

A mark signifies its own occurrence, as well as the content it carries.

It may be
immediate and
inscriptive,
or
extrapolative and
expressive.

Sometimes, a mark will bely an economy of precision, and at others it will engender excess; the point at which something gathered and accumulated, and began to overflow.

The mark can speak, in short, to both abundance and reduction,
to what is instantaneous and what is durational,
to what will expire, and to
what will endure.

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Often, the determining sensibility of Bren Smyth's works is *saturate*: the pieces are heavy with charcoal, gesso, chalk and whiting.

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down by their materials, their palpable density evoking the atmospheric pressure a body bears as it makes its way around corners and through streets.

A sensate body negotiating public spaces underpins the show; a body that looks long at architecture and its angles so that their forms begin to oscillate and rupture. Later, after obscuring an initial drawing with primer and whiting, Smyth will pull out these oscillations with her hands, retrieving hard lines and soft sweeps from the erasure. The pitched roof of a church, the furled growth of a Corinthian column; these are shapes intended to occupy our psychology in a particular way, and Smyth's partial apparitions pitch themselves against the impressions such structures intend to make, asking *at what other levels do they function?*

Sue Rainsford, 30th July 2018

This inquiry produces a keen sense of excavation, a sense underscored by the layers of matter beneath the final image; the original drawing and the whiting and gesso that Smyth works with while they are still in temperamental flux. There is a tremor of panic here, an awareness of the fracture of time it takes for the materials to spoil. The close, quick gestures this process calls for endures in the works' sensibility: in front of us, the images seem to tighten and unfurl as though they are trying to disappear what they have revealed, to swallow and forget their own content. This kinetic quality is enhanced by the paper's warping; rivulets rush toward the centre of the image and suggest further change might take hold, that the gesture is not yet complete and its ramifications may continue unfolding.

In this way, Smyth's process owes as much to accident as it does to drawing, working with the reactive qualities of the charcoal as it lands on the erasure. The resulting textures often so overwhelm the drawings that they seem atmospheric events in and of themselves: rich with soot and smoke, they sometimes call to 'drown' and 'drench', and at others summon a more diffusive tenor, one evocative of mist.

This is part of the pleasure of these pieces; the entangled material narratives the eye can track inside them.

a line trembles under the weight of a building that,
having achieved a precarious balance,
tries to halt itself from slipping
downward, back into its
own foundations

a cloud-like, self-replenishing density
that has rendered the paper sodden
and teeming compresses
and convulses

a shifting opacity, of the kind brought
about by vapour, conceals
an architrave's
moulding
from
view

patches of soft black
feel rich in substrate,
evoking depth
and spillage

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These works take place in an in-between space: on one side is what we ascertain from 'document' and 'record', and on the other what we intuit from somatic, sensory impressions. These sensations may engorge or diminish when brought to the page, but regardless they feel not only indelible, but *irrevocable*. These series of marks cannot be undone, and their rendering has cost something – as it costs us something, to look at them now. In her novel *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk writes of passing through cities and stillness versus motion, of the look of a landscape when sighted from a plane in flight. Of cross sections, she writes

Each slice is a part of the whole, but it's governed
by its own rules. The three-dimensional order, reduced
and imprisoned in a two-dimensional layer,
seems abstract. You might even think that
there was no whole, that there never had been.

These lines readily adhere to Smyth's work, detailing as they do the perceptive discoveries that prolonged, off-kilter observations can lead to. The gestural marks she makes are then both immediate and emphatically present, but also deeply prescient. There is a discerning quality to their chaos, one that feels selective and investigative: what happens when the premise of our gaze shifts, and we begin seeing the parts we're not meant to see? What happens when we look *through* a solid structure?

This is what Smyth's works ask of themselves. Of their viewer, they ask us to estrange ourselves, and suffer the loss of what we thought was the whole.