flow of time is impeded. In its midst we exist as a stillpoint – a momentary centre which posits an acceptance of the givenness of the world and our relationship to it. Basic categories like time, place and space are traversed. Unbounded, they are no longer distinguished by fixity but by fluidity. And, embedded in the world, we play a constitutive part in the genesis of meaning.

A panoramic view. A cinematic trace. A splicing together of accumulated moments. The image as an instrument for looking at time. A blindspot framed by areas of blackness: it exists both as an elemental sublime view and as a site of perception in the resonant region between the realms of idea and manifestation.

Mark-making brings a strong haptic sense to Smith's paintings and suggests the importance of bodily sensation and emotional effect in the ways in which we come to know about the world. Like a participant in a social utopia: text – historical references, quotations, indices, diagrams, maps, hand writing, poetry, abstract markings and erasures – colonise the territory of the picture surface. The material presence of these gestural traces bring the artist's body to the work and disrupts our illusionistic vantage.

Aware of the rhythm of trial and error and striving for visual effects, the viewer reads each change in the articulation of a line in much the same way as a change in the timbre of a voice. In it we sense certainty or strength, pause or forethought, hesitancy or sureness. Intuition and not-knowing are read as definitive elements in a world not solely constituted by language, fact and logical relations.

The text is that space where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate.⁹

Terrain

To enable us to speak about social, cultural and language systems, we need to shift between the realm of subjective experience and that of objective or abstract formulation – to traverse the space of intersubjectivity. In Peter James Smith's art the journey from picture as window to painting as object is evidenced as the difference between subjectivity and history.

Peter James Smith is concerned with how we know what we know. His paintings posit an intersection of self-enclosed paradigms – a slippage between theoretical frameworks. Always dissonant, the space of language and that of experience, we find in this nexus a point of conjunction which separates what we know from how we know it. The viewer is encouraged to navigate a path which traverses the richness of this space. To wonder: What happens in the space between abstract orders of language and material substance of the world?

We know and do not know. We bend closer to the speaker as a guest or traveller whose voice tires. A rich undecidability draws us. This is, to be sure, the poet's design.¹⁰

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¹ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, 'Life Passes', in Richter, I.A., (ed.), 1980, p.276.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.522), in Kenny, A., (ed.), *The Wittgenstein Reader*, 1994, p.31, p.14.

³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 'A Critical Backward Glance', p.171.

⁴ Anne Michaels, *The Weight of Oranges*, 'What the Light Teaches', 1986, p.126.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 1983, p.30.

⁶ T.S. Elliot, *Four Quartets*, I, 'Burnt Norton', 2000.

⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 1993, p.65.

⁸ Anne Michaels, *The Weight of Oranges*, 1986, p.156.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 'From Work to Text', 1977, p.164.

¹⁰ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, 1989, p.162.