

An Interview with
Lisa Smithey

.....

Bayou Banana

LISA SMITHEY | BAYOU BANANA

Rosanna Mclaughlin: Perhaps you could begin by telling us a little about what draws you to the humble banana.

Lisa Smithey: My interest comes from that feeling of walking down the street and seeing a bunch of bananas hanging off a hook above a fruit and veg stall. They are a sexy fruit; they've got a great look. Along with the pineapple the banana has one of the best looks. You just need an outline to know what it is.

RM: You seem to be drawn to tropical forms in this exhibition. As well as the banana, in the painting *Hothouse* you've used a hair braid to make an impression on the canvas. You told us before that these hair extensions came from a beauty shop in Peckham.

LS: My initial experience of hair extensions wasn't from a beauty store in Rye Lane. I experienced them first when I was 22 and working in LA with hairstylists. They used to make me hold them while they brushed them out. It wasn't until years later that I began

to notice them again. Bananas, too, I never thought were tropical when I was growing up. When I was little, my dad used to make banana and mayonnaise sandwiches. My dad's from Alabama, and that's just something that people ate. I still hate mayonnaise. I don't think I'm working out my repulsion of the banana mayonnaise sandwich in this painting...

RM: Ah, the tortured artist!

LS: But I have experienced and engaged with all the things I use in a personal way. It's not about my father's past, but I did begin a relationship with bananas this way. I feel like I'm becoming friends with them again.

Melissa Hobbs: The motifs that you use in your work seem to open up a space for the viewer to inhabit. The braid that you use in *Hothouse*, for example, is suggestive of a body. And in the work *s ~ s ~ s ~ s ~ s*, where you use packaging material, it feels like there is a layer of polystyrene essences that acts as an invitation to discover what is behind that layer, to find out what's inside that is being

protected and packaged. Is opening up the work to the viewer in this way something that you try to do?

LS: I want to convey something physical about these objects, rather than symbolic. I think I like the idea of these works being more about the way things are used. I choose objects because I am drawn to a physical characteristic of a material, to something that reminds me of the way the object should or has been used in the past. They are things that I have come into contact with; they are tied to real interactions.

RM: A lot of the paintings in the show begin with an object, but it seems that the closer you get to a figurative referent - often literally pressing it up against the canvas - the more you are liberated from making representational work. And as the representational element of your work has receded, it has become somehow more bodily. It strikes me that the presence of your work is becoming more and more similar to your own presence.

LS: In response to the work becoming more

bodily, I think this may be occurring through my attempts to approximate the sensations produced by my own interactions with the world. This body of work is producing a closer approximation of my own presence than previous work because it is a more immediate representation of my own experience. I imagine that most painters reveal something of themselves, or something they wish the outside world to associate with themselves, within their work. But painting also has a heavily ingrained tradition that each painter must acknowledge. My comfort with stamping a neon-tinted green oil paint onto rabbit-skin sized and oil primed linen probably reveals quite a bit about the way I approach that history and tradition.

MH: Could you say a little bit more about your approach to the history and tradition of painting? Are you confronting the history of the medium with neon paint, or using that history as another layer in the work?

LS: The latter, and I hope it comes across that way. I have a lot of respect for the traditions of painting - I'm not in the business of

reacting against them aggressively. But while being respectful of that history, I'm also coming to terms with the idea that it's acceptable to set that history aside, for example by applying paints and colours to a work by physically stamping an object on to the canvas.

RM: A part of your practice seems bound up in making or finding the right tools with which to paint or make impressions. I'm interested in when you might choose to use a brush, and when you might choose to print with an object.

LS: The tradition of painting has only supplied me with certain tools but they are not necessarily always the best tools to employ. I highly value directness and an economy of mark making, and sometimes the best way to make a mark is to actually take the thing I'm depicting itself and use it as a mark making tool. I may use something I alter very little or I may make a very labour intensive mould and then a cast, but the resulting paint mark usually happens very quickly.

LISA SMITHEY | BAYOU BANANA

I engage most directly with work where I feel there is a lack of control tempered by intent. This is something that I look for in the work of any painter from Piero della Francesca all the way up to, say, Daniel Sinsel. Instead of just being given an image I need a way in, which comes from imagining the way a mark or gesture has been made. The whole painting doesn't need to be made that way, it can just be a moment.

RM: Your paintings seem to stand alone, but also to act as pieces of a mosaic made up of your wider practice. Are the spaces and tensions between your paintings as important to you as the interior dynamic of an individual work?

LS: I spend a lot of time contemplating those tensions and spaces. It's impossible not to consider them, or experience a physical change in the way the space feels and how the works sit when one is near or far from another. It is not so much the physical space between things that is pertinent as it is the relationships that develop between them. Even one painting in an otherwise empty room

LISA SMITHEY | BAYOU BANANA

exudes a certain kind of power. With this show I was intrigued by the challenge of considering the dynamics between the artworks themselves, as well as between the objects and spaces in which we live. Our daily lives rarely take place within four plain bright white walls.

This interview was conducted in September 2012 to accompany Lisa Smithey's exhibition *Bayou Banana* at Hobbs Mclaughlin 21st September - October 13th 2012.

Hobbs Mclaughlin
Flat 55 Balfron Tower
St Leonard's Road
London
E14 0QS

www.hobbsmclaughlin.com
info@hobbsmclaughlin.com