

**Emily Mae Smith**  
**Ex Libris**

Cathy and Jesse

Marion Art Gallery

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

*Emily Mae Smith: Ex Libris*

March 17 through April 12, 2020



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#### CREDITS

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Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

Rockefeller Arts Center

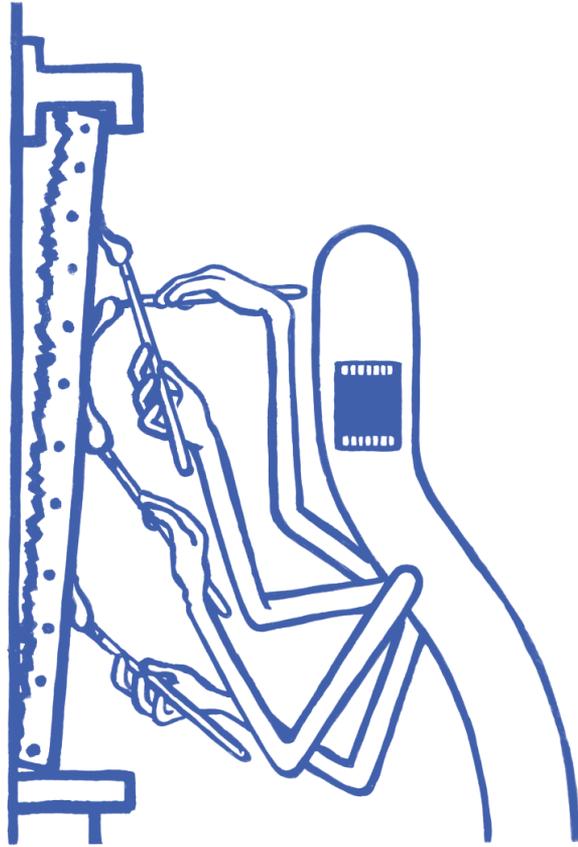
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<https://www.fredonia.edu/about/art-gallery>





*The Studio (Science Fiction)*, 2015, oil and acrylic on linen, 38 x 27 inches

## Foreword

We are grateful to Cathy and Jesse Marion for their ongoing support of the Marion Art Gallery through an endowment they established in 2011. Exhibitions and publications like this would not be possible without their generous support. We are thankful to the Nordell family who established the gallery's first endowment, the Carl J. Nordell Art Gallery Endowment, and Friends of Rockefeller Arts Center for their annual support. We would also like to thank Emily Mae Smith and the staff at Simone Subal Gallery in New York— Kelly McGee, Director and Moira Sims – for coordinating loans of Emily's drawings, prints, and paintings. Finally, thank you to all the *Ex Libris* lenders:

Kristen Becker  
Genesis Belanger  
Valentine Blondel  
Nick Doyle  
Olivia Drusin  
Derek Eller  
Laurel Gitlen  
Adam Henry

Peggy LeBoeuf  
Qing Liu  
Lucia Love  
Kelly McGee  
Florian Meisenberg & Anna KE  
Emily Mae Smith  
Simone Subal  
Leslie & Michael Weissman

Barbara Racker, Director  
Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery



*Sirena*, 2017, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches

# Emily Mae Smith: Ex Libris

by Lucia Love

History is saturated with byproducts of the male gaze, pooling over and eroding the cultural landscape. This is selectively troubling for anyone who finds their reflection missing in such a bog imbued with the hypnotic power to look like home. To negotiate a safe path, one must seek sure footing in the untrammelled landscapes of self-identified narrative. Travelers unconvinced by illusion are rewarded with entrance to a zone where experience gains value and weight – an oasis of reclamation.

The artist Emily Mae Smith is a resident of one such oasis.

Working at the nexus of history and mythology, cartooning and canonized art, Smith methodically acts to co-opt the archetypes of a hegemonic past and recast them through the lens of humor. Since the advent of contemporary feminism, western culture has witnessed a sea change in regards to the visibility of practitioners creating art that challenges the position of the feminine, but relative to the entire timeline of the painting canon, women's validated contribution still equates roughly to the "time of humans" compared to the "time of the dinosaurs." This contention between canonized history and the experience of identities

traditionally barred from institutional discourse has left the later with multiple fractured histories that resonate with each other, rather than existing in a vertical hierarchy of importance that denies subjectivity. It is because of this fracture that subjectivity has been recast as a powerful tool of illumination. The critic Barry Schwabsky picked up on Smith's innate understanding of this relationship to history in his essay on her 2019 show *Avalon* at Perrotin gallery stating, "Smith has observed that almost all this art was made by men for the delectation of other men. Her determination, in accordance with the times, was to put her own perceptions and experience as a woman into the picture – and to have fun doing it."<sup>1</sup>

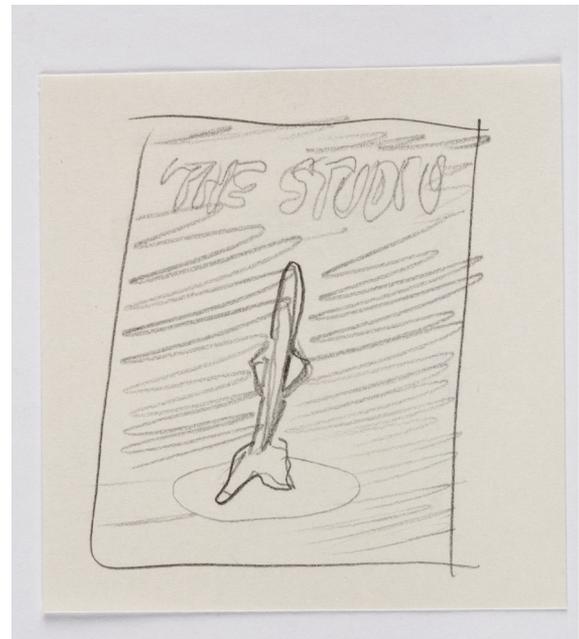
Indeed Emily Mae Smith's paintings exude a playful attitude towards processing the darker aspects of society. This is thanks in large part to cameos played by a harem of enchanted brooms which appear throughout the artist's oeuvre. It took many years of visual experimentation with symbolism before discovering the narrative possibilities these brooms afforded Smith. When asked about her relationship with this specific element of her work in 2016, she detailed, "It started with my laboring in the art world, doing



*The Bikini*, 2017, oil on linen, 38 x 30 inches



*Drawing for Honest Espionage*, 2015, pencil on paper, 4.25 x 3 inches



*Drawing for The Studio (Broom Superstar)*, 2014, pencil on paper, 2.5 x 2.5 inches

random jobs to get by while making my work. I thought, 'I feel like the broom in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.'"<sup>2</sup> Decidedly animated, these protagonists adopt characteristics of archetypes as a way to reflexively address painting the human form. In the same interview she goes on to create an analogy, "With [the brooms], I can talk about the gaze, subjectivity, power, authorship, the phallic nature of art. You can say more difficult things with a character. The broom is my little Tom Thumb."<sup>2</sup> As King Arthur encourages Tom Thumb to revel in his court, so does Smith coax her brooms into narrative gestures which range from languid and sensual, to aloof, to openly confrontational.

