

LAUREL GITLEN

122 NORFOLK ST.
NEW YORK, NY 10002

T 212 274 0761
F 212 590 6191
LAURELGITLEN.COM

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Emily Mae Smith:
Medusa, 2015, oil
on linen, 38 by 27
inches; at Laurel
Gitlen.

EMILY MAE SMITH

Laurel Gitlen

Emily Mae Smith's first solo show at Laurel Gitlen, titled "Medusa," pumped new blood into the ongoing conversation that many contemporary artists have with Pop art, in particular its glamour finish and populist appeal. The crisply imagined paintings reference classic animation, art history, mythology and science-fiction kitsch. After a 2014 breakout show at Junior Projects on the Lower East Side, the young Brooklyn-based artist was included in prominent group exhibitions in New York and Europe.

Most of the seven oil-on-linen works (all 2015) measure 48 by 37 inches, an ideal portrait size. Smith compellingly integrates bold graphic design with the luminous surfaces of oil paint. Virtuoso technique is tempered by an absurdist humor that activates and personalizes her work. Cartoonish brooms figuring in many of the paintings are recognizable from the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" sequence of Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia*. The broom, in various guises, becomes a surrogate for the artist as well as a symbol for the enchanted modality of the studio, a space that exerts tremendous force over its occupant's desires and fears.

In *The Mirror*, simple black lines on a cadmium yellow background depict a group of brooms lounging around a giant red-framed hand mirror in the middle of the canvas. Black and white dots in Lichtenstein's iconic benday style compose its reflective oval surface. The centrality of the mirror creates the effect of looking at imagery by Smith and by Lichtenstein at the same time—a doubling that is complexly pleasurable. References to art history are more subtly folded into other works. The puffy clouds partly occluded by red bricks in *Scream* evoke René Magritte, as does the filigree rendition of twin moons in pink and blue in *Viewer-finder*. In each painting, an anthropomorphic broom handle is depicted in a stance elucidating the title.

Waiting Room presents a close-up of a broom, the bristles transformed into long blonde hair. Wearing glasses with numberless clock-faces, the head appears to lean back against a yellow-purple gradient resembling venetian blinds. The luscious lips and coiled hair identify the face as feminine. The complexity of the description belies the work's visual simplicity. It can be digested quickly as an image, but it can also be savored for its indeterminate psychology. The same figure fills the canvas in *Still Life*. Here one eyeglass reflects (or projects?) a glistening ice cube and a cherry with a phallic stem. Conveyed with the fetish perfection of '80s advertising, the little scene is intoxicating to behold and carries an intimation of mortality, reminiscent of Dutch *vanitas* paintings.

The one work without a broom, *Over the Shoulder*, shows a stiletto heel piercing a pink tongue, held taut by the lethal point. The violence is rendered more obscene by the cartoonish abstraction of the forms and the gorgeous periwinkle background. The scene is framed by an outline that doubles as a wide-open mouth, white squares at the top and bottom representing teeth. A handlebar mustache above the mouth, a recurring character in Smith's work, slyly points to the male persona that is synonymous with the history of painting.

In the quietly shocking *Medusa*, a tangled mass of green snaking atop a broom handle sharply contrasts with a background fade of bright red to hot pink. Smith subverts the Greek myth of this female monster, who turned men to stone when they looked in her eyes, by portraying her as eyeless. In tandem with the other works on view, the painting embodies the psychodrama of seeing and being seen that women artists face when engaging with the legacies of modernism.

—Nora Griffin