

# Who Told You That You Were Naked?

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'And They Knew They Were Naked' is an exhibition of several new paintings by Ruth Helen Smith. This is a cohesive body of work in that the paintings all share the same subject matter: building sites and roadworks. However, within the context of this affinity, one painting immediately catches the eye, if only for its conspicuous absence of eye-catching colour. To the left of it, a larger painting in which a deep orange burns through the surface and to the right, two smaller canvases make use of vibrant blues and yellows. This painting, however, is almost exclusively grey and brown. A flat grey expanse to the top and right, intersected by two dull red lines, describes the surface of an innominate road, while the remainder of the painting is given over to what resides beneath. Visceral, lumpy, impasto marks clod the panel, as much physical detritus as the subterranean rubble it depicts. There is an equivocity between the positive and negative space, between the paint and its subject, its form and content. Smith calls this painting *Materia Prima*, 'the cloudy object' out of which alchemists believe every substance may be formed.<sup>1</sup> In this painting, the mundane rubble and asphalt are transfigured into the material of potential, the universal substance that contains all others 'in an inchoate mass.'<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the material, physical, and concrete is the oblique core of this exhibition and, as such, this painting serves as the key to unlocking the conceptual content of the others. This work reveals that these paintings point to an inherent primacy of matter and so are best understood as ontological, specifically in the Heideggerian sense. In their nebulous juxtaposing of meaning and material, Smith's paintings are fundamentally examining the question of the meaning of Being.

For Heidegger, the concept of 'Being' is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such it resists every attempt at definition.<sup>3</sup> It is something that pertains to all objects yet is not one itself. In as much as an object may be said to exist, the meaning of that existence is already presupposed in a manner that is rarely noticed. In his writing, Heidegger looks to question what it means to exist, the meaning of *Being* itself. However, any attempt to approach Being discursively necessarily relates to a specific entity thus, an investigation of Being must be indirect, that is, through the Being of a particular entity.<sup>4</sup> In Smith's paintings, unfinished buildings and broken roads take up this role as the vehicle for her investigation. Her paintings connect to a particular place and time; these are not general images of construction, but have a relation to a specific, material location, the *Super Sewer at Vauxhall Bridge* for example. Additionally, the paintings capture something of how the construction sites are encountered. Most of the smaller works have the fast-paced, gestural brush strokes that result from the immediacy of working from life. They are the ossified remnants of a direct, primary experience.

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<sup>1</sup> James Elkins. *What Painting Is*. (London: Routledge, 2018). 71.

<sup>2</sup> Elkins. *What Painting Is*. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). [2],21.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger. *Being and Time*. [9],29.

For Heidegger, most of the objects that are encountered in everyday existence are encountered as *equipment*, something that is dealt with "in-order-to" achieve a particular end.<sup>5</sup> His own example, fittingly, is a hammer - an object that is constituted in part by the purpose it serves for the user. These are objects that Heidegger describes as ready-to-hand. Any ontological interpretation of the world, that is, an investigation of the meaning of Being, must proceed 'by going through what is ready-to-hand within-the-world.'<sup>6</sup> This is precisely what Smith does through her work: taking the most ubiquitous forms that are ready-to-hand: the reformulation of the environment to human needs in an urban context. Further, particular to these objects is that 'in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically.'<sup>7</sup> These are things that are not considered in themselves when they are used, rather they 'withdraw' so that they may be put to use without thinking about them as such. Smith's selection of subject matter aligns perfectly with this categorisation: at the moment of their use, buildings and roads are not necessarily thought about at the level of their material existence. The matter of the rock, metal and glass that constitute an office building, such as that on the left of *Eruption*, are not how they are encountered, but more proximally, more ready-to-hand as the building in which one works. Smith demonstrates this with the opposition of the building to the rubble beneath it. A carefully painted grid pattern of regimented light and dark tones fades towards the vanishing point of a well executed single-point perspective in a way that is easy to understand. The interpretation of this section of the canvas as 'a building' arrives immediately, subconsciously and absent any provocation to reexamine that supposition. The same cannot be said for the debris that fragments the lower half of the painting. Such a recourse to quick interpretation in engaging with what is encountered in-the-world can entail a losing of oneself.<sup>8</sup> The direct relation to what is perceived is lost to abstractions and the question of the meaning of Being is forgotten.

