

Ian Smith BIG PAINTINGS small paintings



Exhibition Catalogue
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Images © Ian Smith

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cover image: *Islands* 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 172 x 252 cm



Ian Smith painting 'Islands' 2018

THERE'S FACT, THERE'S FICTION AND THEN THERE'S PAINTING

I tore off and kept a leaf from my daily date block for its quotation: “The difference between writing fact or fiction is that fiction has to make sense.” Tom Clancy. I have not read any of this best selling author’s books but I have seen the film of ‘The Hunt for Red October’ on TV a few times. While savouring Clancy’s ironic joke on himself as a writer of imaginative, suspenseful fiction, it occurred to me that painting [for me] lies somewhere between, outside or beyond fact and fiction. While often steeped in mundane aspects of reality, my painting evolves through unreal, subjective variations – becoming new fact, new fiction and neither at the same time. The more commonplace the starting point the more fanciful the variations. An artist can be more creative by starting with a tea cup and saucer for instance, rather than [say] an ornamental jade dragon. Meanwhile, many artist use paint to make images which look like real things. I try to make images of real things look like painted things. This alchemy imposed on subject matter, is the painting process.

The longer I live and paint the more I think about a certain mundane childhood memory as technically formative in my work. At its most elemental, painting is about suspending blobs, smears, blocks, areas, etc of paint on a fabric membrane, solid sheet, wall, etc. When I was about 10 years old, I watched a plasterer trowel a fine concrete mix across the exterior walls of a new house being built next door. He was one of North Queensland’s Italian immigrants who had brought Mediterranean building styles to Australia. The results are still visible in the towns where they settled. The plasterer worked on stud-frame walls covered with silver tar paper, covered in turn with – well, er – chicken wire mesh, into which he suspended the slushy but workable mix. As the chicken wire slowly disappeared under concrete, amorphous shape patterns came and went against the linear, geometric mesh until it was completely covered. A few days later he came back and free-trowelled [throwing and splattering] a darker grey mix in an open, fanciful pattern over the surface. Whether 1950s stucco houses are now cool or kitsch, I realized I had watched the making of something like a monumental painting. Each step in the process had its own appeal. Collaged chicken mesh over silver paper, abstract patches of concrete suspended in a grid, a flat subtly varied field of trowel/brushmarks and finally a free splattered all-over pattern. Little wonder that by age 25 I’d chosen an image of a house painter confronting a wall as a definitive image in my work; particularly in that 1970s period of conceptualism, minimalism and low regard for anything pictorial or unrelated to process. My ‘surface worker’ image, taken from a photo on a Walpamur Paints colour card, also satisfied that decade’s mood for ‘Art and Politics’ [worker and process as unromanticised art subjects]. The image has endured for me, reappearing periodically when I have lost myself in complex themes and need to regain the basic painting idea.



Painter self portrait 1975, Paper collage, 20 x 26 cm

It is presumed that artists paint with some form of emotion. I realized long ago that, whatever inspires me, I approach painting with a combination of desire and disgust. This should not be surprising, since I believe we experience many of life's good things with this emotional contradiction, sooner or later, if we are honest about it. Food, sex, sleep, sport, nature, material goods, domestic lifestyle, etc. Yes, even nature. We love it deeply but are disgusted when it turns on us, hurts us, or ages and dies on us. We are disgusted by human abuse of nature; of which we accuse others yet we all do it. We chop and mow it, eat it, destroy and displace it for our own purposes. While protesting new development in natural landscapes, we forget what was killed, maimed and banished to make way for our own homes. We love and desire food until our gluttony overtakes us. We pig out on too much sport too, except when the behaviour of players and presenters disgusts us. Sexual desire, of course, springs from many emotions and stirs most others eventually. If our ambivalence to most of life's pleasures is not self evident, compare it to this profit and loss account of my painting habit.

Compulsively, I desire, want, need to paint – to create grand and significant if not beautiful painted objects. I indulge in painting until I am disgusted by this desire, which becomes more difficult to satisfy the more I give to it and which may be futile anyway. I drift into disgust at its ego, its disappointments, competitive judgements, and so on. I conclude I must need such a folly, if only to fill time between now and when...? I sit irresolutely in my studio, looking at my array of splattered, encrusted tins, jars, dishes and plates from which I can, have and must again make magic. Forward and reverse alchemy. I am reminded of how dubious patches of 'stuff' stepped around on Sunday morning footpaths subjectively repulse us, yet objectively resemble delicious dishes served up on Saturday night in nearby chic restaurants. I resolve and seek to create 'something else' – because we see paintings all the time which merely look like paintings we see all the time! Lesser artists paint pastiches. Good, successful artists relax into repeat formulae, happy ever after to become parodies of their former selves. Why don't they recoil from the chilly zephyr of empty complacency? The opposite to this is Piet Mondrian's courageous example of forced change. His later paintings – less accessible or 'attractive' than his earlier works – apparently worried him immensely, but were what he had to do.

