



Samantha Keely Smith  
*Desire*  
 2008  
 Oil and varnish on canvas  
 48 x 66 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist

NEW ARTIST

# SAMANTHA KEELY SMITH

BY ANA FINEL HONIGMAN

Samantha Keely Smith's lush, radiant oil paintings live two separate lives to the fullest. The U.K.-born and New York-based artist describes her work as "an investigation of our continual struggle to integrate the dual worlds in which we exist: the external world which is the sum of our sensory experiences, and the inner world of our mind and emotions, and our physical and visceral existence. It looks at the interdependence of contrasting and often contradictory realities or viewpoints; the idea that in order to truly appreciate beauty and light, one must allow for the necessity of the dark truths that are as much a part of our lives as the innate pull toward hope. Order and chaos, the cerebral and the instinctive, sacred and profane – each requires the other."

Keely Smith's paintings eloquently straddle these philosophical realities. But seeing them in contrasting contexts brings out the tensions she addresses, heightens her work's inherent intensity, and raises challenging tangential issues about pressures on painters to consider how their work will appear in reproduction, as well as in life.

My responsibilities as a staff contributor to an online magazine include carefully sifting through the thousands of international artists – professional and aspiring – who post their work in the open-entry select of the site. After picking 10 of them for special attention, I then select one for a short review, which I will write on the basis of his or her online profile.

On the rare occasions when I have seen

a few of these artists' work in person, the experience has sometimes reminded me of friends' nightmare Internet-dating stories. As in their personal horror-stories, art that seemed compelling in the online profile has often been shockingly shorter, older, a little more psycho, or simply boring in person. Keely Smith's paintings provided an entirely different experience. As with most paintings, her works translate poorly in reproduction. But the dissonance between physically encountering her work and seeing it reproduced yields distinct but equally and uniquely rewarding experiences.

When I first encountered her work through the online publication, I was mesmerized by the images' luxuriance and promise. Her magnificent semi-abstract landscapes keep to a strictly limited palette of predominantly complementary colours dominated by luscious, jewel-like blues and yellows and inflamed oranges. Rendered into pixels, the paintings pulsate with energy and movement.

Responding to the sublime elements that popped on the computer screen, I wrote for the site, "Samantha Keely Smith's paintings are radiant with fiery potency. Yet they present a disquieting chilly vision of a world that is no longer welcoming for humans. [Her] compelling contrasts create a sense of total harmony, which captures our imagination, by creating the arresting aura of a world full and fulfilled without the presence of any extraneous life-forms. Smith's work appears like the hopeful dream of the planet itself for

a nice, peaceful, post-human future when the earth can create drama and beauty utterly on its own terms."

Captivated by the surface attraction of Keely Smith's images, I made an appointment for a studio visit. I was skeptical, but I was elated to find that the work in the studio offered bountiful visual and narrative rewards. Seen in the flesh, her canvases are enriched by the tactile information she creates through juxtaposed brushwork styles. Sections of her paintings have the light, creamy, quality of Fragonard's fluffy clouds, and other areas have an atmospheric intensity akin to that of Frederic Edwin Church's "Twilight" landscapes. But overlying these areas of skillful, historically evocative, nature-inspired beauty are strokes and chunks that appear to have been silkscreened on after Keely Smith completed the harmony of her base compositions. The patterned portions that sank into the overall composition in reproduction created interesting visual challenges and functioned like gates into the wider lovely areas of rich, open color.

In reproduction, her paintings seem as impenetrable and intimidating as a fully formed sci-fi visionary view into the future. Standing before her massive canvases, however, they became as alluring as fairy-tale landscape. The differences in paint quality and character created a feeling of penetrability, and the electric contrasts between sections were as inviting as a portal into a warm, welcoming alternate world.