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Melanie Smith:
Remain detached
November 10, 2022 to
January 19, 2023

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Melanie Smith, *Psychoactive Render 2*, 2021
Pigments on veneered wood panel, 55 1/8 × 47 1/4 in

Remain Detached or the Shape of Our Times
Mara Polgovsky

“I feel like I’m trying to subvert abstraction, always,” wrote Melanie Smith in an exchange with Scottish artist David Batchelor in 2005¹. Almost two decades later, this sense of the ‘always,’ the permanent, appears in the form of a creative compulsion that has continued to renew itself by absorbing and reshaping the weighty history of twentieth-century art; a history marked by the dialectics of abstraction and figuration, materiality and immateriality.

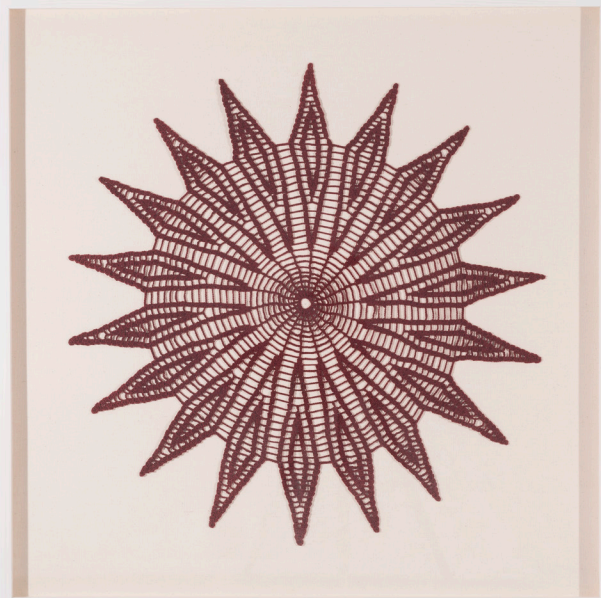
Remain Detached, Smith’s first solo show in the United States since the global pandemic, radically synchronizes traditions, scales, and technologies of perception by bringing together her characteristically multi-layered practice, which ranges from watercolour to video, through to painting and hand-crafted textile. The result is a single, flattened sense of the present: the point of coexistence between Surrealism and abstraction, crochet knitting and modernist painting, 3D animation and watercolour painting.



Melanie Smith, *Psychoactive Render 18*, 2022
Pigments on veneered wood panel, 21 5/8 × 21 5/8 in

Fifteen Minutes of Sublime Meditation, the exhibition’s central piece –which the rest of the works expand and reimagine– immerses the viewer in the syncopated rhythms of a seemingly unstoppable flow of stock video footage relaying expressions of intense emotion and agitation; these are interrupted by capillary shorts taken from electronic microscopes and crudely realistic scenes of human dispossession artificially divided up by a rationalizing grid. The tidal movement of the fervid imagery clashes with a calm voiceover that runs throughout the piece: a guided meditation session inviting the listener to breathe and seek stillness in order to nurture relaxation and reach mindfulness.

Created in 2020, during some of the most anguished moments of the global pandemic, and drawing from some of the iconography of that time, *Fifteen Minutes* suspends any sense of spatial stability while bringing together two senses of the ‘present’: the Buddhist imperative of focusing a detached mind in the current moment and a planetary sense of simultaneity, in which individuals were compelled, if not forced, to remain isolated and detached from one another. During those days, the “shape of time,”



Melanie Smith, *Pi (Pond 5) 11*, 2022 Cotton, 33 1/8 × 33 1/8 in
in collaboration with Annuska Angulo and Asalia Salazar from the collective Lana Desastre

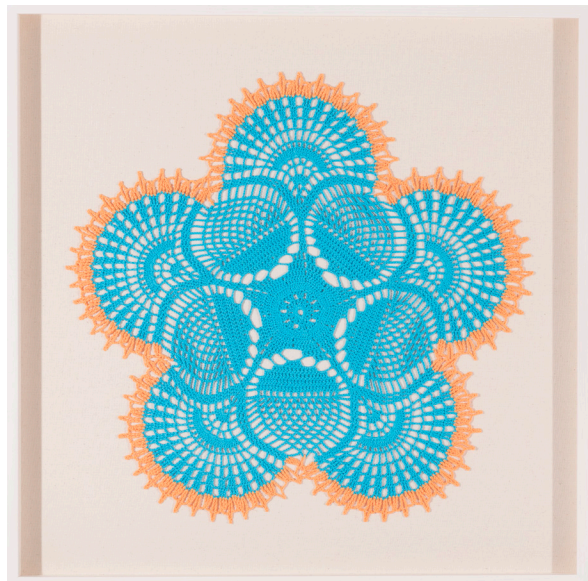
to use George Kluber's phrase, became a combination of statistical graphs depicting the pace of contagion and increasingly molecular notions of both danger and cure.² Smith crops, colours and filters this awkward temporality, bestowing the fragments of the real that feed her piece with a new, notoriously vivid chromatic order. Yet in so doing *Fifteen Minutes* also permits the sliding of chroma into new significations. For even when she works with a carefully coded treatment of colour (green: nature, blue: technology, pink: corporeality, orange: ecological apocalypse), Smith lets the intensity of the image break the code. This is perhaps the ultimate defining feature of her work: the production of a rationalising order that becomes overwhelmed and surpassed by the sensorial potency of the image itself.