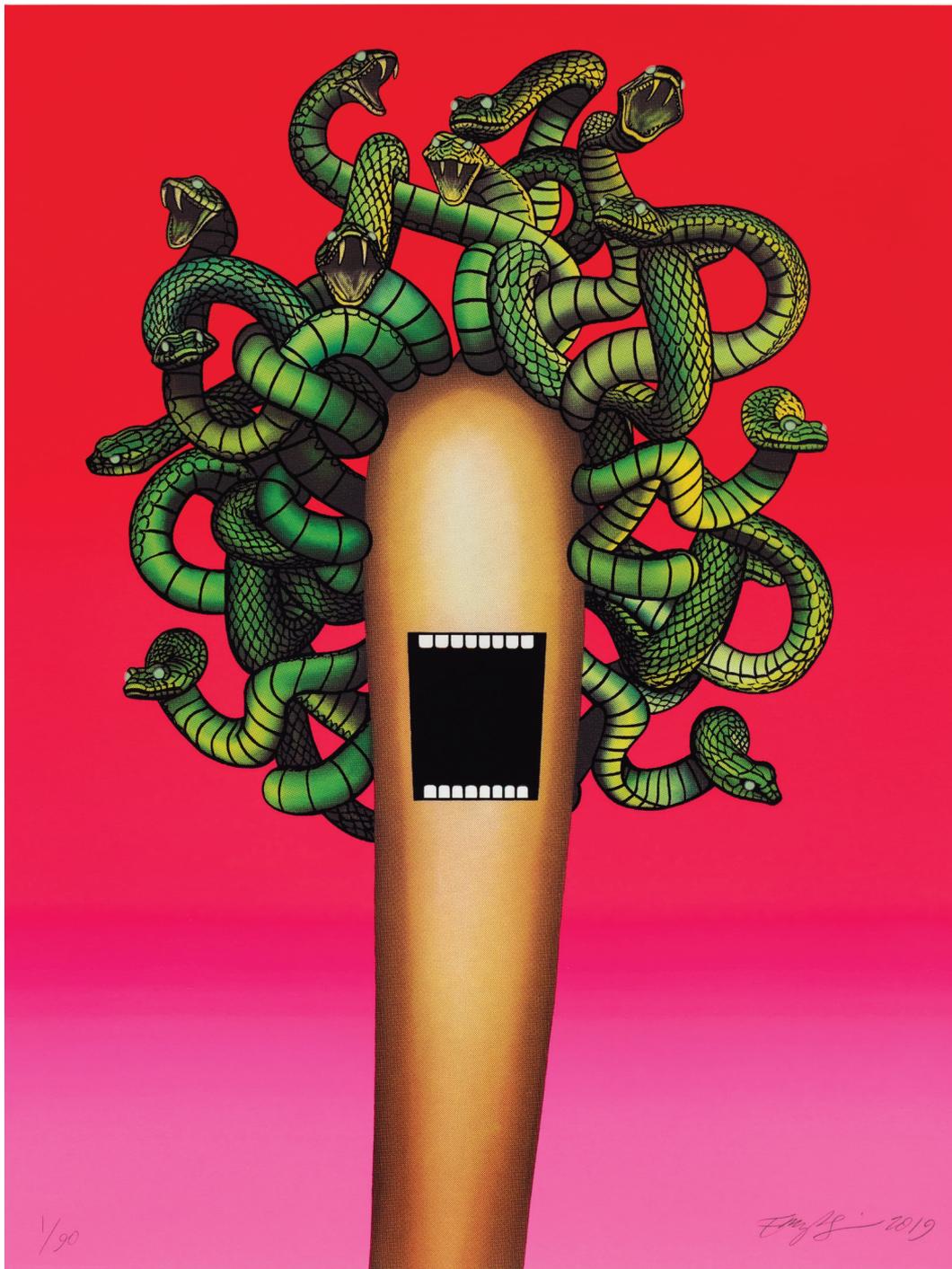
Over the past few years, Smith has decided to begin showing more drawings like the ones on display here in *Ex Libris*. Included in this show are some of the first ever conceptions of this now iconic character beginning with *The Studio (Broom Superstar)* (2014), where the figure makes its debut under a spotlight coming from words hovering above which read "The

Studio." This phrase is borrowed from a design magazine by the same title started by Charles and Emma Holme. Their impetus for creating the project was to break down barriers of language through the dissemination of visual culture, which adds a political message of goodwill embassy to the performance of this tiny Superstar drawing. The intimate scale and fresh effortless line quality of each sketch combines to form a humble blueprint for larger paintings. While these drawings are expressed with the utmost economy of gesture, it is to be noted that all of the major elements of composition are seen worked out before taking paint to canvas. Conceptual rigor is also present in each thumbnail as evidenced by the appropriation of Warhol's *Double Elvis*, replaced by two brooms in the *Drawing for Honest Espionage* (2015) – proof that careful planning goes into the pose to create a seamless illusion of the broom's entry into the canon.

