

mother's annual 2016

### **Matt Sheridan Smith *Pilot Fig.3 Ep.1***

February - April

*A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.* So goes Carl Andre's famous aphorism, and a 1968 essay of the same name by Robert Smithson, on the ostensibly tedious topic of geological excavation<sup>i</sup>. As is probably well known at this stage, both Andre and Smithson claim the hole, and the creation of holes, in rather more capacious terms than simple subtraction. Instead, the hole is articulated in a positive sense, broadening its definition as something no less thingly by dint of the deductive processes that give rise to it. In fact, the thing - or in this case, the sculpture - should be treated in similar terms: as a fissure in the surrounding environment, a disruption or even a 'cut' in space<sup>ii</sup>. By such an understanding, the relationship of hole to thing is no longer a binary one, but rather one of two characters coexistent on an entropic plane of emergence, the one at each point liable to collapse into the other. Materiality or positivity is granted by a particular confluence of negativity, with the inverse being no less true.

A hole, then, functions as a particular means of punctuation; a spatial *punctum*, or what Barthes described as: '*sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice*'.<sup>iii</sup> And, if I extend such a thought to language, then its holes - its slippages and digressions - in fact create meaning, forming it in relief, as one flatters negative space in sculpture. The flip-side to this is that meaning per se, too, only takes place as it emerges as a cut or fissure: as meaning in relief. Matt Sheridan Smith is cognisant of this conundrum, as these self-same holes - simultaneously real and metaphoric, lack and portal - recur throughout *Pilot Fig. 3 Ep. 1*, his second solo exhibition at mother's tankstation. Some are yawning, brute hellmouths, like the first painting the viewer sees, *Figure (hole)*<sup>iv</sup>; others are understated, tangible in the polka dot pattern, itself a mesh of holes, that reverberates throughout the *Pattern portrait (pilot)* canvasses of the main exhibition space.

More broadly speaking, though, it is semantic and mnemonic holes that permeate the exhibition's narrative, which adheres to a nominal delineation of portraiture (*a portrait is a hole in a portrait it is not, if you like*). This portraiture, like much of Sheridan Smith's recent work, is centred on four distinct but porous tropes - the pilot, the widow, the cyclist, and the unknown young woman. Like north, south, east, and west, each pulls in, or alludes to, a specific direction<sup>v</sup>. In hinting at these four diffuse characters - though I hesitate in terming them that - they intrude into his work, and hang - almost olfactory - like subtle, atmospheric shifts. Their individual presences are conditional on their status as lack, as holes, inasmuch as their respective beings only inhere in their interaction with what is left out. Absence, here, is a condition of presence.

In this act, though, it is the pilot that takes centre stage: the pilot in question being roughly approximated by a Mr. Douglas Bader (1910-1982) - dare-devil, double-amputee RAF pilot renowned for his (somewhat unlikely) exploits in World War II. His ghost saturates the exhibition's narrative; a wan and polka dot silk scarf, Bader's sartorial proxy, hangs on one wall, its motif extended throughout the surrounding canvasses; his profile, although overlaid and distorted, hangs on another wall (*Double expiration portrait (fighter pilot)*), and a crude piece of neon industrial signage with the initials 'DB' sits propped, decommissioned and forlorn, one letter overlaid against the other, so their *characters* visually intertwine (*D over B*). At other moments, certain incidents from his life are given creative, material form. But at no time does the exhibition ever approach what could be called a traditional portrait, instead always asking more questions than it answers. Sheridan Smith casts meaning in relief, through a hypostatisation of gaps, slippages, and holes: his characterisation is one only loosely defined by the term, whereby elements of note assume centrality, themselves the results of a series of subjective decisions. Here, instead, is an almost limbless conceptualisation of personhood, or like shards of a plane's wing, the cup that shatters: digressions of a person, cumulatively producing something strangely more than the sum of their parts. Founded in ambiguity and the non-Euclidean play of representation, the exhibition works to give meaning itself the slip. And yet, somehow, we're ushered back towards it.

