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VIOLENT CIRCUS

Rachel Wolfson Smith

by Rachel Koper

Recently, I had a studio visit with the Eye's Got It! winner Rachel Wolfson Smith as she prepared for her prized solo show. I have to say, she's nailed it. Her exhibit is titled *Midas*, a reference to myth and humility. I am most interested in her dramatic imagery of contemporary car and motorcycle crashes. Her large format graphite on paper drawings depict scary scenes that could be stills pulled from any number of action films or news reels. Indeed, she has a Steve McQueen poster up in her studio.

Wolfson Smith aims to touch a nerve in the danger zone. In a statement she writes, "The tension between the thrill and fear of driving reminds me of choices we make in life that pull us in different directions. We're often guided by desire, but consequence is our mentor. This conflict appears in the drawings as disorienting races and undiscovered crashes, and we're held there for a moment to meditate on it."

Eye's Got It! is an annual competition created by Jaime Salvador Castillo. It's styled after TV shows like America's Top Model, but for visual artists. Artwork is judged live in three rounds in front of the artists, who compete for a solo show at the esteemed grayDUCK Gallery. Castillo does a great job of rotating area judges and getting artist participation from Austin, San Antonio and South Texas. While it might seem stressful to be scored, filmed and critiqued, the atmosphere is inclusive and supportive. The judges give advice, and there is a runner up show, for the top eight or ten artists, called Group Hug.



Night, graphite and gold leaf on paper, 15"x15", 2016.

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Rachel Wolfson Smith is an automotive enthusiast. She worked hard in Portland to get her "dream car, a BMW". Actualizing this goal proved itself unsatisfying. She sold the car, quit her job, moved to Austin, rededicated herself to her studio practice, and bought a dual sport Yamaha. I asked her if she wiped out on her motorcycle much. She said, "Nope, I've hurt myself on my horse so much more." Not wanting to paint bucking horses and idealize her pastoral upbringing, she has substituted flipping motorbikes for ponies in these dynamic drawings.

I enjoy what I perceive as Wolfson Smith's force of will in this series. The bikes and cars are of the moment, contemporary. Her epic triptych scene, titled *Uccello*, is directly inspired by a giant 1438 triptych painting by Paolo Uccello illustrating *The Battle of San Romano* with the dramatic perspective of battle and the unhorsing of Bernardino della Ciarda, a mercenary. Wolfson Smith's scale is ambitious; her art history knowledge is useful – humorous not crushing. What she does crush is the composition. The rhythms and positive negative space relationships are just fantastic.



Image top and bottom: Monsters (detail), graphite on paper, 120 x 252, 2016

In her rollicking automotive crash scenes, flipping and skidding vehicles create jaunty compositions and pictorial depth. She consistently and elegantly puts drama into the illusions. The drawings contain loose energetic and expressionist abstract mark making that are ridiculously harmonious when viewed from a distance. She loses edges, leaves white next to white, blends dark forms, repeats shapes and incorporates swooping diagonals.

If you read the street signs and drivers' numbers you encounter an irascible personality: a pedestrian sign encourages one to walk into a multi-car accident, a motocross rider is numbered 666, another 911. Interestingly, the helmets and protective gear of the motocross riders gives them a generic anonymity, a veil of sorts. To strip these heavily sponsored and promoted dare devil athletes of their identity and commercial is subversive. They don't read as tributes to dare devil athletes; they read as a continuing and generic chaos. They succeed as battle paintings, although the battle goes unnamed. There is physical exertion—epic jumping, leaping, twisting as well as motorized energy—on honorific display.



Uccello (detail), graphite on paper, 48"x96", 2016

In her work, she creates the feeling of witnessing violence, of being closer to danger than most would prefer. Her stories talk about effort and cavalier attitudes towards personal safety. The improvised works are accessible, like something we recognize—from movies, from the nightly news of area car crashes or from the X Games at COTA. On a personal level, she really likes bikes, working ones. "Motorcycling," she says, "makes me feel a little bit like a spy, anonymous in a helmet, diligent and hyper alert." Perhaps that's winning in her world, riding a bike and not getting taken out.

I asked her if she had met Hollis Hammonds, a local artist who often draws on a large scale. She said yes and then blurted, "My house burned down when I was a kid too!" Say what? Coincidence sure, but both artists express an intimate knowledge of loss and of really knowing that people and safety matter more than objects. Perhaps, a major loss can provide the artistic insight one needs to draw dense and big.

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Wolfson Smith's work is ambitious and additive, one vehicle on top of another. Because sports have winners, I want there to be a clear victor, or in the case of the vehicle pile ups, know which vehicle was at fault first. For Wolfson Smith, the process of drawing is the winner—graphite on paper, rendered delicately with an unflinching vision.

Exhibit on view through August 21 at grayDUCK Gallery in Austin, Texas.