In addition to scenes with full figures, Smith has also created a number of close up portraits of



*Blow Up (Blue and Gold)*, 2016, acrylic on panel, 14 x 11 inches



*Medusa*, 2019, full bleed seven-color screenprint on Coventry rag paper, enamel, water-based, and glow-in-the-dark inks, 24 x 18 inches



*Rogue Wave*, 2016, oil on linen, 72 x 98 inches

the avatar which she describes as psychologically existential as evidenced in work like *Blow Up (Blue and Gold)* (2016) where the figure begins defocusing. In her words, “They embody a crisis of seeing and being.”<sup>14</sup> *Medusa* (2015) is an iconic portrayal of one such close up anthropoid broom topped with a telltale coil of serpents, complete with eyes that glow in the dark. For the pantheistic world, dwellers on the threshold were often female, as evidenced by the cruel sphinx who makes her appearance in *The Riddle* (2017), a large scale reimagining of Ingres’ *Oedipus Explaining the Riddle of The Sphinx* where a broom stands in for Oedipus, effectively short-circuiting the misogyny inherent in ancient forms of heroism. Rescued from

her particular status as hunting trophy for Perseus, Medusa has reincarnated in contemporary society as an emblem of the female gaze, penetrating with vengeance. And what could be better revenge than having the last laugh? In Emily Mae Smith’s version of the famous Gorgon, this eyeless expression becomes a humorous manifestation of what Hélène Cixous wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa*—namely that, “Men say there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That is because they need femininity to be associated with death.”<sup>15</sup>

Romantic thought, as pioneered by Edmund Burke, decreed that the mortal terror and sensual glory of the sublime should forever be intrinsically linked



*The Riddle*, 2017, oil on linen, 67 x 51 inches



*Chekhov's Gun*, 2017, three-color screenprint on Coventry rag paper, 24 x 18 inches

to the feminine principle. This symbolic alignment is often commemorated through evocations of the unfathomable sea. One of the artist's major works titled *Rogue Wave* (2016) depicts another portrait of the broom, but this time as a giant reminiscent of Ceto, the goddess of uncontrollably dangerous waters – rising with cool resolve and even cooler sunglasses – seeing red through a cresting wave. The wave doesn't shake this figure, for this element is under her jurisdiction. This same scale giant can be seen depicted in the study for *The Bathers* (2017) present in the collection displayed within *Ex Libris*, but this time the waters are calm enough for a group of mermaids to idle about, looking off at a distant iceberg. Other close up portraits included use the psychological element of perfectly reflective sunglasses to tip off the viewer as to the surroundings of the figure. This reflection is necessary,



*Tongues and Coins*, 2014, prepared ground, watercolor, acrylic on linen, 14 x 11 inches

as it does not matter if there's a hook dangling in the water, or an anchor plunging through; the broom shows no emotional response. As is often culturally lauded, these femme fatale figures maintain the perfect lips and hair. Regardless of what dangers may lurk in the waters they have taken up in, not a detail of their mask shall falter. Danger is not all they may encounter however! In a surprisingly lighthearted turn of subject matter, the brooms are also revealed to enjoy skinny dipping à la *Bikini* (2017), a bather at sunset taking off her top in a colorful sea like a girl gone wild.

Emily Mae Smith doesn't stop at explorations of the feminine in her work, but rather has developed an entirely unique framing device for commentary on the masculine. Utilizing a rectangular mouth with all geometrically identical rows of teeth exposed as a recurring narrative element, she introduces surrealist

