

Press Release

Anj Smith. Drifting Habitations

9 November 2023 – 13 January 2024

Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street



New York...Beginning this November, British artist Anj Smith will debut work from her latest series of paintings in 'Drifting Habitations,' her first New York solo exhibition in nearly a decade. Known for intimate, intricately rendered canvases that explore themes of identity, eroticism, anxiety and ecology, Smith's new work takes on a larger scale to explore notions of atopia, a concept beautifully elucidated by Roland Barthes as 'drifting habitations,' through subverting the genre of the female nude. Set within ecologically devastated landscapes, Smith's gorgeous but unsettling canvases challenge the notion of fixed locations and invite us to consider the fluidity of our experiences and perceptions of the world. Delving into the complex relationship between self and space, Smith's luminous works question the very nature of our connections to the environments we inhabit.

Several works on view in the exhibition feature solitary female figures immersed in water. Vibrating with an atmosphere of impending tempest, these paintings evoke rising tides and by extension, hint at the prospect of an approaching natural disaster. Despite their nakedness and seeming vulnerability, the figures appear to have innovated within their apocalyptic surroundings. Smith has said that she sees water as both distinct and malleable, specific and universal, and—like her figures—neither monolithic nor fixed. Above all, the artist aims to express the complexity of dwelling in a human body and how it feels from the inside out to exist against the backdrop of ongoing toxicity.



The pose of the figure in 'But Tell it Slant' (2023) calls to mind the famous goddess central to Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' (1485–86). In contrast to Botticelli's celebration of love and beauty, Smith's painting refuses to offer a clear narrative; its title refers to another familiar masterpiece of the past, Emily Dickinson's poem 'Tell All the Truth,' wherein the reader is advised to tell the truth, but obliquely and incrementally. Smith's painting exemplifies her interest in playing with ideas of mimicry, veiling and obfuscation, accounting for her tactic of leaving sections of composition more legible than others. The viewer can only 'read' the wealth of detail in her work—and thereby discover what is being revealed, what is being withheld—when the eye and brain are slowed, submitting to time.

Genre, perspective, time and gravity are fluid and unpredictable throughout Smith's paintings, reflecting the uncertainties many are experiencing in this current moment—whether political, cultural or environmental. Thus, some of the large-scale landscape paintings on view in the exhibition, while devoid of human figures, are also portraits: profiles of ecological transition and the rewilding of the natural world. When seen from a distance, 'Intermittence' (2022) appears as a straightforward seascape, bleak and barren aside from a bright neon light reaching across the tempestuous sky. But as the viewer gazes into this work, details slowly emerge suggesting different geological epochs have left their mark on this place over many eras. Here, the sea is not a fluid body; instead, it is formed from plates of ice precariously layered like the tiles of an abandoned roof, having frozen and thawed repeatedly. Small marsupials leap and climb across newly formed vegetation, inhabiting an environment that was never meant for them. What appeared at first glance to be a vibrant ribbon of light is not a natural phenomenon but unfurls as a distress signal from far off in the distance, somewhere far beyond the horizon, a surviving remnant of human life.



On the occasion of this exhibition, Hauser & Wirth Publishers will release 'Anj Smith: Drifting Habitations,' a catalogue of the artist's most recent work. The publication, which can be preordered [at this link](#), features a conversation between psychologist Orna Guralnik and the artist, as well as a poetic intervention by author Claire-Louise Bennett. On Saturday, 11 November, Guralnik and Smith will be in conversation at Hauser & Wirth's 22nd Street location. For more information, including how to reserve space, please visit hauserwirth.com/events.

About the Artist

Born in 1978 in Kent, England, Anj Smith studied at Slade School of Fine Art and at Goldsmiths College, both in London, UK, where she continues to be based.

Smith's paintings are rich in detail, color and texture, collapsing strict definitions of portraiture, landscape and still-life whilst allowing elements of each to co-exist. Her wildly feral landscapes, ambiguous figures, textiles, and rare and exotic flora and fauna investigate the possibility of a contemporary sublime. Drawing upon sources as disparate as the works of Pontormo, entomology and the couture of Madam Grès (as examples), Smith weaves archaic traditions and contemporary signs together into a personal cosmos. In Smith's luscious visual language, she embraces the instability of meaning, exploring shifting boundaries, disintegration and the liminal.

Carbon savings: Part of this exhibition was shipped by sea from the UK. Transporting by sea versus air resulted in a carbon savings of 11.84tCO₂e (tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent).

For additional information, please contact:

Andrea Schwan, Andrea Schwan Inc., andrea@andreaschwan.com, +1 917 371 5023

Christine McMonagle, Hauser & Wirth, christinemcmonagle@hauserwirth.com, +1 347 320 8596

Daniel Rechtschaffen, Hauser & Wirth, danielrechtschaffen@hauserwirth.com, +1 415 608 2148

Caption and courtesy information:

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Anj Smith
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Rosemarinus
2023
Oil on linen
79 x 61 cm / 31 1/8 x 24 in

But Tell it Slant
2023
Oil on linen
77 x 112 cm / 30 3/8 x 44 1/8 in

Intermittence
2022
Oil on linen
150 x 300.5 x 4 cm / 59 x 118 1/4 x 1 5/8 in