s u b m e r g e
LIONEL SMIT

exhibition catalogue 2010
Perhaps more than anything else Lionel Smit’s art is defined by a deeply rooted running-dialogue between sculpture and painting. Born in 1982, Smit grew up in a world of sculpture. His father, sculptor Anton Smit, had his studio adjacent to the family’s home in Pretoria, and that sculpture studio played a central role in Lionel’s childhood. By age twelve, Smit was already seriously working in clay and considered himself a sculptor. But when he was sixteen his parents separated and his father vacated the sculpture studio. Tentatively, Lionel, then an art student at Pretoria’s Pro Arte, began to use the empty space for painting, which was increasingly becoming his preferred medium. At first he worked modestly in one small corner, but gradually he brought in more and more canvases for painting. By the time he reached ‘matric’, Smit had not only transformed the sculpture studio into a painting studio, but he was also fully committed to painting. This early shift to painting emphasized by the conversion of his father’s studio would prove to be the first dramatic gesture in an ongoing repartee between sculpture and painting.

No doubt Lionel Smit’s preference for painting was motivated by a desire to carve out his own artistic identity, nevertheless the early experiences in his father’s sculpture studio established a foundation for an approach to art which, as he notes, continues to serve as a reference point for his painting:

I started off with clay – so that’s my reference point. …Everyday seeing that assembly of pieces of clay being applied to a support, and something being constructed – that influenced me. …And that’s the way I approach painting. I approach it like sculpture, adding pieces until the image emerges.¹

In other words, he applies his brush strokes as though they were pieces of clay that he vigorously adds on to build up and model the image. According to critic Ben Lewis, Smit ‘constructs’ the image ‘…from large but deftly placed brushstrokes and a bold palette’.² Painting from groups of photographs he takes of his sitters, he works only with large-scale anonymous portrait heads that at times reach monumental proportions.

And when in 2010, Smit began to produce sculptures in addition to paintings, he ironically reversed his process to establish a distinct symbiosis between the two endeavours. Sculpture that had previously informed the painting was now informed by painting:

I want the sculptures to mimic the paintings, I almost try to merge them in approach, [and] to translate paintings in a three dimensional form. Immediately in my head I see the pieces of clay as brush strokes. At one stage while working on a sculpture I found myself building the plaster of Paris with a brush because I liked to see the brush strokes and the drips.

In Divulge (p.36), a sculpted resin portrait head of 2010, Smit pushes this attitude a step further by splattering paint onto the sculpture as though it were a canvas. Similarly he unabashedly inserts a painting’s stretcher bars into the Benin inspired sculpted portrait head, Malay Girl with shafts (p.33). Dramatic statements that display an unrelenting passion to merge sculpture and painting, these gestures also bring to mind Smit’s transformation of his father’s sculpture studio through the introduction of canvases and other painting materials.

This on-going exchange between sculpture and painting is mirrored by a deeper, more subjective dialogue in which the artist explores the tension between human vulnerability and inner-strength. It is evident, for example, in female portraits like Transparent Variation #1 (p.21) in the unmistakable sense of strength and dignity resulting from the pose and the overall treatment of the head. In contrast, the sad eyes and averted gaze attest to the sitter’s vulnerability. Here the dialogue between outer-strength and vulnerability defines the sitter’s inner-strength. The artist has in fact so successfully adjusted the tension between these contrasting qualities that details like race and ethnicity fade away in deference to the depiction of womanly fortitude and determination. This result is typical to Smit’s portraits of women, prompting one writer to note that his “…portraits are about a universal message”.³ While his depictions of females may constitute a universal statement about woman’s inner-strength, Smit’s portraits of males, are more psychologically complex. Estimating that only one in ten of his paintings are male portraits, Smit manipulates the details of these works in a manner that places his focus more squarely on the tension between vulnerability and invulnerability. The psychological volume is turned up as he portrays the male subjects with a slightly feminine demeanour combined with a ‘piercing’ stare intended to aggressively communicate the sitter’s invulnerability. This effect owes much to the artist’s repeated use of the frontal pose (as opposed to the female portraits, many of which are in profile or in three-quarters view with the sitter looking away from the viewer). Meeting the viewer head on, the sitter in Submerge (p.11), for example, affirms his invulnerability with an unrelenting confrontational stare that catches the viewer off-guard. And although the gaze employed here and throughout these works is disarming, it can be described as expressive of multiple emotions and open to interpretation. In the final analysis, it is most likely that the eyes of these figures are reflecting back to the viewer that which he or she sees in them. Nevertheless, it is this stare that is so difficult to pin-down, that empowers these works.

For Smit, these complexities, strengths and vulnerabilities, and indeed the very portraits themselves are all initially submerged in the depths of the Pollockesque slashes and splashes arising from his first explosive burst of creative energy. Then working methodically, Smit builds up strokes of paint until the image emerges, and his various dialogues play out on the canvas.