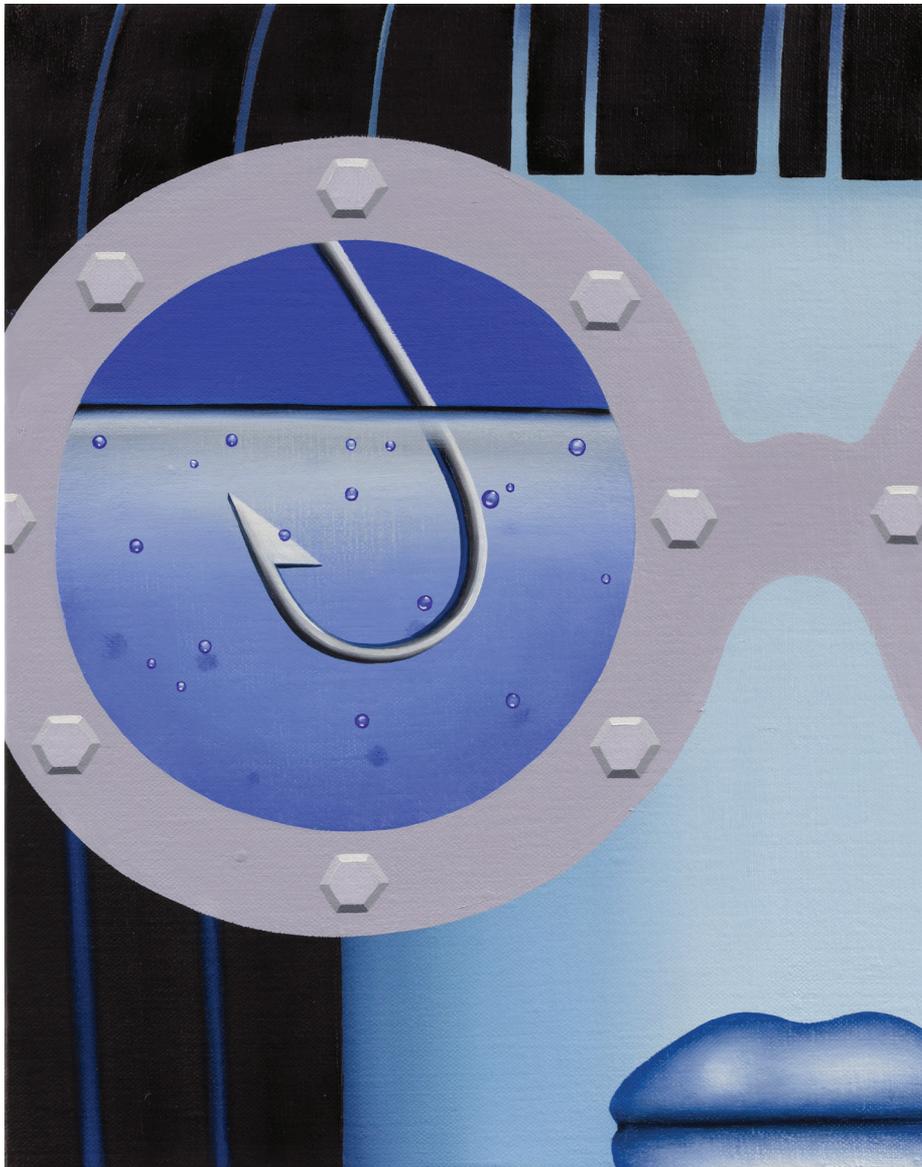


*Bathers Study I*, 2017, watercolor on paper, 8 x 10 inches

plays such as a gang of probing tongues looking as if they are desperately attempting to catch falling quarters on themselves, or a tongue that is rolled up like toilet paper, hanging ready to be used. In an interview with Charlotte Jansen, Smith notes, “I was studying Art Nouveau illustrations, and noticed how a frame device was often used to contextualize a narrative in those designs. I came up with the mouth/teeth with mustache frame as a way to engender my paintings as ‘male.’ It was kind of a joke.”<sup>4</sup> Though the surreal poetry of the disrupted logic within these mouths does read as a joke, the introduction of more sinister elements like the smoking gun suggests a conversation about accountability. The cloud of smoke from shots fired in *Chekhov’s Gun* (2017) has a pop art graphic quality in contrast to the Magritte inspired clear blue sky, but the absence of the shooter’s target (when the barrel of the gun is not pointed at

the viewer) reminds us that there’s always more to discover outside of the image’s frame.

While the cast of Smith’s creations proliferates, they continue to hold court in a myriad of historical modes, unbound by a style imposed by any one movement. Just as Angela Davis anticipates the obsolescence of housework in *Women, Race, and Class*, the brooms once considered automata of drudgery may now be seen luxuriating in the place of odalisques and creating their own art in their own various studio settings. They may also take turns appearing as lowly gleaners or mermaids out of water. It is the artist’s imagination that creates a rift in the prevailing logic, which keeps these characters appearing within any conceivable tableaux. And with each successive depiction of life’s possibilities we gain the stability of higher ground, and with that a history, mythology, and comedy of our own.



*Lagoon*, 2017, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches

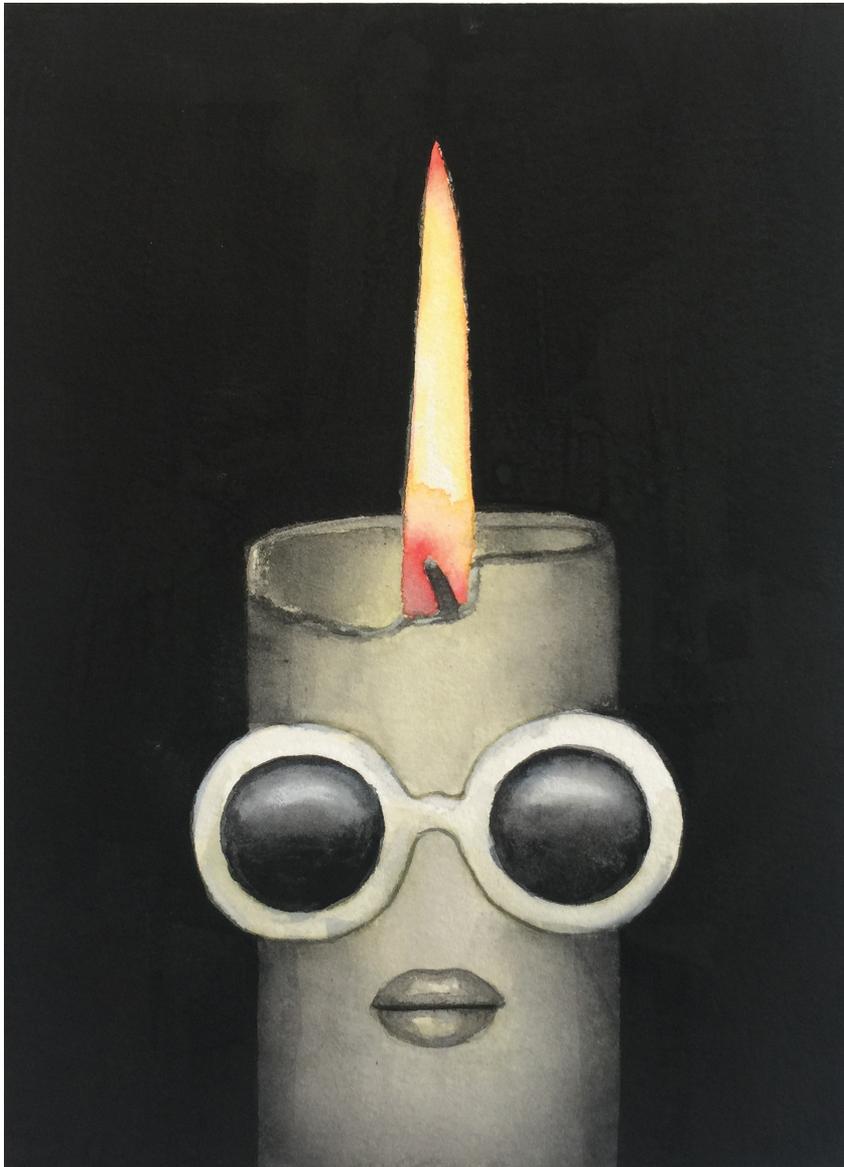
### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Barry Schwabsky, "An Essay for the Occasion of *Avalon* by Perrotin," Tokyo Exhibition, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Cattelan, "Emily Mae Smith Interview," *purple Magazine*, No. 25, Spring/Summer 2016, <http://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2016-issue-25/emily-mae-smith>.

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, translated by Keith and Paula Cohen, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer 1976, 875–993.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Jansen, "Emily Mae Smith," *Elephant Magazine*, Issue 26, Spring 2016.



*Candle Study I*, 2017, carbon and watercolor on paper, 7 x 5 inches

Lucia Love is a Brooklyn based painter and writer. Their narrative images, upcoming exhibits, and writing projects can be found at [nothingisgoingtohappen.com](http://nothingisgoingtohappen.com), the existential ledger for all visual and literary endeavors.



