

## **PATRIK ANDERSSON / Gordon Smith's Black and White Works: Site, Sight, and Afterimage<sup>1</sup>**

At the age when Gordon Smith was just learning to hold a pencil, Sigmund Freud, the father of modern-day psychoanalysis, happened upon a small contrivance called "The Mystic Writing-Pad," which helped to illustrate his own hypothesis on memory:

(It) promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. . . . To make use of the Mystic Pad, one writes upon the celluloid portion of the covering-sheet which rests upon the wax slab. . . . It is a return to the ancient method of writing upon tablets of clay or wax: a pointed stilus scratches the surface, the depressions upon which constitute the "writing." . . . If we imagine one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax slab, we shall have a concrete representation of the way in which I tried (in *The Interpretation of Dreams*) to picture the functioning of the perceptual apparatus of our mind. (Sigmund Freud "A note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" 1925)

Twenty years later, Gordon Smith happened upon his own metaphors and allegorical structures to deal with memory, which he has made use of ever since. Whereas Freud visualized the dialectic between internal and external structures of the mind in a writing tool that is today commonly used by children, Smith has found his rebus in things located at the edge of the forest, the sea and the city.

### **White**

With every season that passes, Gordon Smith manages to find the time, energy and will to produce a wide body of work that includes painting, sculpture, print and collage. At the centre of this practice stand his paintings of nature that, at a

<sup>1</sup> This essay is reprinted from the exhibition catalogue for Black and White at the Equinox Gallery in 2011.

distance, can be read as a lyrical West Coast descendant of European Impressionism filtered through local flora. In many ways this is a good way to see them. Smith certainly has the painterly ability to capture the changing qualities of light as it interacts with tree branches, leaves and reflections on water. But there is also something disquieting and distinctly contemporary in the way Smith engages with this subject matter that makes it a more critical response to modernity than what one might first think.

The dialectic at play in a painting by Gordon Smith is not only one of realism and abstraction, but it is also one where a picturesque and sublime vocabulary has been translated into a unique and strikingly *urban* impression of nature. As much as one would like to think that these paintings are about some kind of pure West Coast wilderness, the urban experience of the viewer is always taken into account. More than often one finds oneself tangled and lost in his close-up depictions of the edges of forests and byways. What Smith does with his paintings is bate his viewer into a situation that is hard to get out of. The visual confrontation with nature that ensues is always defined by a wall of trees, a pond, or a web of tangled branches that keep us from seeing a landscape. In this way, Smith's *modus operandi* appears to be his refusal to entertain a Cartesian landscape tradition based on controlling space from above. Instead, he takes pleasure in a position that is grounded and in the thick of things. The result is that we get caught by these striking images like a deer in headlights. Looking back at Smith's artistic career this arrested vision is nothing new. I was reminded of this looking at a watercolour he painted of the Sussex coast in 1942, where an otherwise tranquil beach scene is cut off by a tangle of barbed wire that, with hindsight, looks a lot like his recent depictions of brambles.

Considering Smith's refusal to depict deep space, to see his paintings for what they truly are means that we must be willing to step right up to the painting's surface where the edge of the forests he depicts turn into an abstraction. Only by being caught up in his tangle of branches, brush strokes, and scratches that on occasion include collaged debris of drift wood, beer cans, and printed matter, does his very urban sensibility become clear. His paintings are not unlike the chronicles of urban wall markings by the late Cy Twombly who also worked with the quick-drying and fluid acrylic paint medium that Smith prefers. But Smith's

gaze is not focused on the scribbles and scratches that have survived censorship on city walls, but instead values the strength that remains in weathered branches that not only have survived dry summers, autumn winds, and snowy winters, but also the encroaching threat of progress and industry. After all, his subject matter is often found just outside the windows of his West Vancouver house, along the roadside or a nearby ski resort.

It is this shaky relationship between city and country that Smith takes pleasure in and has made into his personal signature. The surface that at a distance seems to offer a comfortable and calm picture onto our West Coast's natural environment suddenly appears painted with the haste of city life. Perhaps it is this urgency in his work that leads me to consider this Smith's urbanity despite what is often an absence of civilization as a motif. Or maybe it's the fact that I know how Gordon does not limit his artistic vision to painting nature, but drags as much of the material world into his studio as he sees fit.