These days, artists who change course upset their 'brand position' and risk accusal of losing the plot. The disconcerted audience forget that, had they not read all those books on Picasso, they would not believe that his geometrically fractured cafe tables with cubed objects of 1910 and his monumental 1930s Neoclassical marshmallow girls were painted by the same man. While Picasso was a legend of originality, no one declared more influences. He collected and appropriated other artists' works, old and new, great and ignominious and moved forward and back, sometimes abruptly, from one style to another depending on his purpose. Relevant purpose changes for all painters as we and our world change. So what is a *feasible* way to paint, and how do we paint *plausibly*? Robert Hughes referred to Cezanne's 'heroic uncertainty' which, ironically, became his strength as he constructed his works with brushmarks in ways he had not yet seen in other paintings. Fifty years later Jackson Pollock saw the *feasibility* of flicking and dripping paint yet anxiously balked at its *plausibility*, asking Lee Krasner: "But is it a real painting? Can it be a painting?" In Peter Shaffer's 'Amadeus', Mozart's older, envious rival Salieri snarls [something like]: "Why can't he just play a melody? It's all arpeggios, arpeggios!" Had Mozart heard or bothered – while busy taking Baroque music into the Romantic – his reply may have been [something like]: "I'm making new art here, not playing tunes."

These days I settle warily for forms and surfaces in flux – enhanced or in disarray, even decay, done wrong and then fixed up. A metaphor for how life is. I avoid any ideal of perfection, much less that sort of accurate realism where 'the surface disappears'. I'm back to my 1950s North Queensland Italian plasterer's functional aesthetic. Purpose and feasibility change. Recently, my left hand [of primary use] became painful. X-rays showed most of the cartilage gone from my hand's joints, worn away after a long life of woodworking, canvas stretching and dexterous, repetitive brushwork. Doctor's orders were: "Rest the hand, or it won't even do the brushwork any more." I contemplated painting right-handed. I joked I would now do my best work! Produce awkward, pure expression free or my left hand's unfashionable traditional skills. I always suspected that 'kicked-sideways-wobble' in Vincent Van Gogh's paintings to be that of someone working with the 'wrong hand' – although I gave in to scholarship and accepted the disorientation was 'in his head' and not a clever strategy to 'trap the primitive'. I know of artists and musicians forced to swap hands through accidents and affliction and I'm sure some have experimented. But I see invented [fictional] awkwardness as more pretentious than the facility it would dispell. Anyway, sooner or later the need may arise, since I disobey doctor's orders and still do stressful work with my left hand.

This exhibition brings together big and small paintings. The big ones aren't big beside the Sistine Chapel and all the grand manner historical, modern or contemporary paintings in between. They aren't even *my* biggest works, but are big enough to bring up, along



Yellow painter - Blue painter 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 140 x 260 cm



Views of *'Home Grown Images'*; one man exhibition, Kick Arts, Cairns, 2016

with the small ones, the eternal question of scale. I don't know any rule book to guide this important consideration for artists – within their physical, economic and studio space capacity, of course. Scale is a 'felt' thing. When we look at paintings, dimensions or subject do not necessarily dictate the sense of scale. Some small works can feel virtually monumental while some huge paintings command no internal space or scale at all. Scale is not only a physical fact. Good painting can create a fictional illusion of scale, through composition, treatment and even the manner and size of brushmarks across the larger forms. Which brings us to another subjective yet undeniable quality in painting – surface. If worked on long enough, or with techniques to render the surface 'lived in' and 'built right' to house the viewer's engagement, the fact of the painted object carries the fiction of the idea into the realm of good painting – somewhere *beyond* fact and fiction. If not a definition of painting, this then defines the belief which keeps me doing it, along with a more basic belief in handmade art as an ongoing human need for both maker and audience.