*A Vision*, 2016, oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches

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**Emily Mae Smith**

Born 1979 Austin, Texas

Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

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**Education**

2006 M.F.A. Visual Art, Columbia University, New York

2002 B.F.A. Studio Art, University of Texas at Austin

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**Solo Exhibitions****2020**

Simone Subal Gallery, New York (forthcoming)

*Ex Libris*, Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery, Rockefeller  
Arts Center, State University of New York at Fredonia

**2019**

*Avalon*, Perrotin, Tokyo, Japan

*Matrix 181*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

**2018**

*Emily Mae Smith*, Le Consortium, Dijon, France

*A Strange Relative*, Genesis Belanger & Emily Mae Smith,  
Perrotin, New York, NY

*Feast of Totems*, Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany

*Henry+Smith*, 39 Great Jones, New York, NY

**2017**

*The Sphinx or The Caress*, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY

*The Little Apocrypha*, collaboration Emily Mae Smith &  
Adam Henry, curated by Samuel

Leuenberger and Elise Lammer, SALTS, Birsfelden, Switzerland

**2016**

*Tesla Girls*, Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium

*Honest Espionage*, Mary Mary, Glasgow, UK

**2015**

*Medusa*, Laurel Gitlen, New York, NY

**2014**

*Novelty Court*, Junior Projects, New York, NY

**2011**

*Neon Sigh*, collaboration with Adam Henry,  
The Arcade, Nashville, TN

**Selected Group Exhibitions****2020**

Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH (forthcoming)

*All of Them Witches*, curated by Dan Nadel and  
Laurie Simmons, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

**2019**

*Dark Laughter*, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, curated by  
Barry Schwabsky, London, UK

*WORDS*, Alexander Berggruen Gallery, New York, NY

*Personal Private Public*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY

*The Smiths*, Marlborough, London, UK

*Home/Work*, JDJ | The Ice House, Garrison, NY

*Throwback Jack*, curated by Amanda Schmitt, Fredericks &  
Freiser, New York, NY

*I campi magnetici (Magnetic Fields)*, curated by Cecilia Alemani,  
Gió Marconi Gallery, Milan, Italy

*No Patience For Monuments*, Perrotin, Seoul, South Korea

*AXxoN N.*, Essex Flowers, New York, NY

**2018**

*Summer*, curated by Ugo Rondinone, Peter Freeman Inc.,  
New York, NY

*A name unfamiliar, underlined in red*, 39 Great Jones,  
New York, NY

*Pine Barrens*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY

*Six Artists*, Harper's Books, East Hampton, NY

*The Sun Is Gone But We Have the Light*, Unclebrother,  
Hancock, NY

*Dancing Goddesses*, Dio Horia, Mykonos, Greece

*Texas*, Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

*Buddy System*, Deanna Evans Projects, Brooklyn, NY

*Herding Cats Again*, Catbox Contemporary, Ridgewood, NY

*Tell Him What We Said About Paint It Black*, 1 Mile Gallery,  
Kingston, NY

*The Revolutionary Suicide Mechanized Regiment Band Part 2*,  
Rob Tufnell, London, UK

*The Cruellest Month*, Mother Gallery, Beacon, NY

*Harper's Books at the Beverly Hills Hotel*, Beverly Hills, CA

*Any body suspended in space will remain in space until made  
aware of its situation*, Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn, Estonia

**2017**

*Engender*, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*Pharmacy for Idiots*, Rob Tufnell, Cologne, Germany  
*Women to the Front: Works from the Miller Meigs Collection*,  
Lumber Room, Portland, OR  
*Her Eyes Are Like Doves Beside Streams of Water*, Adams and  
Ollman, Portland, OR  
*Le Quatrième Sexe*, curated by Marie Maertens, Le Coeur,  
Paris, France  
*Sharper Image*, Present Company, Brooklyn, NY  
*Eyes, Nose, Lips, Etc. Etc.*, Left Field Gallery,  
San Luis Obispo, CA

**2016**

*Scarlet Street*, Lucien Terras, New York, NY  
*Me, Myself, I*, China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles, CA  
*Surreal*, König Galerie (St. Agnes), Berlin, Germany  
*What's Up*, curated by Lawrence van Hagen, Soho Revue,  
London, UK  
*Untitled Body Parts*, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY  
*Rock 'n Roll Nightmare*, curated by Olivia Drusin, 41 Cooper  
Square Gallery, New York, NY

