

Rebecca Schiffman, "A Broomstick in a Man's World" *Hyperallergic*, September 28, 2026.

HYPERALLERGIC

POCKET REVIEW

A Broomstick in a Man's World

In Emily Mae Smith's surreal paintings, a symbol of women's work becomes a weapon.



Rebecca Schiffman

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Emily Mae Smith, "Petite Muse at Work" (2026) (photos Rebecca Schiffman/*Hyperallergic* unless indicated otherwise)

Petzel

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Walking into Emily Mae Smith's show at Petzel Gallery, all I could think was, "I wonder if she is getting enough credit for her anthropomorphic broomsticks now that Wicker is coming out." Though voluptuous brooms abound in her paintings, they are complemented by witch-like bunnies and eyeball-filled grapes (what good company for such seemingly strange subjects). All are connected by the artist's technical skill and a darkness that haunts each work.

This is intentional: The title, *Transit of Venus*, refers to the astronomical alignment when Venus moves between Earth and the Sun, appearing as a tiny dark spot. And what unfolds when the imagined light source sits behind the subject becomes Smith's commentary on translucency: what might not appear in the spotlight, how long it takes to paint a painting, and what we're really feeling beneath a strong exterior. Most obviously, this comes through in "Venus (Inner Vision)" (2026), a broomstick figure that stands contrapposto in a hazy wooded landscape. We see her handle (head and torso) as though through an X-ray: her veins and organs on display.



Emily Mae Smith, "Straw Woman Problem" (2026)

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Emily Mae Smith, "Venus (Inner Vision)" (2026) (photo Charles Benton, courtesy Petzel)

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This desire for honesty and transparency could also be understood as a way of seeing multiplicity, all the sides of something. For Smith, that comes through in her re-creations of Venus, where the historically helpless nude female figure is updated with new tools. "The Locust II" (2026) reimagines Jules Joseph Lefebvre's helpless and demure nude, "The Grasshopper" (1872), now equipped with a scythe, while "Petite Muse at Work" (2026) turns the male-artist-genius figure into a woman. Reframing history is hardly new, but by casting a broomstick in the role, Smith gives this familiar gesture a particular force: a symbol of women's work becomes a weapon, transforming the passive female figure into one capable of wielding power.

Emily Mae Smith: Transit of Venus continues at Petzel Gallery (520 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 24. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

<https://hyperallergic.com/a-broomstick-in-a-mans-world/>