Heidegger compels his reader to thrust 'aside our interpretative tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us.'<sup>9</sup> These interpretive lenses build upon the relation to the world practically as ready-to-hand and allow for a conceptual engagement with it as present-at-hand. However, Heidegger explains that to 'experience something like the absence of what is present-at-hand within-the-world' can trigger an existential anxiety in that it causes a genuine consideration of that which is encountered.<sup>10</sup> In other words, when something is broken or missing and it is no longer possible to use it 'in-order-to' achieve the desired end, that object is no longer ready-to-hand. Therefore, the conceptual edifice of that which is present-at-hand cannot continue being thought in the same way. Rather, the object is much more closely attended to after the interpretive tendency has been removed. It may be considered on the level of its constitutive materiality and even on the level of its Being. Thus, looking at *Fenchurch Street*, that which is depicted cannot be deciphered through the interpretive lens of an ordinary street. The semiotic cues are absent and it is at a remove from the everyday experience of walking down the road. The viewer is confronted with something typically unseen, hidden behind facades or beneath tarmac; masked at the point of its construction by plastic screens and camouflaged hoarding. Smith shows the buildings naked. This revealing impells the viewer to give thought to the substance of their metropolitan

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. [69],98.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. [113],149.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. [69],99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. [76],107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. [67],96.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. [343],393.

environment, casting off presupposed interpretive frameworks in favour of the tangible existence of matter that is at the foundation.

But Smith takes this further than simply depiction. Beyond glimpsing beneath the veil to the material core of urban existence, she demands that her viewer consider the materiality of the painting itself. In *Inside the Belly*, the joists of a crane in the background overlap slightly with a foreground girder, disrupting the illusion of space and announcing itself as paint. *Broken Easel* preserves patches of the white of its gesso primed surface, clearly distinct from the oil paint covering most of it, and divulging its own material foundation. Perhaps most conspicuous are *Through the Super Sewer to Battersea Power Station* and *Letterbox*: these two canvases are stretched inside-out, a residual consequence of Smith's pragmatic approach to transporting the paintings whilst working on-site. But they also reveal that which is typically obscured in painting: the fraying edges of the canvas, carefully folded over the stretcher, with an abundance of staples holding it all together. These paintings embody an insight into the construction of painting as much as they depict an insight into the construction of the city. Smith does not allow her paintings to be encountered as present-at-hand, but seeks to undermine any presumed interpretive lens through a unity of form and content. The work is disclosed to the viewer on the level of its materiality.

For Heidegger, this is the authentic relation to the world. This is a return, so to speak, to before the fig-leaf covering of interpretation, a return to an eden before *they knew they were naked*, to an originary state. Part of pursuing the meaning of Being is a search for the origin, it is a pursuit of 'the most primordial way of interpreting Being.'<sup>11</sup> Thus, correlate to Smith looking to get behind the interpretive presuppositions of the meaning of buildings and paintings, Heidegger tries to get behind the Western philosophical tradition, understanding it to be a sedimented collection of misinterpretations.<sup>12</sup> He has an emphasis on returning to the origin of the tradition, as his essay on the Anaximander fragment very clearly demonstrates.<sup>13</sup>