The psychedelic trip the viewer undertakes in *Fifteen Minutes* is arguably dissociated from the countercultural political force Zen Buddhism and psychodelia unleashed during the 1960s, particularly in the United States. The feeling is closer to what Cuauhtémoc Medina once described, speaking of Smith's art, as "a meditation on the everyday

phenomenology of capitalism," expressed through a post-national aesthetic marked by drift, interconnection and "endlessly reproducible, artificial and exchangeable objects and sensations."³ The direction of this drift in *Remain Detached* leads an overflow of the mathematically calibrated digital imagery of the fifteen-minute video into a series of paintings, watercolours and textiles. In contrast to the dread-tinged speed of *Fifteen Minutes*, each of these hand-crafted images and textile patterns stop time, producing instead complex, static forms for spatial and material dwelling. The series of brightly coloured *Psychoactive Renders*, each of which was meticulously hand-painted using pigments on veneered wood panels, return soft, uneven textures to an intricately geometric iconic field that is often and increasingly reduced to the flat screen. As speculative mental landscapes of altered states, these images saturate perception, producing a destabilizing sense of movement and spatial orientation. The process doesn't just activate the mind, it interrogates the very possibility of producing any kind of mirror of conscious and unconscious states.



Melanie Smith, *Sublime Meditations 21*, 2022
Watercolour on paper, 29 7/8 × 22 1/2 in

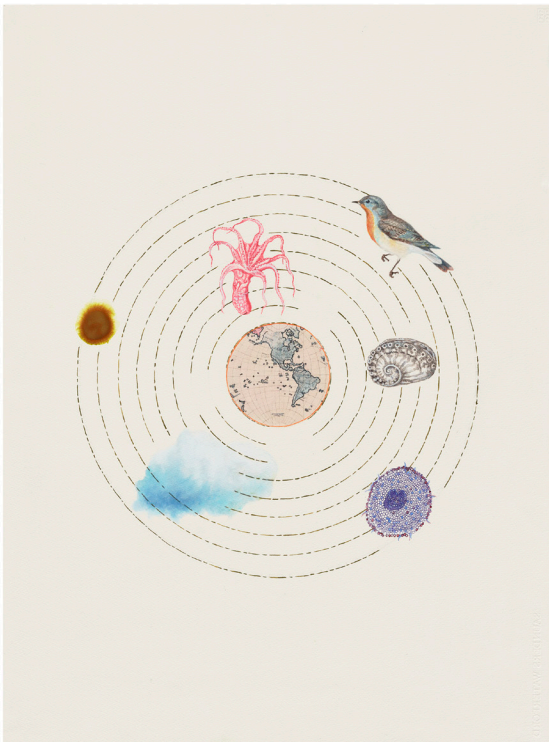


Melanie Smith, *Pi (Pond 5) 15*, 2022 Cotton, 25 1/4 × 25 1/4 in
in collaboration with Annuska Angulo and Asalia Salazar from the
collective Lana Desastre

This series of paintings is constellated with the *Pi* (π) series, which consists of framed circular patterns handwoven in cotton in collaboration with Annuska Angulo and Asalia Salazar from the collective *Lana Desastre* (Yarn Bombing), working in collaboration with Smith. Here, the abstracted form takes on the subtly political undertones of female labour and the materiality of cotton, a comforting organic material entwined, however, with the history of slavery. Smith's impulse to subvert abstraction thus explores uncanny fantasies and anxieties that, as Briony Fer asserts, "may be at stake in the most apparently systematic of pictorial structures."⁴ *Lana Desastre* uses yarn as a means to reclaim spaces of feminist possibility and presence in the public field. By contrast, Smith's framed cloths allow a more intimate engagement with each pattern, both reclaiming their aesthetic, almost meditative singularity and reimagining a traditionally female craft through the lens of machine-enabled fractal designs, in this case conceived after the mathematical constant π .

This palimpsestic conflation of the old and the new, the manual and the mechanical, comes full circle with a delicate set of drawings presented as numbered *Sublime Meditations*. Reminiscent of botanical illustrations and Surreal cartographies, these alluring works round off an exhibition that captivates and shocks as it interweaves the increasingly restless personal and collective consciousness with an overpowering mosaic of images emerging into visibility from the past and the future at once.

- 1 "Preindustrialpost," in *Spiral City and Other Vicarious Pleasures*, by Melanie Smith and Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: A&R Press, 2006), 56.
- 2 George Alexander Kluber, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).
- 3 "Preindustrialpost," 9–10.
- 4 Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.



Melanie Smith, *Sublime Meditations 10*, 2022
Watercolour on paper, 29 7/8 × 22 1/2 in



Melanie Smith, *Sublime Meditations 9*, 2022
Watercolour on paper, 29 7/8 × 22 1/2 in