

Petzel

Elisa Carollo, "Emily Mae Smith Paints Worlds on the Edge of Transformation," *Observer*, October 23, 2026.

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Emily Mae Smith Paints Worlds on the Edge of Transformation

Beneath her work's seductive hyperrealism lies an unsettling sense that we're approaching a point of no return.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 10/23/26 1:51pm



Emily Mae Smith, *Transit of Venus*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

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Emily Mae Smith’s rise as one of the stars of the ultra-contemporary boom that followed the pandemic has often been linked to the resurgence of interest in Surrealism, which echoes the unreadability and instability of our times. (Prices have since readjusted significantly, but her auction record still stands at around \$1.6 million, after *Broom Life* fetched HK\$12.35 million at Phillips Hong Kong in June 2021 against a HKD400,000-600,000 estimate.) Her landmark 2024 exhibition at the Magritte Museum in Brussels, which paired her work with masterpieces by Magritte, reinforced this reading. Yet when we met Smith shortly before the opening of “Transit of Venus” at Petzel in New York, she distanced herself from this interpretation.

Her work, she told *Observer*, has far more in common with fin-de-siècle Symbolism, the Nabis and related movements, particularly in its ambiguous, evocative allegorical language, which moves through poetic metaphors and symbols to confront a similar sense of uncertainty. *Sacred Conversations* (2026), for example, plays with several historical genres. In its densely detailed, hyperreal rendering, the still life gathers animals, plants and artists’ tools within a shallow architectural niche, lending the scene the precision of a natural-history display or a Renaissance cabinet of curiosities. Small jars of pigment line a lower shelf beneath the carved word “EMSKITH,” suggesting a studio portrait assembled not from the artist’s likeness but from the organic substances, animal hairs and plants from which painting is physically made. Yet the improbable assemblage of species and objects pushes the image into an allegorical realm, transforming what could read as both a religious scene and a vanitas into a celebration of the material world of painting as its own devotional, symbolic ecosystem.

This awareness of materials and of the processes behind each image has grown more important for Smith in our current sociopolitical and technological climate. She feels that people are losing sight of what it takes to create and produce things—objects as much as images—as images proliferate in a continuous flow, oversaturating our imagination and communication. “Images are not the same thing as paintings,” she reflected before suggesting that painting allows for a more conscious, deliberate, almost analytical construction of symbolic presences that can gradually lead toward narrative or meaning.

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Emily Mae Smith. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Lexie Morland

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Her practice involves a continuous, sly play with historical canons and tropes, and a conscious use of the archetypal symbolism attached to them, to make visible the semiotic and psychological dynamics at work. What Smith shares with a figure such as Magritte is her exploration of the semiotic instability between image and object, which leads her to employ visual trickery in a lucid contemplation of the impossibility of any final, fixed reading or version of truth. Her works unfold through a progressively deeper process of decoding, disassembling and rearranging these elements, revealing how the repeated use of symbols has sedimented specific meanings over time while exposing the arbitrariness of how they function.