Being itself is the originary principle to be examined for Heidegger. He maps this back, finding it in Kant's account of an 'art hidden in the depths of the human soul'<sup>14</sup> as well as in Aquinas' work on the soul.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger suggests that the theological approach has its underlying focus on Being in a mode that has not been ontologically clarified. For Heidegger, the question of the soul is not dissolved for secular philosophy, but transformed into the question of ontology. Smith's exhibition lends itself to a spiritually informed vocabulary by which to gloss her ontological investigation. *Cross Below* depicts a distorted cross shape, formed by the intersection of two concrete supports beneath the road, and hangs deliberately in the space of the altar in this church-turned-gallery. Even on the curatorial level, there is an indication of a return to the origin, the work pointing implicitly at the initial function of the space itself. The cross here acts as a synecdoche, emphasising the material crux of the Christian faith. Yet, given the allusion to the Genesis narrative in the title of this exhibition, aligning with the search for the origin, an even older vocabulary may be more pertinent.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. [38],17.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Bambach. "Athens And Jerusalem: Rosenzweig, Heidegger, And The Search For An Origin." *History and Theory*. 44, no. 2 (May 2005): 284.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Early Greek Thinking*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995). 13.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger. *Being and Time*. [23],45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. [14],34.

Returning again to the *Materia Prima*, it is now evident that this alchemical concept corresponds to Heidegger's *Being* as the notion of an originary principle that contains all things and is itself thus contained within all things. However, this may be traced back further to the Jewish mystical tradition, providing an alternative path to Heidegger's tendency to find the origin in the Hellenistic heritage. The turn to Judaism at this point both stands as the origin of the Christian faith to which Smith more clearly alludes and, if Peter Eli Gordon is to be believed, as the surreptitious ancestor of Heidegger's own philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Central to the enigmatic idea of creation in Jewish thought is the principle of *Chokmah*, typically translated as Wisdom. This is the principle that orders all creation; it is the beginning force of the creative process<sup>17</sup> and so inhabits creation as its origin.<sup>18</sup> If this is understood as purely transcendent or spiritual, it would seem more correlate with the alchemical *anima mundi*, as the incorporeal world-soul that is at odds with the unequivocally corporeal *Materia Prima*. However, against this ethereality, *Chokmah* is taken to be the first emanation of the divine that has form. It is the originating principle precisely because it is the first material, blurring the clear delineation between spirit and substance, and bringing meaning into union with the material in a much more monistic sense than the *Materia Prima*. What the concept of *Chokmah* can reveal about Smith's exhibition, which Heidegger's concept of Being fails to, is that her paintings are simultaneously meaning and material. For Smith, the building sites are endowed with meaning by the mere attribute of their materiality in such a way that makes them worth painting. The meaning of the paintings is always already informed.

*Lava* is the largest painting in the exhibition and in many ways the most figurative. Two highly rendered workmen are the focal point of the composition, working on top of a glowing orange pile of rubble and surrounded by blue roadwork barriers that occupy the opposite side of the colour wheel. This binary is put to work by Smith in a manner consistent across several works in the show: the loosely painted, fiery, foundational material struggles against the confines of the rigid, repetitive, cool paintwork of the barrier, schematically understood as the interpretive containment of the originary materiality. The narrative hinted at in the work is irrelevant to its impetus. What is interesting about this piece is that the figures occupy the point of connection between the two sides. Their uniforms incorporate both blue and orange, and they reside in the midst of the autochthonous rubble despite being cleanly and methodically painted. They are a part of the matter whilst being distinct from it. This painting therefore begins to destabilise the categories that have animated the discussion of the work thus far. There is shown to be a kind of diffuseness in the distinction between Being and entities, matter and interpretation. The knowledge of what it means to be naked is unthinkable without the fig-leaf coverings: interpretation constitutes materiality as much as materiality constitutes interpretation. The origin cannot be discovered again.

'Beginning at the beginning is always an illusion.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Eli Gordon. *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). 313.

<sup>17</sup> Psalms 104:24.

<sup>18</sup> Proverbs 8:22 and Gershom Scholem. *Das Buch Bahir*. (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1923). 142.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988). 8: 41.

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