## **Black**

Smith generally works on two or three bodies of paintings at a time and manages to extend this practice into other mediums such as papier mâché sculpture, collage, etching, photography, and drawing. With all this production, time seems to be on his side. His collages and assemblages reveal an eclectic mix of inspiration and, unlike his paintings of trees, this work admits more readily his fascination with the leftovers of both nature and society. Used and broken sticks, branches, tumbleweed, pop cans, newspapers, magazines, and broken wheelchair parts all make up an army of readymades prepared to liberate his creative impulses. Nothing is too dead for Smith to transform into his own brand of surrealism where everything is playfully alive.

The White paintings are in many ways the reverse of this expanded mixed-media practice as they appear to freeze time in the driest of manners. The brush strokes lead us in as much as they keep us out by dragging themselves across the canvas. At times it is hard to tell whether the artist has used a gnarly old tree branch or a dried-up paint brush to conjure up the tangled structure that, despite its lure, keeps us blinded from Smith's interior motivation. This is quite



the opposite of Smith's so-called Black paintings, which appear to expose the latent base to these more visually striking works. Just as Freud saw a necessary relationship between the waxy substrate and the written surface of "The Mystic Writing-Pad," Smith has in his own way established an interior and exterior way of working.

Unlike their dry counterparts, the Black works look humid. Earthy browns and moss-like green colour fields are shot through with accents of industrial red and orange. On occasion, brilliant blue appears as if to strike up a visual analogy with the blue jays interrupting the calm outside his window. Other times, black and white under-paint or divisive vertical stripes give hint to process and underlying conversation with artists such as Franz Kline and Barnett Newman. While equally sublime, Smith reduces their heroic posturing to something more humble and personal. Unlike his "colder" work, these paintings are more apparently emotive and bodily in their drippy and chance ridden fluidity. They also willingly admit the sources that drive this self-admitted appropriation artist to create ("I am a hundred painters deep"). Just as for Louise Bourgeois art represented a form of exorcism, what she called "a tool for survival," Gordon Smith works on these Black paintings as if to learn about himself.

The more time we spend with the Black works, we find an artist who, unlike today's ironist, has a *bricoleur* ethos in line with artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Robert Rauschenberg who formed their visual economies out of the detritus of their immediate surroundings. And like the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, Smith has anchored his poetic sensibility in a war-torn Europe but infused it with the beauty and pathos of life on the West Coast of Canada. Conversations with artists like Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, and Jack Shadbolt, who all saw nature as a motif able to access the spectres of history, percolate to the surface of these works. All references and inspirations aside, Smith establishes his own aesthetic territory that conflates his most traumatic moments with that of sublime aesthetic revelations. Just as brush strokes, drips, and colour can evoke specific encounters with art, so do dates, names, and objects call up a more personal inventory of events. Take, for example, *Pachino 43* where the artist invests the canvas not only with the darkest of blues, brown, and blacks, but affixes

the very dog tags he chewed on before and after being “blown up” by a shell at Pachino beach in 1943.

Or on a darker note, how about *Pachino #11*, the blackest of the black paintings. Like looking into the shattered black hole of an icy lake, we are submerged in a rich sea of darkness by geometrically cut remnants of his colour-stained painting rags and circular splay of his discarded boxer shorts that create a vortex effect. Here we come closest to what André Breton once termed *humour noir*. After all, is this painting not a survey of the artist’s career? From employment at Brigdens, illustrating underwear and other garments for Eaton’s department store in the 1930s, to the kind of independent abstract artist that his studio rags call up, the past and the present are synthesized. But if this is a self-portrait, where is the artist? Has he slipped through the canvas like a rabbit down its hole? Despite all this expression, it remains the strength of this work that we are left wondering about the artist’s intention.

If, as some have argued, repression and pessimism were at the core of Sigmund Freud’s black-and-white analysis of intention and expression, Gordon Smith’s current practice, which revels in the transformation of memory and vision into concrete objects, puts a positive and dialectical spin on our interior and exterior relationship to the world. Rather than view these works as black or white, we need to understand how much the two bodies of work depend on each other. It is only by seeing how colourful and steeped in memory his black paintings are and how entangled and twisted his white paintings can be that Smith’s project comes into full focus as a critically engaged modernist practice.