



# MELANIE SMITH

## GREEN IS THE COLOUR



In 1929, Henry Ford built an American suburb deep in the Amazon jungle. Named Fordlandia, the town was the center of a rubber-tree plantation in Brazil that Ford hoped would produce enough rubber to free him from expensive imports from Asia. Like the Michigan-inspired architecture, the town's social program was also regimented to Ford's specifications: residents attended poetry readings, ate hamburgers, played golf, wore shoes, and had a daily work schedule of 9 am to 3 pm, despite the region's relentless daytime heat.

The experiment was a failure.

By 1933, the factory was shuttered and Fordlandia's American inhabitants returned to the United States. Evidence of Ford's effort to Americanize the jungle still lingers, however. The crumbling tire factory and clapboard housing still stand, and many of the town's inhabitants are the descendants of Ford's Brazilian employees.

Melanie Smith takes this experiment as the starting point for *Green is the Colour*, an exhibition of recent paintings and video created after her own visits to Ford's Amazon town. "Fordlandia is an industrial abandoned site and a utopian project where the relationship between nature and industry coincide, and where the tensions between modernity and nature are put into operation," Smith writes. "Seen from the present, Fordlandia appears as a moment of construction of poetic ruins."

The paintings in *Green is the Colour* reflect a relationship between savagery and softness. Smith has used spray paint on board and Plexiglas to give the paintings a sense of immediacy; there is no touch here, no dabbing at or mixing of paint and pigment, and as a result, the edges of the paintings gently recede, as if they were dreams or after-images. This is not a representation of the jungle as much as it is an impression.

There is a consistency to Smith's production, evident in several series of earlier work. For *Orange Lush* (1994-1996), Smith collected orange-colored detritus from the streets of the city, photographed orange signs and kiosks, and painted large orange canvases, creating a multimedia meditation on the color. With all its synthetic garishness, the color orange is ubiquitous in Mexico City. The color became a cipher for the city and a monochromatic tool for studying the megalopolis at a microscopic level. Orange objects, symbols of consumerism culled from the city's trash, created a corporeal portrait of the place, imbued with connotations of fleshy excess.

In 1964, American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman stopped painting—a response to the "lush solution" that the medium offered. Instead, he began mixing paint with liquid plastic, making a type of work that critic Lucy Lippard would later describe as "spiritlessly urban, but not commercial—like a shrimp pink house badly in need of a paint job." Smith's *Orange Lush* functions somewhere between this well-known critique of painting and Nauman's subsequent move to use synthetic, urban materials. It also references the jungle-like nature of urban space: *Lush* connotes dense and vigorous growth, luxuriant foliage, sensory overload, and sumptuous materiality. Smith's work is engaged with the aesthetics of abstraction and painterly practice at the same time that it infers a physical or bodily presence in the unique historical and geographical context of Mexico City, circa 1990s.

### Entropy

In 2002, Smith filmed a helicopter journey over Mexico City. The black and white video, *Spiral City*, records the path of the aircraft as it spirals over the densely gridded urban landscape. The video echoes the land art structure *Spiral Jetty* (and film of the same name), by American artist Robert Smithson. Smithson's *Jetty* is a spiraling strip of land built into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. The salty water of the lake, as it rises and recedes, alternately hides and reveals the massive walkway, which spirals in upon itself. As the water recedes, the salty crystals that coat the path mark natural processes of decay and erosion, something Smithson called "entropy."

Shot in one unedited take, Smith's *Spiral City* reflects the built environment of Mexico City from above. It is also a study in monochrome: as the camera circles over the city, the view of rooftops, streets, and avenues recedes to grey and then white. The video continues Smith's fascination with abstraction and color, even as it surveys the contours of the urban landscape.

## Structures of Surrealism

Smith's 2010 video *Xilitla: Dismantled 1*, shown at the 2011 Venice Biennale, is a refraction of scenes from a pleasure garden in Xilitla, Mexico. Begun in the 1940s and constructed over a period of 20 years by English poet and artist Edward James, the 30-acre garden is filled with cement structures and 36 Surrealist-inspired sculptures, now overrun by dense growth. James, a major patron of the Surrealist movement, was fascinated with the process of entropy in the jungle, and he specified that the sculptures not be rebuilt, but that the jungle be allowed to subsume them.

In *Xilitla: Dismantled 1*, shot in 35mm film, Smith turns the "exotic"-ness of the landscape into a screen, reflecting back the viewer's gaze. The film's rhythmic pace, its disorienting rotation (it is a vertical projection, unlike the standard horizontality of most film), and its sensual exoticism suggest Surrealist filmic precedents—Maya Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), for example, or the non-narrative films of Stan Brakhage, including his lyrical *Dog Star Man* (1962).

James's Surrealist "Xanadu" draws from a centuries-old European tradition of constructing landscape gardens filled with structures that mimic those of ancient and international civilizations. The structures, ranging from classical temples to Egyptian pyramids and Chinese pagodas, were replicated loosely in gardens across Europe. Within the gardens, they marked a landscape vista, and they served as sites for romantic *rendezvous* and parties. In the 1950s (just as James was building Las Pozas), André Breton's group of Surrealist friends gathered often at the Desert de Retz, one such garden just outside Paris. They were enchanted by the overgrown 18th-century estate, marked by a giant broken column, an obelisk, a temple dedicated to Pan, and a lover's grotto. For the Surrealists (as for James), such fantasy gardens acted as potent symbols of the tension between human constructs (mental and architectural) and natural forces.