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On the funeral day of my long-time friend and art dealer, Ray Hughes, one object from his vast art collection kept coming to mind; as much for Ray's fascination with it – out of all the beautiful and weird things he loved and owned – as for the thing itself. An African four legged animal fetish figure about 30cm high. It has no eyes, ears, mouth or nostrils in its horizontal, cylindrical, blunt knob of a head, which makes it appear mute, blind and lost. Yet it exudes sinister, all-knowing power. It is made of solid, cracking, straw-infused mud. "Or something worse?!" Ray would ponder as he cradled it in his arms, as only Ray the refined connoisseur could, before retelling of its Australian arrival in his luggage and its passage [so to speak] through customs and quarantine. One of Ray's many airport stories. Who made the little beast is not clear, but we imagined it was created in some combined fervour of desire, disgust and spiritualism. Ray brought spirit, desire and disgust to his 'ownership' of it in his Sydney apartment. As much as Ray possessed it, it possessed Ray – just as the compulsion to make it must have possessed its maker. Was this object some ultimate expression of [and about] art? An absolute act of brutal creation. Ray's wondering led mine. Could its mud held together by straw, as easily be paint hanging on a grid or membrane? A compulsive act of painting which moves us beyond fact and fiction.

IAN SMITH, Brisbane, 2019



Abandoned mountain excursion 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 164 x 244 cm



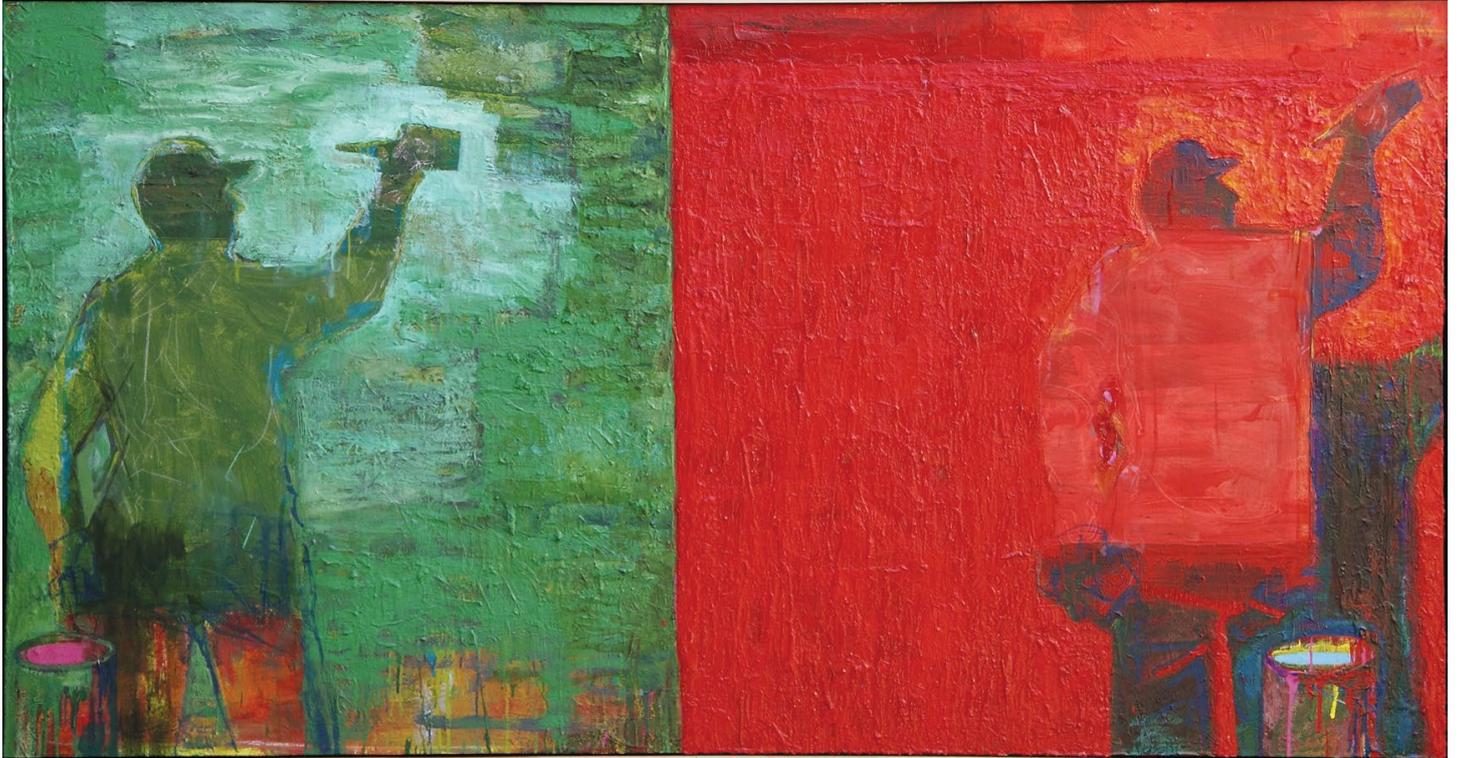
Humidity 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 170 x 240 cm