¹ I conducted a taped interview and exchanged e-mails with Lionel Smit during the months of August and September 2010. All statements by Lionel Smit in this essay have been quoted from those sources. The aforementioned interview and e-mails are also the sources for references to the artist’s personal details and specific data regarding his work. -SSS

Swath 2010 oil on canvas 200 x 150cm

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Scatter series #2 2010 oil on canvas 120 x 120cm
Hide 2010 oil on canvas 170 x 250cm
Submerge 2010 oil on canvas 165 x 165cm
detail
Scatter series 2010 oil on canvas 165 x 230cm
Transparent variation #2 2010 oil on canvas 230 x 165cm
Transparent variation #1 2010 oil on canvas 230 x 165cm
Conceal 2010 oil on canvas 170 x 130cm
Emerge 2010 oil on canvas 170 x 180cm
Yves submerged 2010 oil on canvas 80 x 80cm
Boy with black 2010 oil on canvas 80 x 80cm
Fragments with blue and red 2010 oil on canvas 80 x 80cm
Malay girl with shafts 2010 bronze edition of 12 or variable edition of 12 in resin 122cm
Divulge 2010
resin and oil paint variable edition of 12
or bronze edition of 12 110cm
Malay girl submerged 2010
bronze edition of 12
or variable edition of 12 in resin 64cm
LIONEL SMIT


Qualifications and awards:
2009 Merit Award, Vuleka, Sanlam Art Competition, Cape Town
2008 Achievement Award, Pro Arte School of Arts
2000 First prize in the MTN Art Colours Awards of Gauteng
1999/2000 Best painting student Pro Arte School of Arts

Selected exhibitions:

2010
We are not Witches, Saatchi Gallery, London
Submerge, solo exhibition, 34FineArt, Cape Town
Who, group exhibition, Grande Provence, Franschhoek
Coolstuff, group exhibition, 34FineArt, Cape Town

2009
F.A.C.E.T., Charity Auction, Christie’s, London
Group 09, group exhibition, 34Long Fine Art, Cape Town
Gesprek, group exhibition, University of Stellenbosch Gallery, Stellenbosch
Presence, group exhibition, Off The Wall Gallery, Paarl
Relate, solo exhibition, Grande Provence, Franschhoek
Nuance, group exhibition, UCA Gallery, Cape Town
group exhibition, North-West University Gallery, Potchefstroom
Identity, group exhibition, Platform on 18th Gallery, Pretoria

2008
URBANEYE, group exhibition, KyK Contemporary, Pretoria
REFLECTIONS, group exhibition, Rust-en-Vrede, Durbanville
Day Dream, two man show with Jaco Benade, Magpie Gallery, Centurion
Rendezvous - focus wearable art, Fada Art Gallery, Johannesburg
Reflect/refuel, group exhibition, Association of Arts, Pretoria
Outskirts, group exhibition, 47 Market Street Artspace, George

2007
St.Sebastian, group exhibition, Association of Arts, Pretoria
History, group exhibition, Afriart Gallery, Pretoria
Group exhibition, Aardklop, Potchefstroom
Group exhibition, Dawid Ras Gallery, Johannesburg
Project, group exhibition, Carol Lee Fine Art, Johannesburg
flesh/escape, two man show with M.J. Lourens, Magpie Gallery, Centurion

2006
40 x 40, group exhibition, KKNK Arts Festival, Oudtshoorn
Epidemic, Judge, Hope, solo exhibition, Voir Gallery, Pretoria
Physical self, group exhibition, Gallery 88, Sasolburg
Initial, group exhibition, Carol Lee Fine Art, Johannesburg
Turn the table, group exhibition, Artspace, Johannesburg

2005
Group exhibition, Woolworths, Johannesburg
Group therapy, group exhibition, Civic Gallery, Sandton
Oppitafel, group exhibition, Artspace, Johannesburg

2004
Group exhibition, Association of Arts, Pretoria
Group exhibition, Art House, United Kingdom
Pretoria, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town

2003
Mortem Life, two man exhibition with Rossoouw van der Walt, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg

Selected publications and media:

Catalogues:
Submerge LIONEL SMIT, 34FineArt, October 2010
Christie’s, F.A.C.E.T (catalogue cover), October 2009
Residue, Grande Provence Gallery, October 2009
Group therapy, Sandton Civic Gallery, 2005
Pretoria, Everard Read Gallery, November 2004

Articles:
ART OF AFRICA, The Graff Magazine, Summer 2010
Grand Scale, Garden and Home Magazine, April 2010
Time Out Magazine, 2007
Ou idees met moderne aanslag, RAPPORT, 2 July 2006
A look away, Art Magazine, 2006
Soos in 'n tweepe, Beeld plus, 26 November 2004
Radically different works from striking ensemble, Interval, May 2002

Television:
Artha, SABC2, 2008
Kwela, KYKN, 2008
Kunskafee, KYKN, 7 July 2002

Internet:
34FineArt.com
lionelsmit.co.za

Collections:
Lawrence Graff Collection
Rand Merchant Bank
European Investment Bank
Johannesburg City Council
Saronsberg Wine Estate
Grainvest Futures
M-NET
Barnstone
Delaire Graff Wine Estate
South African Embassy, Nigeria
Parkdev
Various private and corporate collections