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Matt Sheridan Smith

HANNAH HOFFMAN GALLERY

Though it may be inadvisable, let's begin with the press release. The text that Matt Sheridan Smith produced for his recent exhibition "Widow: Fig.3 Ep.1" didn't merely gloss the show's themes and forms, but rather played an active role in their production. He begins with the famous opening line of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, only here Gregor Samsa has been replaced by "the widow," who is transformed not into a "giant insect" but a "Figure." The show hinged to a large extent on that final, prismatic term—*figure*—a word whose meanings include shape and pattern, one's physical appearance or the depiction of a person in literature or art, body, symbol, or emblem. Its adjectival form gives rise to seemingly contradictory meanings for language and art: *Figurative art* describes a recognizable, and thus on some level faithful, or even literal, depiction of the world—and is therefore the opposite of abstract art—while *figurative language* is itself an instance of abstraction and stands in contradistinction to the *literal*.

Polysemy, even the simultaneous implication of near opposites, recurred throughout Smith's exhibition. In his text, the artist plots an unstable set of possible functions for his works (they might be still lifes, backdrops, or *mise-en-scènes*). However, the principal characterization he offers for the efforts in "Widow," a show that consisted predominantly of abstractions, is "speculative portraiture," or portraits that lack subjects. The identity crisis thus prescribed did not destabilize the experience of this very controlled work as much as it did the relationship between the text and the art. That is, the two didn't quite match up; neither described the other. Instead, they teased things out of each other through discordances and quiet echoes.

The widow, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin (the "Grand Dame of Champagne"), loomed over the show as the presumptive missing subject of Smith's various speculative portraits. She appeared explicitly once: In *Portrait*, 2014, a digital print of Léon Cogniet's mid-nineteenth-century painting of the Widow Clicquot pasted on plywood, her image sits behind a grid of polished aluminum. In the installation *Untitled (skin contact)*, 2014, glasses of champagne and lees (the yeast used to produce the beverage) sit atop two Clicquot-orange plinths poised before a mound of dirt and an arrangement of potted nightshade (a plant that's deadly if ingested). A heap of earth, perhaps excised from what might now be a hole in some landscape, is a visual inversion of Surrealist poet René Daumal's words quoted in Smith's text: Daumal describes a hole as "an absence surrounded by presence." Champagne bubbles, too, are instances of absence surrounded by presence. An image of these bubbles, clustered circular forms that repeat in leaflike patterns, could be found in various scales in most of the works that were on view.

Smith's preoccupation with the ontologies of presence and absence manifested formally in the interplay of transparency and opacity



View of "Matt Sheridan Smith," 2014.

throughout the show. In a set of five works (each titled *Scratch*, 2014), Smith covered prints of champagne bubbles with a layer of the specialized ink used on scratch-off lottery tickets. He left two of these works untouched, the bubble patterns just barely visible beneath the trademark-orange color fields, but he abraded or rubbed away the ink on others, creating gestural revelations of the otherwise obscured prints. In the series “Pattern portrait (widow),” 2012–, the artist transferred the same bubble pattern from paper printouts to linen using acrylic gel medium, leaving a ghostly grid among the faint clusters of abstracted bubbles. The layers and traces that mark Smith’s works magnify—and are magnified by—the layering and blurring of meaning in his text; his hesitation between still life, portrait, and pattern; and, again, the simultaneity of presence and absence. In all of this, he models the uncertainties that plague contemporary art (and writing about art), the concurrent allure of opposites, the simultaneity of all styles and forms, the presence and absence of the entirety of art history.

—Eli Diner