Detour around old bridgework 2001, Oil on canvas, 200 x 205 cm



Steps between islands & mainland 1986, Oil on canvas, 240 x 314 cm



Red painter - Green painter 2008, Oil on canvas, 140 x 240 cm



Biscuit tin Australian landscape 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 175 x 235 cm



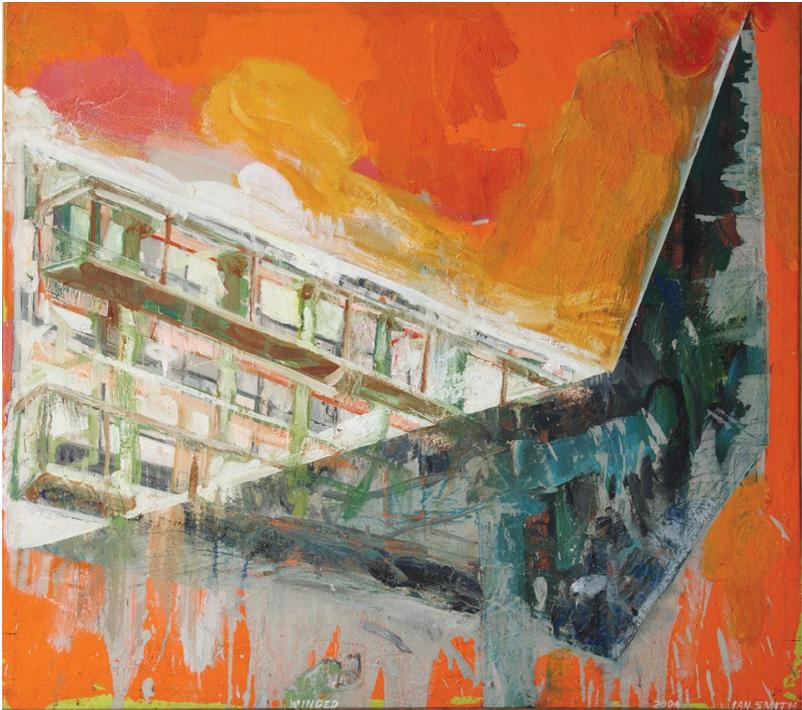
Dubbo heaps colour coded 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 101 x 101 cm



Role of the left over barbecue sausage in Western art 2001, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 185 x 175 cm



Backside 2004, Oil on canvas, 58 x 86 cm



Winged 2004, Oil on canvas, 75 x 85 cm



Behind the bleeding obvious 2005, Oil on canvas, 59 x 86 cm



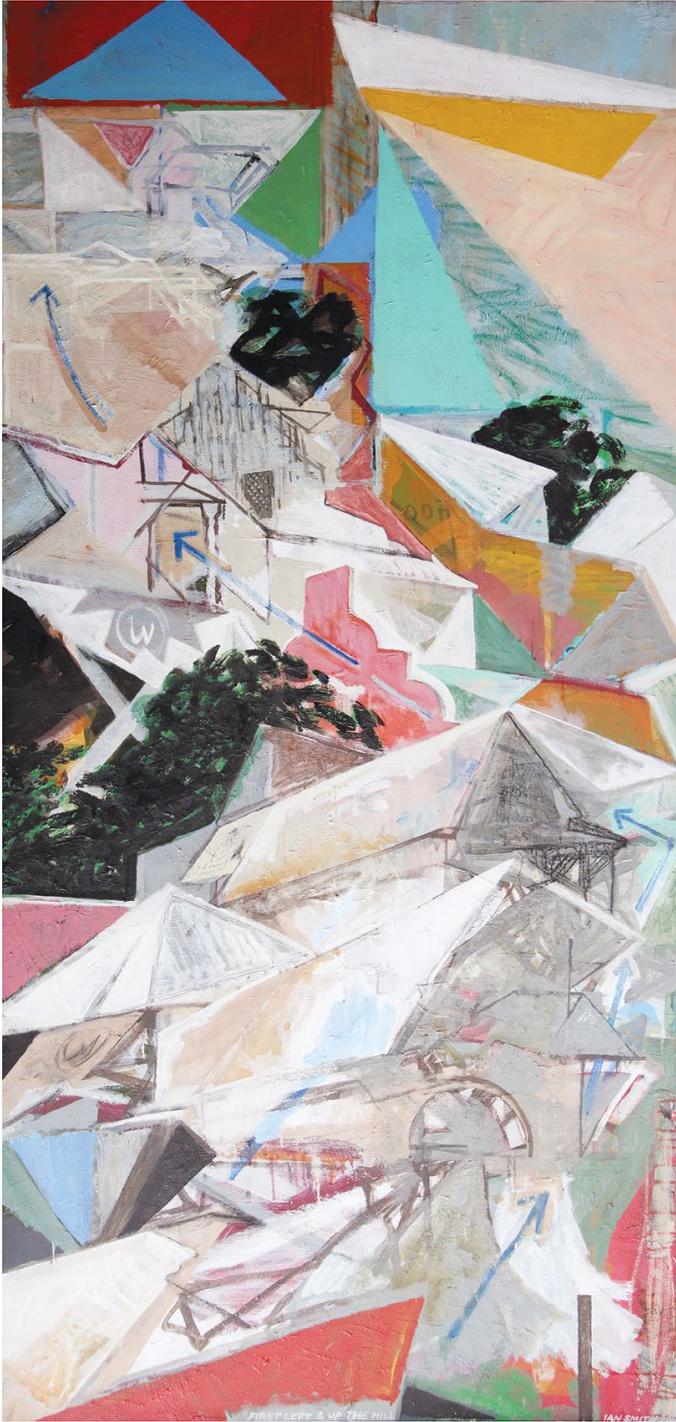
Behind the signs 2005, Oil on canvas, 60 x 96 cm



