

CHERI SMITH

swallowing figments

March 14 - April 20, 2024

FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE



A woman lies supine diagonally across a field of creatures and close to the picture plane, creating an immediacy and intimacy with the viewer. The dynamic placement of the figure and animals heightens the tenebrous atmosphere in this animalia, which is full of intensity and tremorous stillness (echoing, unintentionally, Caravaggio's work from 1601, *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*). Her limbs spread to the edges of the canvas, and the beige-light brown coloration of her flesh becomes one with the earth. The deep indigo blue of her top seamlessly blends into her bruised skin at the sleeves, where there is no limit between fabric and skin. The blue becomes her flesh, eyes blankly possessed, and the body recedes into the threshold of the tellurian and metaphysical.

Top: Cheri Smith, *the Quick and the Dead*, 2023. Below right: Caravaggio, *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, 1601.

"Do you consider the gulf between the material and spiritual worlds only apparent?"- Joy Williams asks in her story *The Quick and the Dead*. As in Cheri Smith's painting of the same title, Williams's novel concludes with a vision of a dream, as if experienced collectively in the unconscious mind, where unusual and magnificent creatures arrive to transport you away. As in Williams's stories, a peculiar energy and underlying darkness permeates Smith's paintings.

Within Smith's painted realm, a captivating blend of animals, humans, plants, and natural elements coexists, creating a uniquely intriguing space that hovers between reality and imagination. Each painting is a self-contained universe, carefully crafted by Smith through keen observations of nature and the creative transcription of narrative elements drawn from personal experiences, dreams, literature, and art history.



Art history references are diffused throughout Smith's exhibition, *swallowing figments*. Her paintings are deeply reminiscent of the work of Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. While working on these paintings, Smith went to the Prado Museum in Madrid to see the work of these artists. Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* had a profound impact on Smith, revealed in the textures of fruit and feathers, observing the good and the bad in people. Smith's painting, *Furrow*, began as a response to the first panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, "I wanted to populate the land, for creatures to crawl out of the lake as they do in his painting. Instead, they crawled out into subsequent paintings, and I started to feel that this landscape, void but for the gaping hole and slippery crack, held the promise of things lurking beneath the surface."



Left: Cheri Smith, *Furrow*, oil on book cover, 2024. Right: Detail from the central panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, oil on panel, 1490-1500.

From the terrene landscape in *Furrow* to the watery peaks in *They Float*, both oil paintings on book covers, another dialogue emerges between past and present. In *They Float*, waves are like ridges, solid and dark, filled with swimmers in a strange sea governed by sirens, mermaids, and witches. Impelled by the work of Giovanni di Paolo (c. 1403-1482), an Italian painter who belonged to the Sienese School of Painting during the Renaissance, *They Float* brings to mind the Gothic-inspired, fantastical paintings of di Paolo, specifically the umbral sea in *Saint Clare rescuing the shipwrecked*. Coincidentally, it's impossible not to think of the uncanny landscape in the 1979 film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky and wonder if Tarkovsky was also looking at the paintings of di Paolo.



Left: Cheri Smith, *They Float*, oil on book cover, 2024. Center: *Saint Clare rescuing the shipwrecked*, tempera and gold on panel, 1400s. Right: film still from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film, *Stalker*.

Furrow and *They Float* are outliers exposed in their sparseness but also function as bookends, holding together a body of work as a whole, allowing for moments of pause amidst the more saturated landscapes of people in other paintings in the exhibition. For example, of *Crown Shyness*, Smith says: "There are old paintings with forests in, for example, by the 15th-century Sienese painter, Sassetta, in which an entire canopy of leafy treetops rests on two or three tree trunks. I wanted to create a forest of people. A nagging, demanding forest, like a to-do list or blinking unanswered messages. *Crown shyness* is a term used to describe how treetops in a forest grow to occupy their own distinct personal space, clearly separated from one another." In the depths of her forests of people, faces from art history reveal themselves; the most familiar may be hidden in Smith's painting *The Itch*, mirroring the face of one of Christ's tormentors in Bosch's painting, *Christ Mocked*.



From Left: Sassetta, *The Meeting of Saint Anthony and Saint Paul*, c. 1430/1435. Cheri Smith, *Crown Shyness*, 2023, oil on book cover. Hieronymus Bosch, *Chris Mocked*. Cheri Smith, *The Itch*, 2023, oil on book cover.

Smith's palette in *swallowing figments* is earthy, filled with pigments such as ochre, raw umber, raw sienna, and Bohemian green earth. Bohemian green earth gained its name from the region of Bohemia, a significant source of pigments during the Renaissance, where the natural deposits of the mineral were found. This pigment is primarily composed of celadonite, a green mineral that contains iron, aluminum, and potassium. The presence of these elements contributes to the pigment's deep green color. Of this particular color, Smith says: "Bohemian green earth was a favorite for this and many other of the paintings in this collection. I would use it for underpainting, then building color in thin glazes over the top like stained glass. I also used buff titanium which is unbleached and feels more natural, and transparent green gold, which is beautifully sickly, so you don't need much, and safflower oil for thinning and glazing."

For Smith, the process of amalgamating narratives, dreams, and imaginative whims is continual. Each painting in this exhibition originates from the whimsical realm, either as pure manifestations of the artist's vision or inspired by dreams and fiction. The act of assimilating these imaginary elements, swallowing figments, becomes palpable, revealing a yearning to delve beneath the surface of things.

There is something deeply tangible in the act of swallowing that resonated - though imaginative, the paintings are still rooted in the earthly and embodied. - Cheri Smith

Essay by Fabiola Alondra

Cheri Smith (b. 1991) lives and works in London. She completed her postgraduate in drawing at the Royal Drawing School (2018) and her BA in Fine Art from Norwich University of the Arts (2013). Her work has been exhibited internationally including at the James Freeman Gallery (London), Lychee One (London), Fortnight Institute (New York), and Tabula Rasa (China). Her debut solo show *swallowing figments* will open at Fortnight Institute in March 2024.