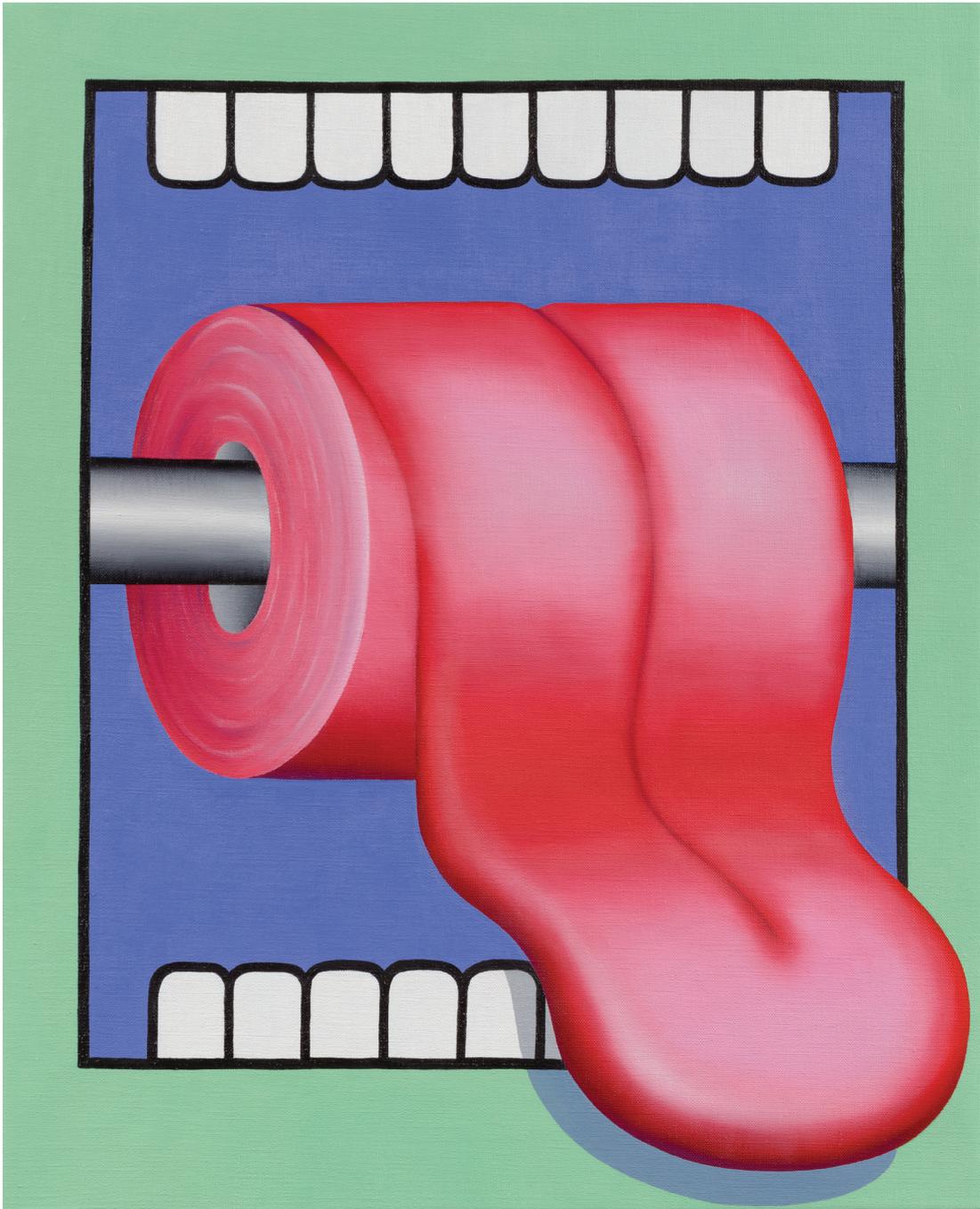
**2015**

*Unrealism*, organized by Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian,  
The Moore Building, Miami, FL  
*Mrs. Benway*, Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland, OR  
*I Dropped the Lemon Tart*, Lisa Cooley, New York, NY  
*Six Advertisements*, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, NY  
*Comic Relief*, Levy/Delval, Brussels, Belgium  
*Oh, Of Course, You Were Berry Picking*, co-organized by  
Rosa Tyhurst, DREI Galerie, Cologne, Germany  
*Six possibilities in painting*, curated by Fabian Schöneich and  
Samuel Leuenberger, Galerie Bernhard, Zurich, Switzerland

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**Public Collections**

Arsenal Contemporary, Montreal, Canada  
The Consortium Museum, Dijon, France  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA



*Potty Mouth*, 2017, oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches

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## Selected Bibliography

### 2019

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- Matt Smith, "Smiths and Legends," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2019.
- Sasha Bogojev, "A Clean Sweep," *Juxtapoz*, April 2019.
- Susan Dunne, "A feminist, surreal twist on an old tale at the Wadsworth Atheneum," *Hartford Courant*, February 10, 2019.
- Clementine Mercier, "Emily Mae Smith, Jeux, Sexe et Manches," *Liberation*, January 28, 2019.
- Julie Ackerman, "Emily Mae Smith, Le Pin-Up Power," *Beaux Arts Magazine*, January 27, 2019.

### 2018

- Noah Johnson, "Fresh Paint," *GQ*, December 2018.
- "A Summer Sampler at Peter Freeman, Inc.," *Blouin Art Info*, July 24, 2018.
- Alex Bennett, "Portrait: Emily Mae Smith," *Novembre Magazine*, February 2018.

### 2017

- David Geers, "Acts of Recognition," *Frieze*, November and December 2017.
- Sasha Bogojev, "The Continuing Intrigue of Emily Mae Smith: The Sphinx or The Caress," *Juxtapoz*, September 2017.
- Robin Cameron, Robin and Wilson Cameron, "Video: Emily Mae Smith in the Studio," *ARTnews*, March 2017.

### 2016

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- Fan Zhong, "High Five - A handful of rising artists are bent on reshaping our view of reality," *W Magazine*, November 2016.
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- Christopher Knight, "Who Am I? Provocative Answers in 'Me, Myself, I' at China ArtObjects" (review), *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2016.
- Casey Lesser, "These 20 Female Artists Are Pushing Figurative Painting Forward" (editorial), *Artsy*, June 10, 2016.