Green car 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 46 cm



Bridge with clouds 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 81 cm



First left and up the hill 2012, Acrylic on canvas, 210 x 100 cm



Circus Antwerpen 2002, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 235 x 175 cm



Ray Hughes makes his own main course 2001, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 270 x 180 cm



Famous painting 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 80 cm



Diana jugs 2009, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 50 x 100 cm



Dark Diana 2009, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 50 x 100 cm



Tropical Irish 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 41 cm



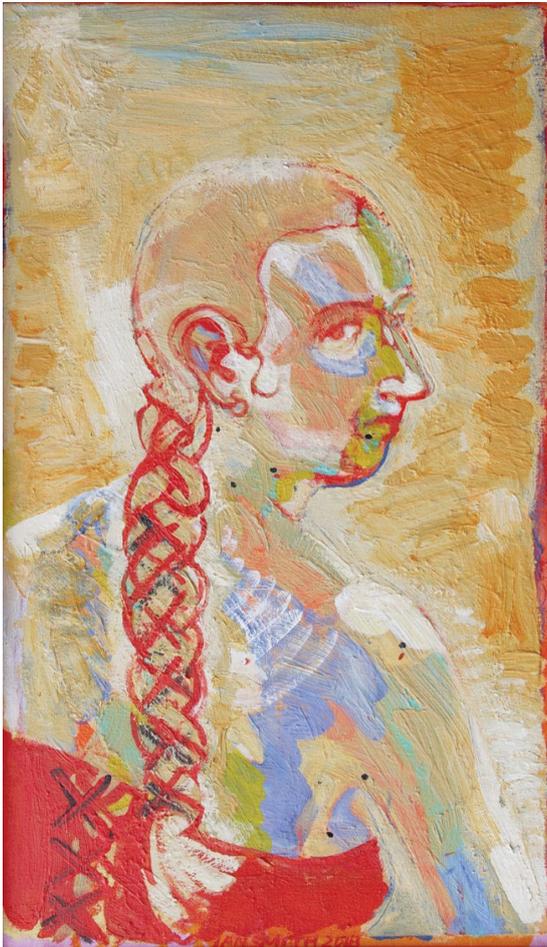
Imperial Ruler 2016, Acrylic and wooden rulers on canvas, 46 x 48 cm



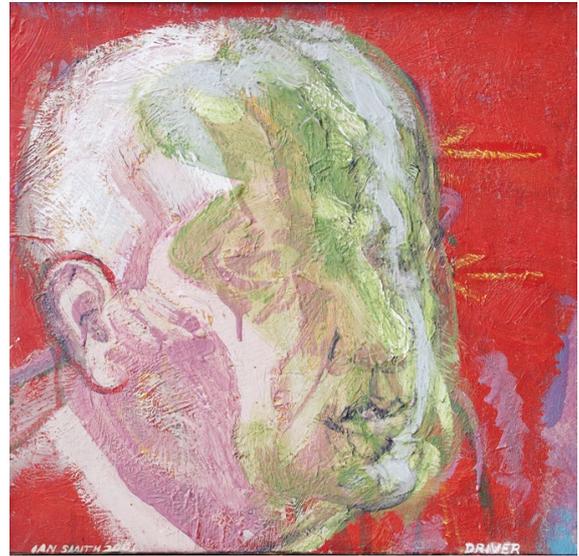
Self totem - hers 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 41 cm