Some of the generative holes here are less apparent, like the barely-there - and barely noticeable - work, *Cream or plain*. A diminutive cup and saucer, cast in a pearly-white porcelain, it is very nearly camouflaged atop the alcove where it sits above head-height. It has a singular resonance from Bader's life: namely, as a prop as he courted his wife, Thelma, when she worked at a tea house close to the infirmary where Bader recuperated after his crash. The phrase "*cream or plain?*" would be used so as to

deal with the ease that came unstuck from their conversation, and when broaching awkward subjects, his disability and frequent self-endangerment in particular. It is quite literally an object only granted form through a hole: namely, a hole or ineptitude in language, symptomatic of the hushed and fumbled attempts to grapple with the ineluctable fact of Bader's mortality. From all accounts, though, such sensitivity was rather more everyone else's problem: the crash was the result of a dare gone terribly awry; his first thoughts on surveying his injury: "*Damn! I won't be able to play rugger [sic] on Saturday.*"<sup>vi</sup> If anything, Bader demonstrated a somewhat feckless death wish, a trait which he would later attract consternation for, as RAF Wing Commander.

Portraying such a famous and quixotic character as Bader is invariably a process of selection and erasure. It is unified, and given form, through misstep. In her now seminal essay on the work of David Salle, "Forty-One False Starts,"<sup>vii</sup> Janet Malcolm does just that, clearing her throat some forty-one times, at once presenting the reader with writing *per se*, warts and all, and also making the slipperiness of Salle's paintings painfully tangible: there, where '*nothing adds up, nothing goes anywhere, everything stops and peters out*'.<sup>viii</sup> And whilst not actually saying so - show, not tell - Malcolm's essay in fact performs Salle's (personal and artistic) mercurial quiddities, alongside the inexorable, lived problem of textual encapsulation more generally. Its forty-one accounts of those fumbling, writerly first steps - all too familiar - somehow create a vivid idea of Salle's work by merit of what they unavoidably *leave out*. What's constructive here, really, are these absences and digressions, and the incessant tracking of Malcolm's failure. The holes and gaps in meaning are in fact where meaning is produced.

In much the same way that Malcolm's essay performs the problem of writing about art, *Pilot Fig. 3 Ep. 1* performs the difficulty of portraiture. Notwithstanding the fact of the artist's inevitable estrangement from its subject, Bader - having never met him, and only being alive at the same time as him for two short years<sup>ix</sup> - the portrait itself is performed as an unstable and capricious proposition: as much informed by omission and belatedly-imposed selection, than organic emergence. After the fact, all that is left are fragments and pass-me-down anecdotes (of which there are many). Here, it seems more constructive to atomise the portrait, peeling its skeins back to breaking point and in so doing revealing the productive gaps that form it in relief, rendering the person both newly perceptible and animate.

Returning to our pilot, who had been an exceedingly zealous sports-player from his school days, excelling in rugby and boxing in particular. After the fateful crash of 1931 though, golf superseded rugby, it being a more realistic pursuit for a man with "tin legs". In golf, a *mulligan* is a supplementary shot permitted to a player after a particularly bad one: a rare, compassionate gesture within an otherwise inflexible game. In one work here, *A mulligan, perhaps*, a somewhat meagre length of partially crumpled lawn - a poor man's putting green - is stretched across the gallery floor. A small but elegant, bush-like plant sits on one of its longer edges. In front of the shrub, a pair of small silver forms, not immediately discernible as anything, rest on the green. The work's purported randomness, though, is belied by its details: the plant in question is a laurel, a somewhat poisonous, kissing-cousin of the *bay* herb, and insignia of the RAF bomber control; the diminutive pair of objects, on further inspection, are chrome-plated scones. In the latter, an anecdote from the artist's life mingles with Bader's: the aforementioned 'cream or plain' overlapping with Sheridan's Smith's master-engraver/plater uncle, who - demonstrating a similar bellicosity to Bader's - once claimed to be able to plate *anything*. These two anecdotes then coalesce into a particularly tenacious idea of a person, of resolute one-upmanship, stakes notwithstanding. After all, if this is a golf course, it is pathetically small terrain; its egalitarianism, furthermore, countered by the sharp folds that disrupt its horizontality.