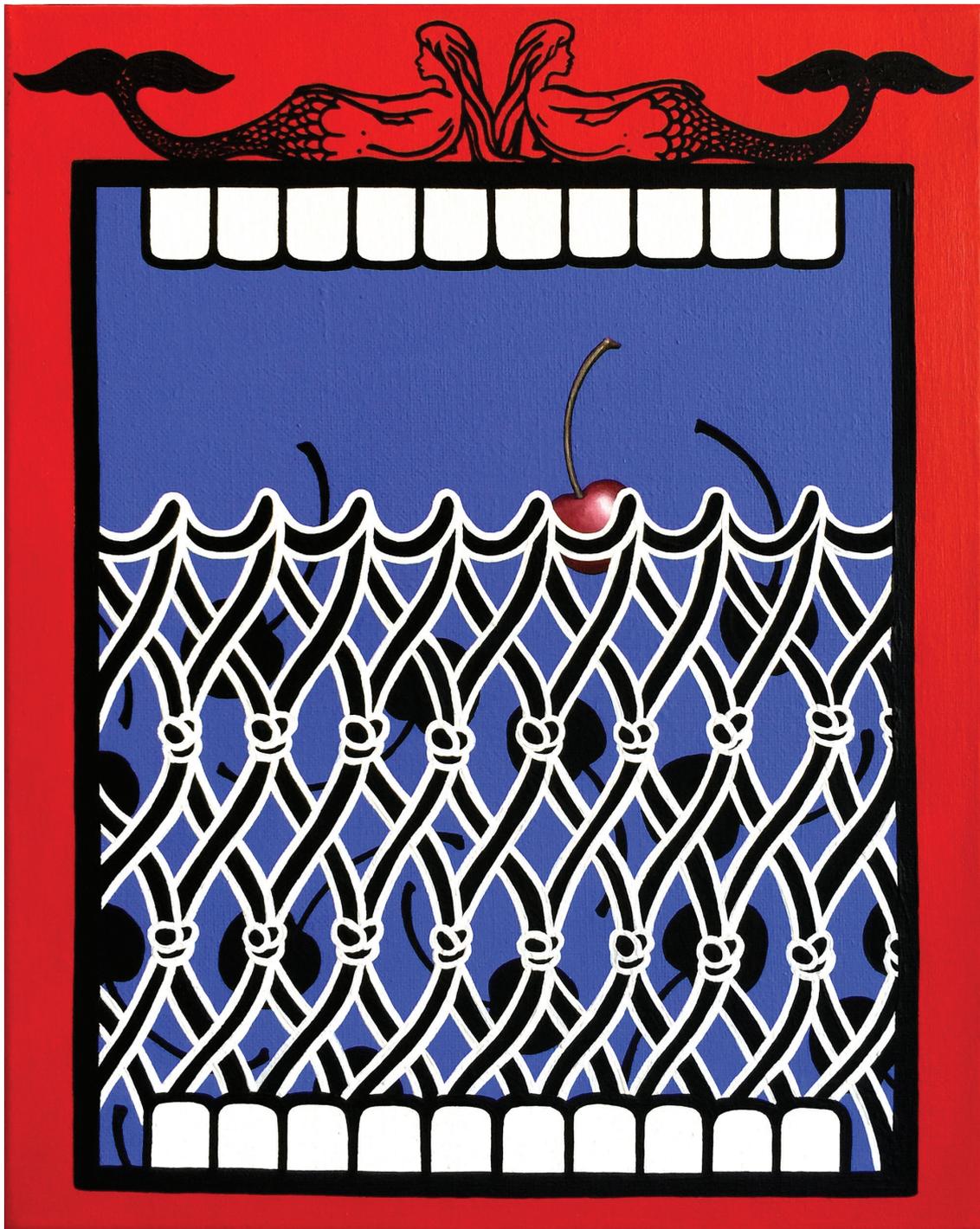
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- Maurizio Cattelan, "Emily Mae Smith Studio Visit, Brooklyn" (interview), *Purple Magazine*, S/S Issue 25.
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- "Untitled Body Parts" (review), *Art in America*, January 2016.
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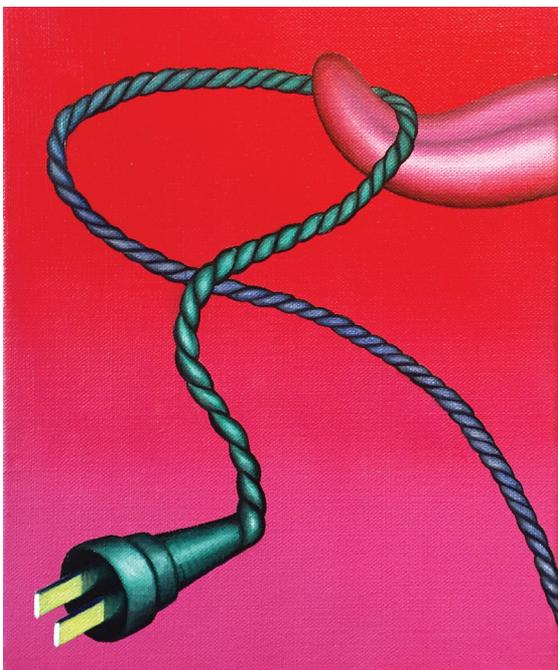
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- Nora Griffin, "Emily Mae Smith" (review), *Art in America*, November 2015.
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- "The top five New York art shows this week," *TimeOut New York*, 21-27 September, 2015.
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- "Sex on Paper," *Kaleidoscope Magazine* #25.
- "I Dropped the Lemon Tart" (review), *Art in America*, August 2015.

### 2014

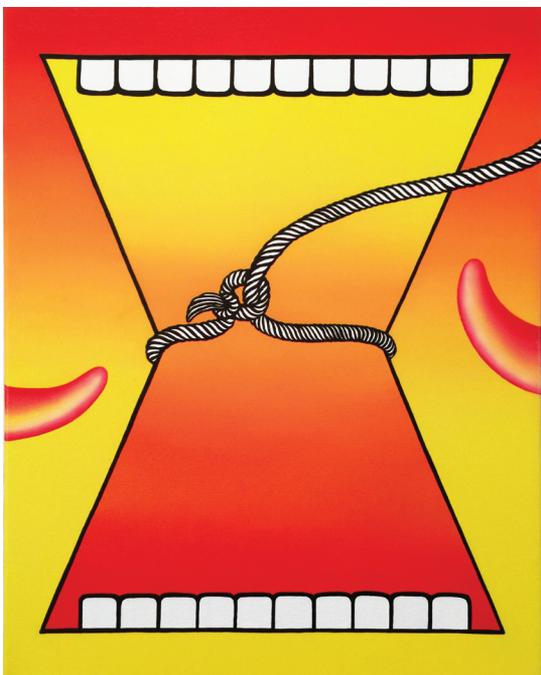
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- Ken Johnson, "Art in Review," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2014.



*Undertow*, 2015, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches



*Electric Loop*, 2018, oil on linen, 10 x 8 inches



*Waisted Talent*, 2015, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches

## Exhibition Checklist

### Paintings

***The Bikini*, 2017**

oil on linen  
38 x 30 inches  
collection of Leslie and Michael Weissman

***Blow Up (Blue and Gold)*, 2016**

acrylic on panel  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Valentine Blondel

***Electric Loop*, 2018**

oil on linen  
10 x 8 inches  
collection of Nick Doyle

***Lagoon*, 2017**

oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Peggy LeBoeuf

***Potty Mouth*, 2017**

oil on linen  
20 x 16 inches  
collection of Genesis Belanger

***Sirena*, 2017**

oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Derek Eller

***The Studio (Science Fiction)*, 2015**

oil and acrylic on linen  
38 x 27 inches  
collection of Leslie and Michael Weissman

***Tongues and Coins*, 2014**

prepared ground, watercolor, acrylic on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Adam Henry

***Undertow*, 2015**

oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Olivia Drusin

***A Vision*, 2016**

oil on linen  
20 x 16 inches  
collection of Laurel Gitlen

*Waisted Talent*, 2015  
oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Laurel Gitlen

*Zero Man*, 2015  
oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches  
collection of Kristen Becker

#### Prints

*Chekhov's Gun*, 2017  
three-color screen print on Coventry rag paper  
24 x 18 inches  
collection of Emily Mae Smith