Self totem - his 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 41cm



Girl with a plait 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 34 cm



Driver 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 41 cm



Pacific 2017, Acrylic & collage on canvas, 35 x 60 cm



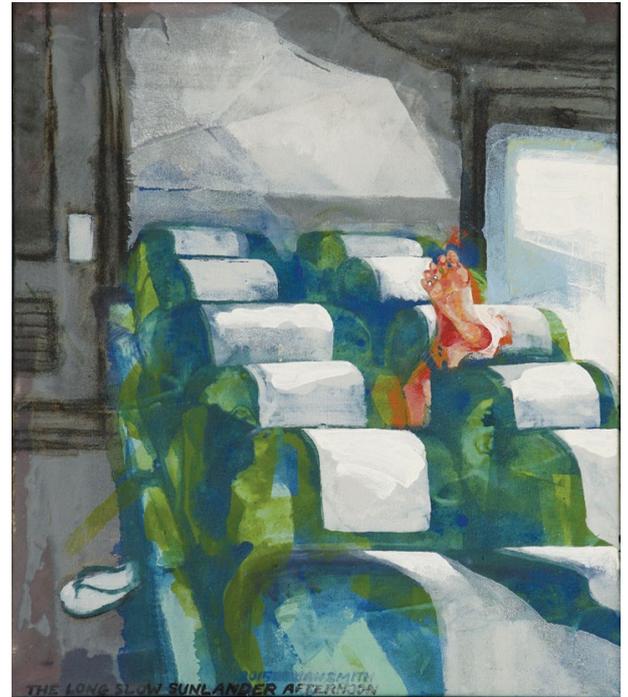
Painting of a charcoal drawing 2007, Oil on canvas, 54 x 57 cm



2nd painting of a charcoal drawing 2007, Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm



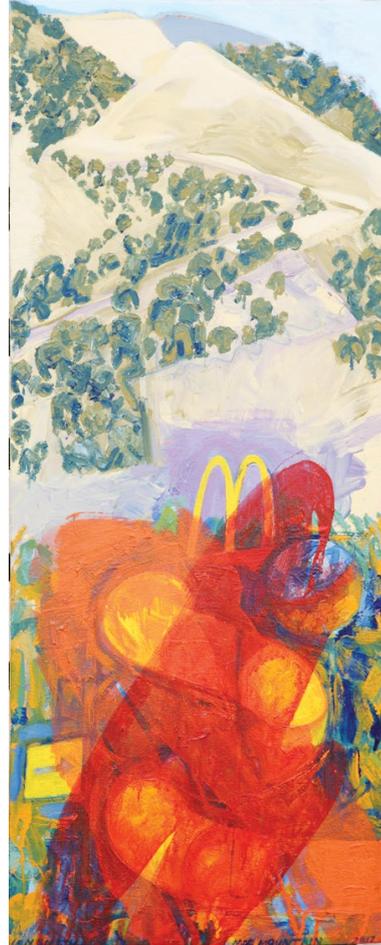
Sleepers 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 38 cm



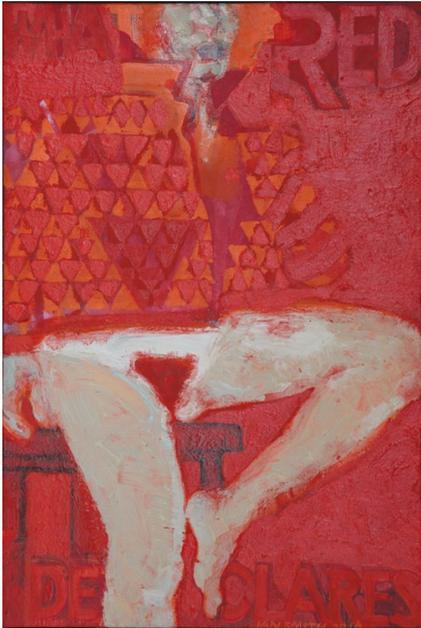
The long, slow Sunlander afternoon 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 47 cm



Tent 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 89 x 38 cm



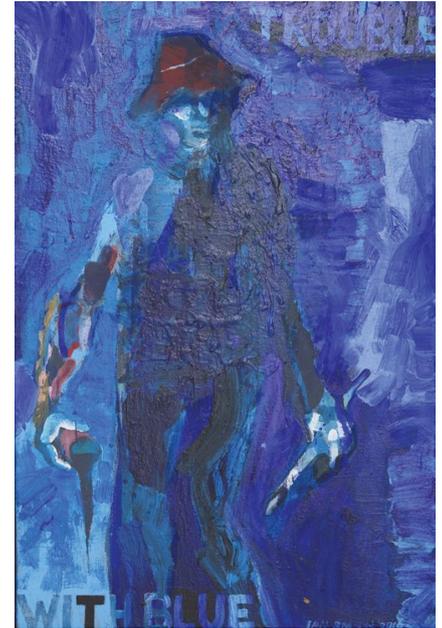
Mac Mountain 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 40 cm