Any idea of progress or familiarity with the eponymous pilot is countered at each and every turn, with this thwarted sense of narrative hanging heavy in the series of eight dot paintings within the exhibition. One - *Figure (hole)* - hangs in the darker front atrium space, with seven others hanging over two walls in the main room (the *Pattern portrait (pilot)* series). Materially and compositionally, they share a specific vocabulary: a subtle stone-grey grid overlaid with small and imperfect circular markings. Gunmetal grey, their facades are part armour - almost like that of a bullet-ridden aircraft - part whimsy, polka dots. Each one seems to work from an identical source material, separately functioning like fragments of something, something larger - or, smaller - and yet unshown. Indeed, it's this confusion of scale that seems more pertinent here: no traction seems attainable on the image's totality, the image becoming more abstract even as it gets nearer. The whole/hole remains outside of the viewer's grasp. In much the same way that looking at a person's DNA code can't tell us what they smell like, or how they talk, here approaching the code - rather than making clear - only serves to further obscure.

Indeed drawing closer to Bader, as we should through two nominal portraits here - *Double expiration portrait (fighter pilot)*, and *D.B.* - is more a question of one step forward, and two steps back. In the

former, a youthful and handsome Bader in profile is repeated twice - not unlike like the stacked neon letters - a smaller black and white image is overlaid by a larger version of the same, screenprinted on Plexi in deep washes of turquoise. One likeness obscures the other, coming to resemble a kind of pictorial Russian doll, always collapsing back in on itself. To the right of this work, a further complication - the silk polka dot scarf (2011) and worn (twice) in the framed portrait - hangs directly on the wall. In *D.B.*, the pilot's initials are recreated in signage, now unplugged. It's hard to think of them without imagining their prior animation: instead, what we have here is the afterlife of the object, of a person. Pared back to 'pilot,' Bader becomes a cipher, a ghost in Sheridan Smith's machine.<sup>x</sup>

The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy is the natural tendency of the world: the whole invariably splinters into its constituent parts, and order is superseded by disorder. In *Pilot Fig. 3 Ep. 1*, it seems that this process is sped up and presented in microcosm: meaning unfurls and comes unstuck, revealing the at-all-times precarious balancing act on which it is founded. It is as much a question of chance, being arbitrary - so too with the person - and what endures of both is a question of what is done with it, how we buffer holes. Holes are not only absences, though, but modes of entry, productive bridging devices prompting new narratives and trains of association. It is both towards, and in flight from, these points of entry, that Bader's subjectivity is constructed.

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<sup>i</sup> Jack Flam, ed. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996) pp. 95-97

<sup>ii</sup> Carl Andre in David Bourdon. "The Razed Sites of Carl Andre: A Sculptor Laid Low by the Brancusi Syndrome". *Artforum*, October 1966, p. 15.

<sup>iii</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000) p. 27

<sup>iv</sup> From henceforth all works dated 2016, unless stated.

<sup>v</sup> Matt Sheridan Smith. "You Can't See Any Such Thing". *Triple Canopy*, May 14 2015,

<https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/you-cant-see-any-such-thing>. Accessed 19 April 2016

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Brickhill *Reach For the Sky: The Story of Douglas Bader* (London: The Companion Book Club, 1955) 44

<sup>vii</sup> Janet Malcolm. "Forty-One False Starts". *The New Yorker*, July 11, 1994, pp. 50-68

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, 56

<sup>ix</sup> Bader died in 1982.

<sup>x</sup> Italo Calvino. "Cybernetics and Ghosts" in *The Uses of Literature* (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1987) pp. 3-27