

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

ARTFORUM

Molly Smith, Kate Werble Gallery

By Michael Wilson

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Molly Smith

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While the claim to have merged art and life is a perennial and universal cliché, it rarely holds water, functioning more often as a highfalutin excuse for doing nothing much. But when a change in an artist's practical circumstances—whether planned or accidental—forces her creative practice and day-to-day routine into closer-than-usual proximity, the results can prove serendipitously engaging. On the evidence of Molly Smith's recent exhibition "Hours," this holds true in the relocation of the artist and her partner to rural western Massachusetts in the spring of 2013. The move left Smith without a studio while the couple dismantled an extant house and used local natural materials to build their own. And though the fact that they had thirty-one acres to play with doesn't exactly suggest hardship, the disruption of their established routines is easy to imagine.

The centerpiece of the show was *Seasoned*, 2015, a rough wooden ziggurat into which 365 tiny watercolor and mixed-media paintings on paper have been slotted like postcards into a store display stand. Produced at the rate of one a day, these avowedly modest but periodically affecting images document the artist's first year on her new property. Mostly figurative, they range from depictions of the surrounding flora and fauna to fragments of figures and interior scenes. Shown flush against one another or slightly overlapping, they bring disparate moments into intimate contact: A small feather tickles a crooked finger; the swooping lines of a set of overhead cables echo those of distant mountains; a starry sky glimpsed through a forest canopy sits next to a pair of burning candles.

Undeniably charming in toto, *Seasoned* walks a fine line between quiet and slight; considered in isolation, an uncomfortable proportion of these images feel phoned in. Fortunately, the other works in "Hours," while similarly unassuming—found objects play a major role—achieve a more substantive air (judicious placement in the gallery helped). So, 2015, for example, is made from tea-stained muslin and silk, the fabric fragments sewn together into a soft, irregular burst. *Waste*, 2014,

is more downbeat still, a small, crumpled pad of dark paper pulp and rusty metal wire. And *Not Just*, 2015, appears to be a kind of found painting, in which a piece of raw canvas has been smeared with plant dyes and hung on a stick.

In the gallery's back room, Smith's immersion in the organic and the fleeting, and in the fusion of natural and engineered materials and processes, remained evident in such works as *Shock*, 2015, a jagged branch with a hank of black-tinted hair sprouting from it as if left behind by a fleeing animal, and *Veil*, 2015, a colorless sheet of fabric with the disconcerting look of a bloodied bedsheet (it turns out to have been splotted with beet juice). There's a slight *Blair Witch* feel to such works that, even if unintentional, nicely balances the project's sweeter aspects. So while several objects here seemed well on the path to decomposition, not to mention the number of rough edges that were on display, "Hours" benefited nonetheless from the added undertone of creepiness—or at least of the portentous. Smith is by now presumably established in a pleasant, newly built home, but let's hope she doesn't now lock her door to the country's darker side.

—Michael Wilson



Molly Smith,
Seasoned, 2015,
watercolor, ink,
and mixed media
on paper, wood,
12' x 12' x 1' 8".

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