Red – hers 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Purple 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



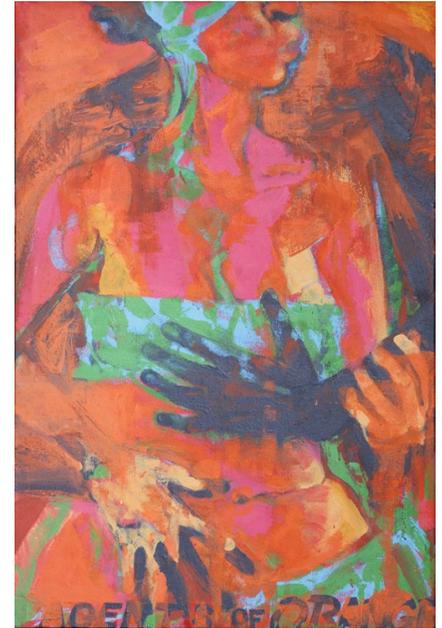
Blue 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Green 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



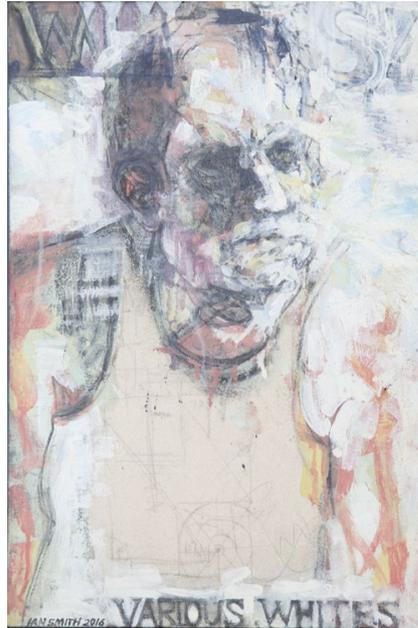
Yellow 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Orange 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Black 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



White 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Red - his 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 31 cm



Dryza 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 39 cm



Red Dryza 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm



Figure in shade 1996, Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 cm



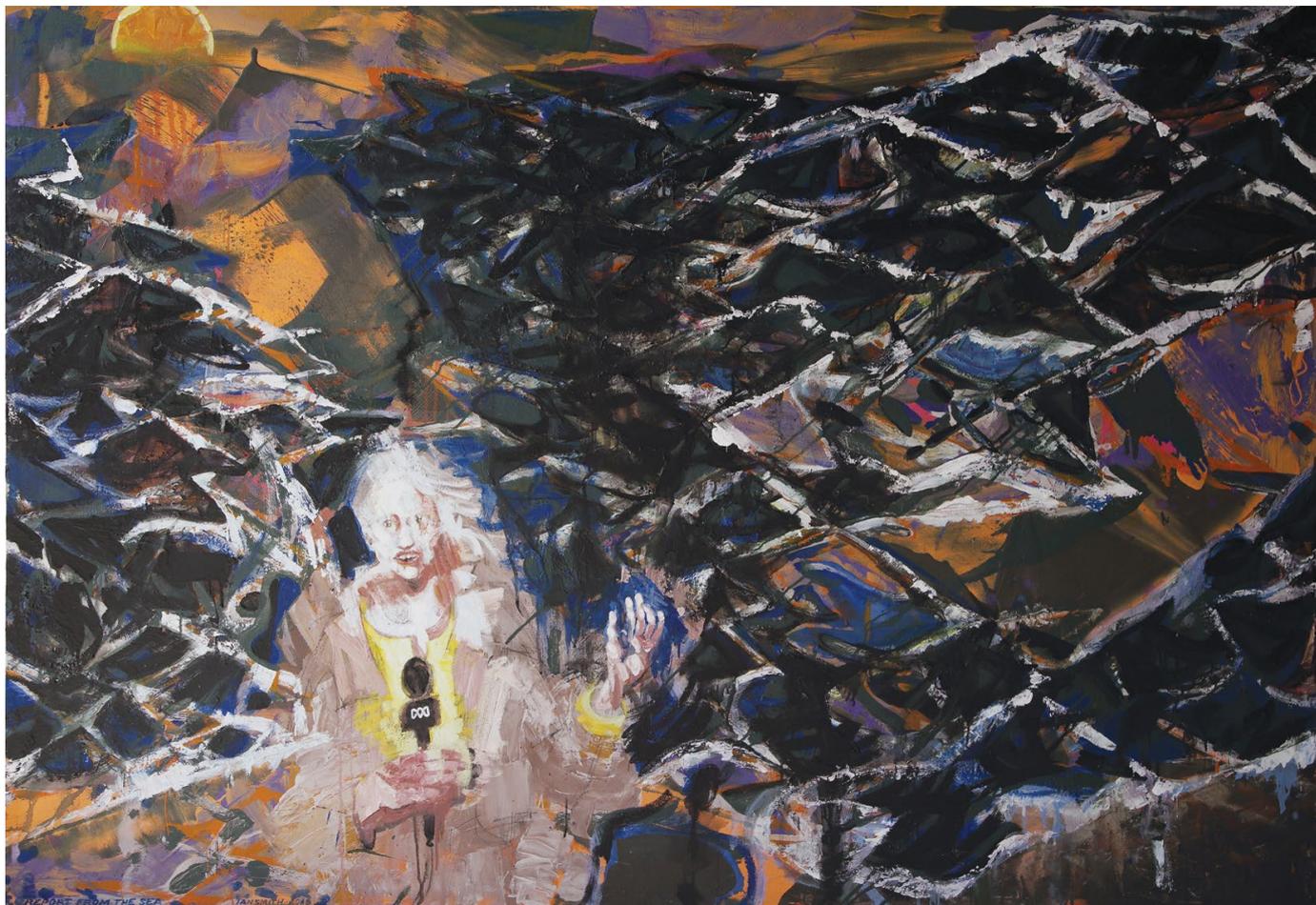
Italian Greyhound 2010, Oil on canvas, 55 x 57 cm



