

THIS IS MONEY →



LONDON GUIDE



Days Out Guide

The next Lucian Freud - or a mirage?

It may be that we have a considerable new painter of the human figure on our hands, just at the point when most of those who have long cared for the genre as a once lively art are all but prepared to perform its obsequies when Lucian Freud is gone. And maybe we haven't. Perhaps we clutch at straws. Perhaps what some of us see in the paintings of Clive Smith is no more substantial than the mirage seen by desperate men dying of deprivation in the desert. Why such uncertainty? Of the 14 pictures with which he constructs his first one-man exhibition in London, more are failures rather than successes (particularly those without a figure subject), but the half dozen that succeed within the parameters he sets are worth a serious second glance, and if they too fail in some degree, then the fault lies with the parameters rather than with the failure of the painting or the underlying drawing.



BRIAN SEWELL
Tuesday and Friday
in the Standard

Born in 1967, Clive Smith as a beginner is at almost the age at which the triumphant Raphael died - but then St Albans was his birthplace, not Urbino, and he studied fashion in suburban Kingston rather than painting with distinguished masters of the Italian Renaissance. Half-way through his three score years and ten he is still hesitant, the touch of his brush often as tentative as it is assured, his dependence on the palette knife intellectually lazy, his drawing, though brave, a little insecure, his compositions, when ambitious, verging on the pretentious, even overstretched, and when unambitious, so self-effacing as to be unnoticeable.

Those with sharp eyes and long memories will recall Smith as the winner of the Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery, in 1999, with a picture of a saturnine boy lying clothed on half a double bed, the other half ostentatiously unoccupied. It was damned by most critics as an exercise in the manner of Lucian Freud, but it seemed to me entirely devoid of Freud's often ill-balanced intensity of observation in one part of a picture and his patent lack of interest in another part. Freud, in working on a single figure, can seem both driven by urgent involvement and so bored that careless impotence sets in; form and volume are then abandoned for meaningless sweeps of the broad brush that are mere filling and finishing. Smith's observation and method of painting in a picture as large as a middling Freud (a not

inconsiderable acreage), were entirely coherent, the intensity of the one and the diligence of the other never tailing off at the edge or in the corner of the canvas.

In retrospect, informed by this current exhibition, I realise how important Smith's Double Single was, and is, in that it contains clues and elements that are developed in and essential to his new paintings, the subject itself an early expression of the isolation that has become the preeminent thesis of his recent work. I wrote then of the studied separateness of the occupied and empty halves of the bed, "the awkwardness of bed-sharing by people who are not sexual partners, or the melancholy of one who wishes to be such a partner when the other does not, or the sense of trespass ... that sometimes overtakes the traveller when given a vast double bed instead of the single in which he'd prefer to be cocooned". Now, it seems, this loneliness is taken a stage further and has become as hermetic as the jar in which the entomologist entombs his butterfly.

Last, First encapsulates the point, a picture of 10 chairs against a rear wall parallel with the picture's surface, the first and 10th of them abutting the flank walls to lend a pressing claustrophobic note to what, at first glance, seems cavernous space (a note developed in Encounter); the seventh chair is occupied by the single disconsolate figure of a boy, clothed. In the beginning, six of the chairs were occupied by ghostly figures, two of which were removed long before they were finished; four were completed, but then Smith scraped away three, repaired the damage, and left only one. "As the work progressed," said Smith, "it wasn't feeling right ..." but with a single figure "it felt just right and I think a more honest emotion was left within the painting."

That, of course, is exactly how a painter should react to his work in progress, as though an amiable conversation is in train, an exchange of ideas contributed as much by the canvas as the artist, rather than the distilled and rigid conclusion reached in the mind's eye before the first stroke of paint is applied to the canvas. To this language of intuitive response the viewer responds too - he may see no evidence of extensive change, but instinctively he will be engaged by the solution, ask the questions why and how the painter arrived at it, and sense that something more intriguing than predetermination was the driving force. Private Parties, another exploration of isolation, this time within a sexual partnership, makes the point more dramatically; it consists of five small canvases, almost square, joined in a horizontal line, but on the wall of the gallery, the three containing a single figure and an empty chair, separated by two that depict nothing but the far wall and the tiled floor, hang in a different order from the reproduction in the catalogue printed before the exhibition opened; even at so late a stage, Smith was still thinking about the work and quite prepared to change it.

He paints the male nude with restrained gusto, the figures much smaller in proportion to the canvas than three years ago and much smaller than Freud ever paints them, and yet, in some senses, he is now close to Freud. The first of the current nudes

was Organ, painted last year, a confrontation intended to purge him of embarrassment and "slightly unnerved feelings". In the seemingly vast white space defined by a far wall and the perfect linear perspective of a floor covered with large white tiles that is common to most of these new pictures (the variation in technique for defining the tiles, beguiling), lies a naked man, dead centre, his legs parted, his feet toward us; under his buttocks are three pillows, flattened by his weight, in the dead ground of which his arms are all but concealed, only his fists obvious; his legs, uncomfortably arched torso and the little that we can see of his face in such extreme foreshortening, combine with the upthrust hips to form a V that exaggerates the sense of perspective suggested by the floor, but, instead of zooming off into the distance, the eye is startlingly arrested by what it encounters at the bifurcation of the V - the model's scrotum.

It is an affront that, hitherto, only Freud could risk - as he did, most aggressively, with the penis of Leigh Bowery in 1992, though he has been toying with such parts for a quarter of a century - and the scrotum's raw and reddish tinge enhances its immediate visibility in the half-acre of white paint that surrounds it, in exactly the same way as the tiny peasant in a red bonnet is the most visible point in the grey-green late landscapes of Corot. Not a pretty sight, a scrotum, not the subject for a drawing-room, but if painting it purged Smith of sheepishness and allowed him the detachment to go on to other nudes, then so be it as a psychological document, if not as art.

The most effective of its successors is Comfortable or Uncomfortable?, a vast study of four nude men astride a steel table, posing as though for Old Uncle Tom Cobbleigh's grey mare, the chill metal unsympathetic to the warmth of their thighs and buttocks, shrinking their, in this case invisible, scrotums. In spite of a man's empathic response to these circumstances, he will nevertheless be aware of this composition's contrived elegance, its refined sense of balance and a breadth of interval that maintains the theme of man in isolation. Unlike Tom Cobbleigh's crew, these men are separate; here homo-erotic desire and lockerroom curiosity are irrelevant; we see, as it were, four musical notes, the e,a,d and g of violin strings, the e most taut and erect, the g most slack and slouching, the table acting as the instrument's bridge, but music is impossible without a bow and this is no place for pizzicato.

This is not a sexy picture; this is a picture for the drawing room, or better still, the music room, and serious contemplation. Here Smith has interesting ways with paint; he smudges the flesh tones of the legs with grey that gives them a hirsute look enhanced by the irregular build-up of the white paint against which they are silhouetted, describing by entirely painterly means, without a hint of detail and, in broad terms, limbs far more convincingly modelled than is possible with the long strokes of paint employed by Freud to describe legs, male or female.

The four faces, however, in reproduction almost photographic, are in paint that looks delicately deposited by a small but loose-bowelled bird, impastose, crusty, pitted in the drying, and in

this, though on a smaller, neater scale, he comes very close indeed to the facture adopted by Freud, most notably in his *Large Interior* (after Watteau), of 1981. The wall behind the figures is painted with the palette knife, its broad sweeps contributing a glister that, to my eyes, disrupts a surface that should reflect the composition's mood; in some other paintings, notably *One too Many*, the background is loosely painted in a mosaic of strokes in which there is considerable variety of tone to give a much more sympathetic and coherent surface as a whole. Perhaps Smith uses the wrong varnish. Perhaps there is an unnatural degree of lighting in the gallery.

To have raised the ghost of Freud so often in this review is perhaps unfair to Smith, who gives every impression of being his own man and soon to exorcise the influence - if that is indeed what it is - for the resemblances are small enough and the differences wide. Smith is far the subtler painter, interested in fugitive shadows and reflections as well as solid flesh, more interested too than Freud in the abstract responsibilities of the figurative painter - in none of his pictures do we see Freud's often slapdash rush at things and his wholly uncritical willingness to let unmitigated (and often squalid) failures escape his studio. Scrupulousness in such matters does not, of course, make a man a master, but there is enough about Smith's first London show to suggest that mastery is within his reach. Perhaps. Maybe. I have seen too many broken promises. Were Smith a junk artist of the Britpop brand there is no doubt that his bandwagon would now roll, but a serious painter is his own worst enemy in that with each new painting he provides a benchmark by which judgment can be made. In three years' time ~~we may have a better indication.~~

● *Clive Smith at Marlborough Fine Art, 6 Albemarle Street, W1. 020 7629 5161. Mon-Fri 10am-5.30pm. Sat 10am-12.30pm. Until 4 May. Admission free.*

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