## Green is the Colour

The feeling of being in the jungle is pressing and urgent, perhaps not too dissimilar to the feeling of being in an incomprehensibly massive urban place, such as Mexico City. The jungle and the metropolis are both sites where modernity has been implemented by outsiders, where modernity has crashed haphazardly into the specificity of a dense, reluctant, complicated, and beautiful place.

"Green is green colonial," Smith says. In her *Fordlandia* and *Selva* paintings, Smith uses the color green to find relationships between abstraction and reality, between urban and jungle entropy. Rather than looking backward with melancholy, she presents the location of colonization (in this case, the Amazon) as part of a broader implementation of modernization. There are not two modernities, she argues; there is not a successful Modernism in the West and a failed one outside the West. These places are, instead, part of the same project. Smith is naturally attracted to places marked by pockets of heterotopia and unexpected sites of modernity: the town of Fordlandia is a perfect example. *Tapiz I* (2012) takes a Regency wallpaper pattern for its imagery: "the colonial becomes the jungle," Smith says.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig describes how 19th century European explorers experienced the Amazon's oppressive force: "Emptiness and absence become assailing presences. The nebulous becomes corporeal and tangible. [There is] something vague, a miasmic subspecies of terror, the pressing in of somethingness in the nothingness."<sup>1</sup> Smith's video *The Colour Green* (2014) makes visible a relationship between the color and this feeling. The two-and-a-half minute-long silent film flashes flat screens of different tonal ranges of green, intercut with images of dense plant growth, mosquitos, a sandaled foot, a jaguar: all suggesting the myriad things that impeded colonialism. Smith takes these micro and macro images—pulling first in to details of the Amazon, and then moving quickly out to larger views—to make her own surrealist project, a psychological portrait of a place and a history.

Consistent with her earlier series, the works in *Green is the Colour* are heterogeneous in media, and directly engaged with the legacies of the past. In art, this means that she looks to Surrealism, abstraction, and ideas of the Modernist avant-garde. But this also means that she complicates the backdrop for historical Modernism, looking closely at the places where such ideas come into conflict with local realities. "Slippage, grey areas and circulation are all important to me," she writes. "It's less about periphery and more about alterity." Fragmentation, ambiguity, unfamiliarity: these are the spaces of Amazonian dreams. These are also the constellations of Modernism.

- Laura A. L. Wellen

<sup>1</sup> Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 77-78.



Born in Poole, England, **MELANIE SMITH** received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Reading, where she studied painting. In 1989, she moved to Mexico City, joining an international community of artists and writers. Since then, the city has played an important role in her work; she has produced installations, videos, films, photographs, and paintings in which she considers Mexico City's density of population and structures, its production of detritus, and its endless entropy and reconstruction. These concerns are balanced by Smith's interest in the legacies of modernism and post-avant-garde movements as they manifest themselves in Latin America.

She has had numerous solo exhibitions, including: *Red Square Impossible Pink*, Venice Biennale (2011); *Bulto*, Museo de Arte de Lima (2011); *Xilitla, El Eco*, Mexico City (2010); *Spiral City and Other Vicarious Pleasures*, MIT List, Cambridge (2009) and Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Artes, MUCA Campus, Mexico City (2006); *Parres Trilogy*, Miami Art Museum (2008) and Tate Britain, London (2006); *Dream Spots: Taxqueña Bus Station*, Sala Díaz, San Antonio (1996); and *Melanie Smith and Francis Alijs*, L'Escaut, Brussels, Belgium (1992), among others. She will have a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in March 2014.

Smith's work has also been shown in numerous international exhibitions, including: *México: Inside Out*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (2013); *The Smithsonian Effect*, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City (2011); *Espectrografías: paradojas de la historia*, MUAC, Mexico City (2010); *Changing the Focus: Latin American Photography, 1990-2005*, Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach (2010); *The Twentieth Century: How it looked and how it felt*, Tate Liverpool (2009); *Global Cities*, Tate Modern, London (2007); *La era de la discrepancia*, MUAC, Mexico City (2007); *Constructing a Poetic Universe*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2007); *Eco: arte mexicano contemporáneo*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2005); *Sodio y asfalto: arte británico contemporáneo en México*, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2004); *Made in Mexico*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2004); *Mexico City: An exhibition about the exchange rates of bodies and values*, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2002); among many others.

Her work is in collections including: ARCO Foundation Collection, Madrid; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela; CIFO Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami; Colección Isabel y Agustín Coppel, Mexico City; Daros Latinamerica, Zürich; La Colección Jumex, Ecatepec de Morelos, Mexico; Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg; Zabłudowicz Collection, London.

Front cover image: Melanie Smith, *Selva V*, 2013 (detail).

February 27 - April 19, 2014  
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