Landscape with car drama 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 cm



Red, green & blue with new carport 2012, Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 101 cm



Report from the sea 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 124 x 180 cm



Your oxygen mask will fall from above 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 126 cm



Your lifevest is under your seat 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 126 cm

IAN SMITH - Biography

Australian Collections: NGA, Canberra; NGV, Melbourne; QAG, Brisbane; GNT, Darwin; Regional and City council Galleries: Hamilton, Vic.; Karratha, WA; Cairns, Stanthorpe, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Gympie, Gladstone, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Townsville and others; University of Qld, QUT, Griffith University, Brisbane; JCU, Townsville; Uni. Central Qld., Rockhampton; Parliament House, Canberra; Student Unions Sydney Uni., Uni. NSW, Sydney and Melbourne Uni. etc.

Overseas Collections: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; Shenzen Art Museum, China; National Collection Ghana, Emmen City Cultural Centre, Netherlands. Private collections in USA, UK, Netherlands, and Belgium – particularly in Antwerp – where Smith lived for 7 years with his Belgian wife and 2 Australian born children; 1988 to 1994 when he returned to Australia alone and lived Brisbane/Gold coast/Moreton Bay Islands, making frequent trips to Sydney and Cairns.

Born Cairns, 1950, he lived a working class, bush and beach yet artistically active boyhood. In 1968, on a Commonwealth Scholarship, he did one year of Architecture before dropping out, working in a bank for a year then moving to Melbourne to do a Diploma of Art & Design at Prahran College [1970 – 1972]. 1973, painted TV sets at Channel 9, then mid-year returned to Brisbane to teach painting and drawing full-time at Qld College of Art until 1979 when he quit and has painted full-time ever since.

Exhibitions since 1972 in Australia and Overseas: include +/- 25 solo shows, Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane/Sydney 1972-2006; +/- 7 solo shows, Heiser Gallery, Brisbane since 2006. He is now represented in Brisbane by Woolloongabba Art Gallery. While living in Europe, involved in many exhibitions; most notably solo shows at Campo & Campo, Antwerp and Emmen Cultural Centre, Netherlands. He has been in numerous curated group shows in commercial and public galleries here and overseas.

Curated solo exhibitions include 'Since I left', 1996 Cairns Regional Gallery then touring; 'On and off the Road', 2010 Gold Coast City Art Gallery then touring to 8 regional galleries, ending appropriately in Cairns. Survey show, MOCA, Brisbane 1988.

In a career which really started as a schoolboy, his work uses images of everyday even mundane existence from cane toads to grand bridges, from explicit sexual scenes to blank roadside billboards in landscape to evoke universal issues. He has won many prizes including Tattersalls Landscape Prize, Brisbane, 2012; and been an Archibald Prize finalist 9 times over 4 decades [first time 1977, most recently 2010]. Also hung several times in the Salon des Refusés, Wynne and Sulman Prizes.



Gabbascape 2009, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 3 panels each, 150 x 80 cm

Woolloongabba Art Gallery

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