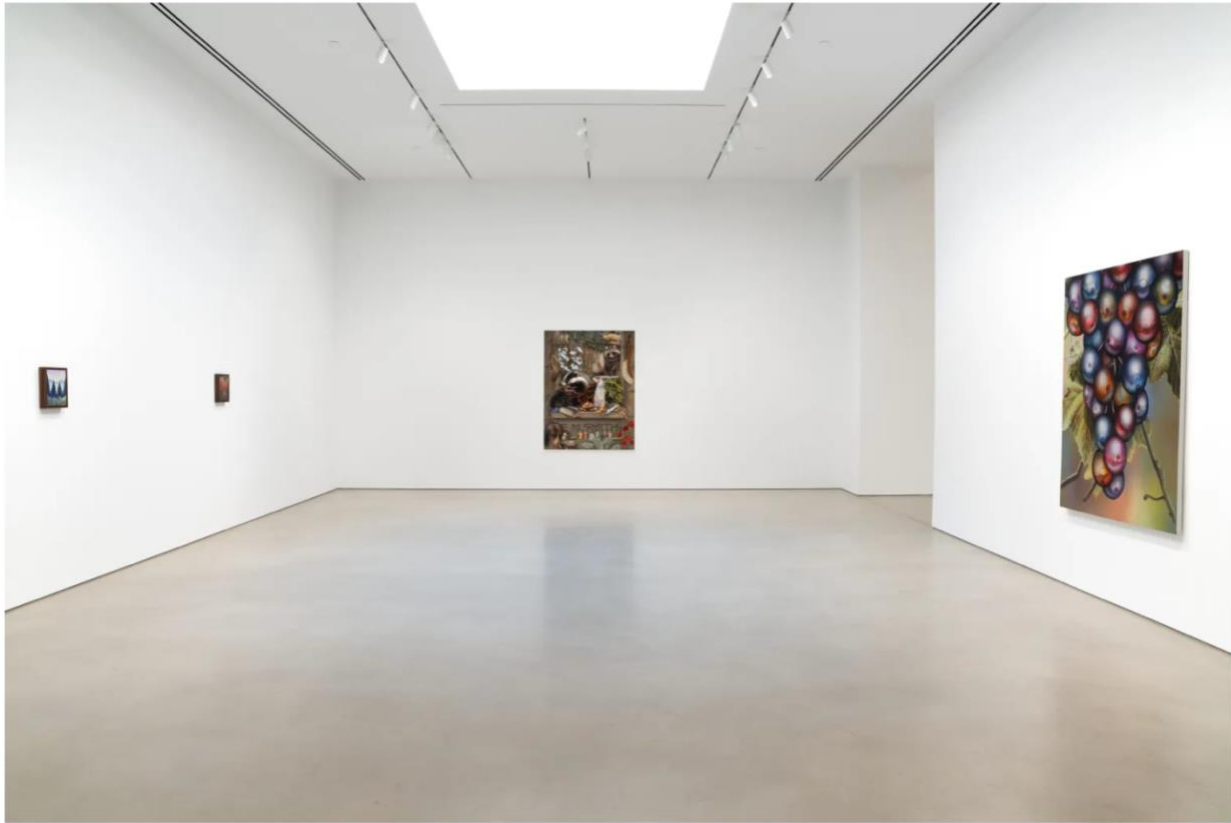
At the heart of this approach is a persistent inquiry into what—and who—controls the meaning of an image. She plays with the dynamics among phenomenological encounters, cognitive decoding and individual signification, embracing the instability and unpredictability that emerge between them. This may explain why so many of the paintings in New York are inhabited by hybrid, trickster-like figures perpetually on the verge of metamorphosing into another species or entity. They bear witness to the essential instability of any reading of reality, which depends on the interaction between seeing and naming objects, as psychological and physical perception enter into a complex interplay with the cultural constructions we all carry.

This is also why the characters on the canvases—Smith’s signature broomstick as well as grapes, plants and other organic forms—take on anthropomorphic traits, showing how naturally we project a human, often anthropocentric, perspective onto the reality around us. Yet this is not the only possible way to relate to our surroundings or to the entities that coexist with us in a complex web of interdependencies.

Dominant throughout the show is a renewed vision of nature. Smith grew up in rural Southwest Texas amid hay and corn fields, cattle and pigs, but spent most of the following decades in the city. Recently, she moved back to the countryside, and she acknowledged that it has begun to enter her work: “I lived in New York for 22 years. Three years ago, I moved upstate. My house is in the country, so I am back in the forest now. It is a very different nature from my childhood, but it is definitely affecting me.”

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Installation view: Emily Mae Smith's "Transit of Venus," at Petzel, New York, through October 24. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

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Several works in the show are grounded in bucolic life, hinting at the passing of the seasons while operating on a more allegorical register, almost like fairy tales, in which animals stand in for human behaviors and relationships. Smith was an avid reader from the moment she learned to read, and fairy tales, along with literature more broadly, have long informed her imagination. Yet she feels the magical quality of the work is also reinforced by her present environment, where fairy-tale encounters occur in ordinary life—there’s a fox, she said, that roams near her house in winter. “Crazy things happened to me after I moved. I realized I could smell better. My sense of smell improved dramatically. Most often, sort of magical things are happening in real time, in real space... Nature happens,” she added, even as we’re cut off from natural cycles by the rhythms of modern life.

An autumnal atmosphere pervades the entire show, capturing warm days slipping inexorably toward winter, as in *Becoming Neolithic* (2026). In *Only Human* (2026), red grapes hanging among green vine leaves evoke the same season, but Smith has transformed each into a glossy eyeball with visible irises and veins, adding a psychological and symbolic layer.

The painting began with the idea of a transparent form containing sloshing liquid, and she began thinking about what might be agitating it—what could inhabit that space. “The eye can stand in for the person. At the same time, the grape can carry so many different symbols, depending on the painting, but I love how it is an object that can be an individual and a collective at the same time,” she considered. “I also feel like it is a little bit of a metaphor for paint itself, which is these individual molecules wrapped in oil that get moved around to create an image and an entire symbolic world.”

The deeper one goes into Smith’s densely symbolic, imaginative universe, the harder it becomes to ignore that the light in many of these works is almost crepuscular, suggesting a liminal moment of dusk before full darkness. Something subtly sinister runs through them, perhaps a sense of imminent disaster or the sad reality of a cycle reaching its end—something that might give way to renewal, but only after passing through decay and destruction. “I think it is also just a feeling I am having. It kind of feels like our civilization is in that season, and also, as a planet, I think we are maybe before a real crisis,” Smith said.