*Medusa*, 2019  
full bleed seven color screen print on Coventry rag paper,  
enamel, water-based, and glow-in-the-dark inks  
24 x 18 inches  
collection of Emily Mae Smith

#### Drawings

*Bathers Study I*, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
8 x 10 inches  
collection of Simone Subal

*Candle Study I*, 2017  
carbon and watercolor on paper  
7 x 5 inches  
collection of Kelly McGee

*Drawing for Honest Espionage*, 2015  
pencil on paper  
4.25 x 3 inches  
collection of Lucia Love

*Drawing for No Patience for Monuments II*, 2019  
pencil on paper  
5 x 4.125 inches  
collection of Valentine Blondel

*Drawing for Seance*, 2015  
pencil on paper  
3.375 x 3 inches  
collection of Olivia Drusin

*Drawings for Teapots and Tongues*, 2014  
pencil on paper  
6 x 5 inches  
courtesy of Simone Subal Gallery, New York

*Drawing for The Studio (Big Tomato)*, 2014  
pencil on paper  
7 x 5.125 inches  
collection of Qing Liu

*Drawing for The Studio (Broom Superstar)*, 2014  
pencil on paper  
2.5 x 2.5 inches  
collection of Emily Mae Smith

*Drawing for The Studio (Never Tear Us Apart)*, 2015  
pencil on paper  
3.375 x 2.5625 inches  
collection of Genesis Belanger

*Drawings for Klein Bottle and Candles*, 2017  
pencil on paper  
4.375 x 7.375 inches  
collection of Emily Mae Smith

*Drawings for Western Tale and The Discipline*, 2015  
pencil on paper  
8.5 x 4.5 inches  
courtesy of Simone Subal Gallery, New York

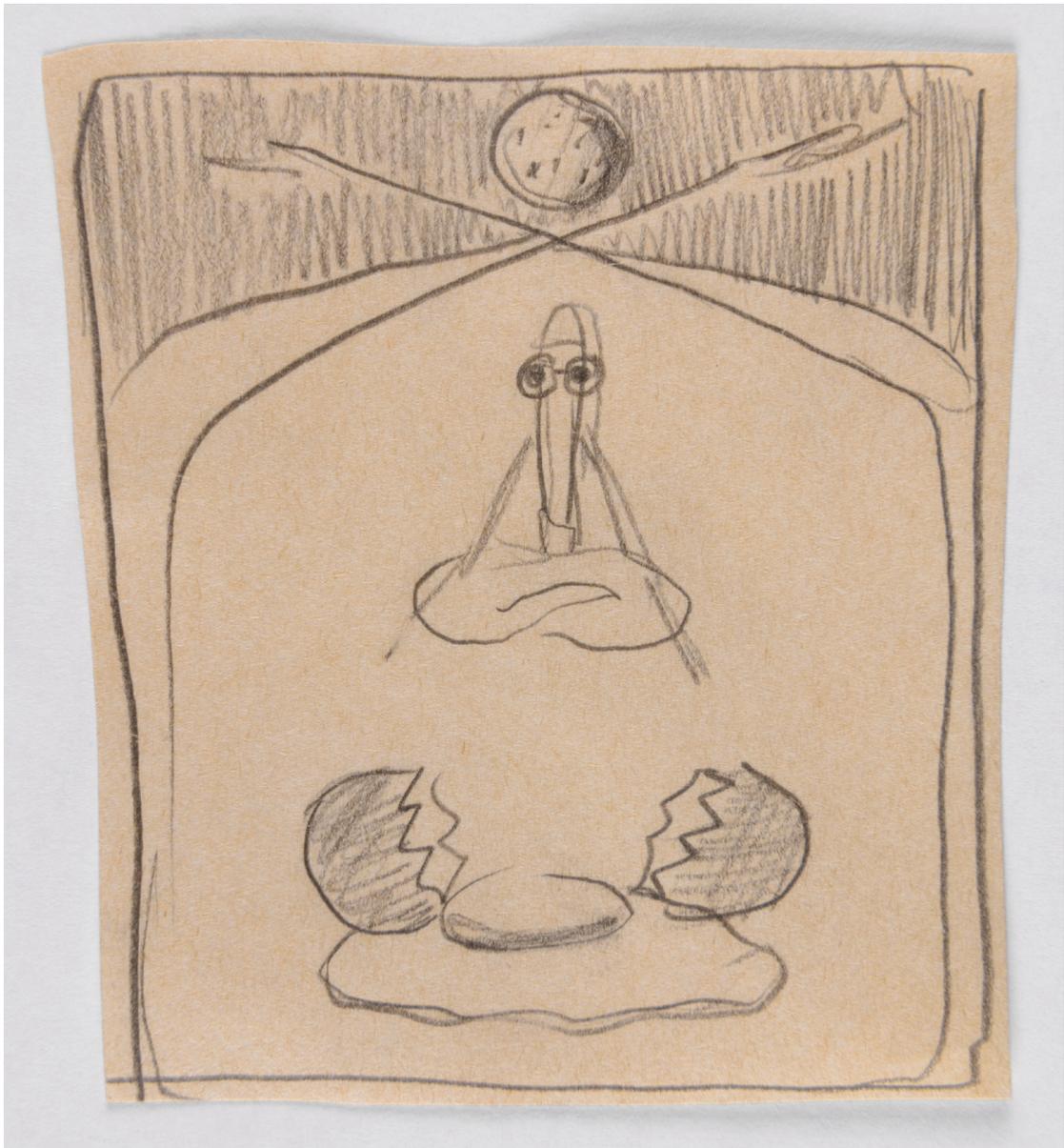
*Mouth Gun Studies*, 2014  
pencil on paper  
2.25 x 5.875 inches  
courtesy of Simone Subal Gallery, New York

*Slow Burn Drawing II*, 2016  
pencil on paper  
3.75 x 3.5 inches  
collection of Florian Meisenberg and Anna KE

*Smoking Gun / Business End Studies*, 2014  
pencil on paper  
6.25 x 4.75 inches  
courtesy of Simone Subal Gallery, New York



*Slow Burn Drawing II*, 2016, pencil on paper, 3.75 x 3.5 inches



*Drawing for Seance*, 2015, pencil on paper, 3.375 x 3 inches

Back cover: *Zero Man*, 2015, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches

