ADAM HASLETT
IMAGES OF THE MIND

> "As our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest… Some fields are narrow fields and some are wide fields. Usually when we have a wide field we rejoice, for we then see masses of truth together, and often get glimpses of relations which we divine rather than see, for they shoot beyond the field into still remoter regions of objectivity, regions which we seem rather to be about to perceive than to perceive actually."
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> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

One possible description of life in the era of digital capitalism is an unwitting, machine-driven conspiracy against the act of concentration. As ever smaller fractions of our attention become monetized, the competition for them increases in speed and aggression. And as ever subtler means are employed to win those fractions from us, our capacity to even discern what it is we are paying attention to is frequently overwhelmed. In this onslaught of distraction, we either try to will our brains to operate at digital speeds or shut down and dissociate. Most of us do some of both. Lost in the space between these two reactions is the environment of mind that permits us to focus and to reflect and to feel.

One possible description of Sam Shmith's artworks is as the distillation of a sustained effort, despite these forces, to focus and reflect. As such, they are a means for us to do the same. To slow our minds to the point of seeing rather than just looking. To neither consume in haste nor fall asleep, but instead be awake and open and newly alive to the old experience of wonder. This is no small accomplishment.

the sacredness of something… is a selection of large-format works on paper from the last three years of Shmith's work. One imperfect way of categorizing them is to distinguish between what we might call the transit images and the scale images. The former, which constitute the plurality of this exhibit, are a kind of hybrid of landscape and figure. Passengers on what appear to be commuter trains are captured in reflections on the glass of the windows they sit opposite. While these figures are the centers of visual gravity, the place our eye is eventually drawn, their almost ghost-like figures are subsumed in the much larger field of the passing landscape seen out through the window of the moving train and the play of light it creates on the glass. Foreground, figure, and background are less defined spaces than the slightly blurred layering of all three in motion. The seemingly mundane subject of a commute is rendered existential (more on this shortly).

The scale images, on the other hand, are of massive distant landscapes—a city from above, the sky, the stars—as seen through the minute detail of filters very close to the eye: the plastic of an airplane window or a simple sheet of glass. While there are no human figures in these works there is a strong sense of the implied human viewer, the person glimpsing vastness through the grain of the vanishingly small. The play here is precisely this shifting back and forth that the images produce in us between the scale of the infinite and the scale of that which is so close to us it is almost invisible. The pictures imply that there is a relationship, an interconnectedness between these two registers that we are habitually missing. And so instead of being conventional images of grand vistas that *suggest* wonder without the power any longer to produce it, these pictures manage to capture the mind itself in the process of looking. And this, almost miraculously, returns our wonder at the scale of the world back to us from beneath the clichés under which it has been buried.

But why these two sets of subjects, in one show, entitled *the sacredness of something…*? What is it that relates these works and the other images in the exhibit that fall, though not as neatly, into the category of either transit or scale?

One answer is process. All of the images here have been created through the compositing of multiple digital photographs. Shmith often spends years editing and refining these combinations, bringing out layers of light and color in the digital dark room of Photoshop, in much the way a painter can work for years on a single canvas. When he is done, the pictures are printed at a tenth of the scale of the final images, and then blown up to the size on display in the exhibit. The effect of this substantial enlargement of an earlier printed version is to increase the smallest unit of the printer's capacity—the supposedly precise dot—to a scale at which this precision breaks down, producing, on close inspection, a blotching and blurring at the granular level of the printed image. This gives them a painterly surface even as they are produced through a digital process.

There is an echo here of the shifting registers of perception that occur when we look at the scale images. By bringing the smallest scale of perception to the surface, Shmith lets us glimpse the interpenetration of the particular and the infinite, how our mind can only grasp the infinite in and through the particular. Thus, with blessed understatement, his process recapitulates his theme. Form becomes content.

Sam Shmith
Untitled (figure, glass, landscape / consecutive)
Pigment print on paper
Diptych: 168 × 110 cm (66 1/8 × 43 1/4 in), each
168 × 220 cm (66 1/8 × 86 1/2 in), overall
2019

But there is something else that unifies this work and that doesn't rely on knowing anything about how it was produced. It goes back to the commuters on the trains. In the two diptychs that form a central element of the exhibit, we get the reflection of a dark haired woman sitting in a railway carriage, her eyes closed or just barely open, her head rested slightly back, her face tilted slightly upward in a posture of some longstanding fatigue. Next to her, the thigh of a person who's face we cannot see is visible, a smart phone rested on it, a thumb hovering over its screen. On the flat plane of the image, the woman is faced up and away from the phone. This same figure of a woman and disembodied phone sits at the center of all four images in the series. What changes—in one diptych dramatically, in the other quite subtly—is the light and landscape in which she is subsumed.

As in all of the transit images, despite the apparent subject of travel, these pictures resist narrative. Wherever this journey is headed it seems it has happened before and will happen again, just as it literally recurs in the four pictures. Recurs but changes. Or does it? In fact, what changes is our perception of the same transit. In one diptych, an image of a passing body of water in which a tower is reflected is paired with another, in which night seems to have fallen and the only evidence of water is a golden smattering of light from some unknowable source above. In the second pair, the heavily dappled light of sun through trees so dominates the first image that we don't see the reflected figure, at first, but instead an almost impressionist wash of black and beige; in the next image, the effect is increased, erasing the figure almost entirely.

It will be obvious to anyone looking at these pictures that what Shmith is inviting here is contemplation not storytelling. But what are we contemplating? A person apparently oblivious to her reflection being caught in the shifting light by which she is almost entirely encompassed and through which we gaze at her. This could be voyeurism, even judgment (the ever present dangers of portraiture): we look at her, at the perceptual complexity of the landscapes she passes through; she sees nothing, remains fixed in the dullness of the commute.

But if we see, rather than just look, if we take up the invitation to reflection these images extend to us, we notice that phenomenologically this isn't how it works. The blurs and smudges of the light, the near abstraction this creates—not a hard abstraction of discrete shapes, but the impressionist dilation of the eye—together these elements place us in a kind of hypnoid state. Our eyes are dilating, but so are our minds. And in this quasi-trance, the barriers between us and the woman on the train begin to fall away, as they do between us and the figures in the other transit images. The woman passes into our consciousness and we pass into hers, into that ever so slightly aching but otherwise blank expression on her upturned face. This consciousness is not one of stories or identities, but, for lack of a better phrase, of our condition in the world. To be terrestrial creatures, forever caught in the specifics of a moment, in the mundane, in the phone screen next to us or the one in our hand. Yet at the same time surrounded by infinities we are always missing, of space and time and visible light. Those regions, to borrow William James' phrase "which we seem rather to be about to perceive than to perceive actually."

If this invitation is accepted, then we sense the pictures becoming a porous membrane. The transit described is not from one place to another but through the surface of the picture and back again. Thus, as in the scale images, what appear to be pictures of the world only turn out to be images of the mind. The mind in the act of reflection. They become, in short, meditations on meditation.

This is the uncanniness of Shmith's work: that the considerable time he devotes to each picture, the considerable concentration and focus, is somehow distilled into the images themselves, layered into the very dynamics of how we view them. His dedication to the sacredness of *some thing*, to what I might call the sacredness of our own contemplative capacity, has created art that offers us the chance to experience that capacity anew. As though his work were literally giving us time. The time to reflect, to focus, to wonder.

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