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Emily Mae Smith, *Only Human*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Charles Benton

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Her iconic brooms appear in these new works, too—as usual, caught in moments of transition. The broom entered her symbolic lexicon around 2014, partly through the enchanted broom in Disney’s *Fantasia*. It’s a motif that has often been read as a complicated symbol of women’s labor, but Smith also uses it as an agent that lets her move through art history while claiming alternative perspective. “It is the instrument of the witch, the vehicle of the demonized feminine principle and knowledge,” she explained.

“A lot of people are always showing pictures of these broom paintings. It is interesting how there is almost a kind of shadow digital self now that follows you. For an artist, there is a shadow digital artist who is not even the artist that I am,” Smith said, pointing to another layer of manipulation and filtering that digital media introduce into perception, storytelling and the very process through which an artist’s identity is constructed.

In her new works, the broom figure takes a more human, psychological turn while remaining in dialogue with the broader course of art history and Western iconography. *Venus (Inner Vision)* depicts a hybrid female figure standing on rocky terrain at the edge of a dark forest, in a pose that recalls classical depictions of Venus and of bathers. Her elongated upper body, rendered translucent, reveals a brain, internal organs and a network of blood vessels: an inner life visibly flowing through the body. “I wanted to take her body into another world or a deeper place. Instead of moving her into a different environment, I wanted to explore actual interiority—to create depth, and show an actual inner depth,” Smith said. Painting the figure’s insides becomes a way of insisting on her interiority, so that she is not merely an object of representation.

In another work, *The Locus II*, the broom has nearly completed its transition, becoming an inquisitive female figure pressed into the corner of a warm-toned architectural wall. She is partly nude, her lower body covered in tawny fur or straw-like growth. Smith draws here on depictions of Mary Magdalene in Western art, whose long hair and fur-covered body have made her a complex figure in both art history and Christian mythology. Yet in these historical images, such female figures exist so often for someone else’s visual pleasure that they are rarely granted interiority. The pairing of broom and scythe links domestic labor with agricultural work and threat, while the figure’s hybrid body and piercing stare turn what might read as a vulnerable nude into a self-possessed and potentially dangerous presence.

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Emily Mae Smith, *Venus (Inner Vision)*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

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The painting, Smith acknowledges, is partly an allegory of social and political upheaval. “I wanted to approach that figure and transform her into the holder of the power in the painting—bring her into the present moment where she has the authority to act and to do damage,” she said, noting that in the historical painting she was studying, there is no scythe or tool; the woman is simply a nude against a wall. “It is almost like a resurrection with the ability to take revenge. Even her gaze is penetrating the viewer.”

These hybrid bodies also open the image to more contemporary questions about humanity itself: what makes us human, and what makes human work valuable when machines can perform so many tasks? Where does the difference now lie? Smith’s work remains anchored in a belief in painting as a process that reconnects mind and hand—the fundamental cognitive and emotional relationship from which human ingenuity and imagination emerge, allowing us to create new objects, new images and new worlds.

“There is an image or there is a message—sometimes it just emerges from creating a painting,” Smith said. “There is also painting for pleasure, and an interest in asking: what can this material do?” She is increasingly willing to paint from imagination rather than building an image from external references. In the past, she might have gathered photographs and physical examples before painting something as simple as an apple; now she sometimes works directly from what is in her mind. For her, the shift reflects greater self-trust and confidence in what the painting itself can reveal.

The Changeling, for example, shows two hands approaching one another against a dark, smoky background. From the left, a human wrist and palm dissolve into a tangled mass of dry straw or broom fibers, while a hand on the right extends a lit match toward the brittle material. The small flame becomes the composition’s focal point, suspended just before the point of contact, creating a sense of imminent ignition. Hovering between intimacy and threat, the image plays on the contrast between flesh and combustible organic matter, turning a simple gesture into a charged moment of anticipation of the destruction that can be the catalyst for transformation.

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In *Transit of Venus*, Smith's broom appears as a straw-covered, humanlike figure reclining across a harvested field at sunset, its body merging almost seamlessly with the surrounding hay. The figure lies on its side with one knee raised and both arms lifted toward its head, its face partly obscured, conveying exhaustion, vulnerability or suspended repose. Behind it, a monumental haystack rises against an orange-pink sky, suggesting a union between human form and landscape. The warm, low light gives the scene the atmosphere of a pastoral at the edge of dusk, while the uncanny hybrid body and abandoned wooden pitchfork turn the rural setting into something more psychologically charged, hinting at a different relationship between human life and nature. The title connects the image to both an astronomical phenomenon and mythological associations, and this hybrid Venus becomes a figure of connection, transformation and the generative forces of nature.



Emily Mae Smith, *The Changeling*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

<https://observer.com/2026/10/artist-interview-emily-mae-smith-transit-of-venus-petzel-interview/>