

GUY RICHARDS SMIT  
GUILTY OF EVERYTHING





*Toilet Girl*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 inches

In their 9 x 12-foot scale, Guy Richards Smit's new paintings—humbly and preposterously—evoke the epic magnitude of old historical masterworks. But unlike those works, they do not depict historical, mythological, or biblical moments. Nor do they illustrate a detailed consideration of everyday life, bustling with characters and situations. Their preference is a defter rendition of base emotional states—shame, guilt, pride, anxiety, contempt—realized in broad, lush painterly strokes. They are gorgeous works depicting low emotional gullies with a wry observational touch. They appear to rest upon shallow punchlines while simultaneously transmitting lingering emotional depths.

Consider how rapturously they are painted. Smit's rich use of color and fast, gestural hand plays out beautifully across a wide expanse—the turbulent green on a toilet stall, the lush dark ground beneath his knight and horse, or the staccato crackle of a burning bridge surrounded by darkest night and reflected in the water below. Even in his small watercolors, the cross-stitched shadows or dashes of color are keen examples of his considered rendering. There is plenty of space within Smit's work to simply relish how they are painted, a confident hand resolving anxious spaces.

There is also a deceptive simplicity to Smit's depiction of his characters. He takes very few marks to render a face but manages a depth of complexity to expressions. His girl leaning against a toilet stall is so simply rendered yet still has a complex expression that reads as longing mixed with apathy and indifference. This ambiguity is heightened by the twisted clasping of her hands into an emotionally uncertain state. If the painting were not strange enough—and it *is*, girl watching boy at urinal—Smit has the ability to twist the tableau into a more curious and uncertain moment. Is it love, is it shame, is it some blend of the two?

Even more intensely, his doctor consulting with an unidentified woman is a full-on masculine creep. Gently pointing to a prescription, the unshaven face, smarmy grin and beady eyes are sufficient to layer the entire scene with an unsettling aura. And, as simple as his scenes are, Smit makes the most of the details he does include—the tawdry-seeming diploma on the wall and the ominous list of symptoms beneath the woman's elbow complete the disturbing nature of the consultation. All set against a forebodingly grey background. At the scale Smit has painted the scene, the disquiet of the scene is inescapable.

A similar approach can be seen in *Arrested*, where small details again play into the larger sense of an anxious *mis en scene*—the handcuffed hands, the slight paunch, the forlorn three-quarter expression, the ominous black uniforms of the officers, and the section of open police vehicle all play into the dourness of the scene. Set against lush greenery, it seems even more miserable. Smit applies no judgement to the scene, but he is keenly observant of the pathos of the moment—earned or not, moments of dejection and failure are absolute.

Within these pathetic, anxious scenes, it's interesting to note how frequently Smit does not entirely reveal characters to us. We are often looking at their backs, with perhaps a slight reveal of a face. It's almost like everyone has something to hide, everyone is guilty of something, everyone is complicit in this game of shame and failure and denial. In one large painting and several small watercolors, a woman lies in bed with her back to us—is it a portrait of loving adoration, uninvited male gaze, or is it a woman hiding her shame and guilt? The image functions effectively in any of these directions.

Occasionally, the artist depicts himself within his work in a manner wry and self-deprecating. Patiently digging one's own grave turns a figure of speech into an iconic gesture that could stand in for everything one does in life. It could stand in for just living one's life. It's an image that contains the toil and effort of living as well as the existential punchline that is often acutely felt. Less humorous than comi-tragic, it's unclear whether this condition is bestowed upon unfairly by outside forces or earned by a lifetime of bad choices. Philosophically, Smit keeps things ambiguous.

In another large work, Smit paints himself as a dandified knight astride a handsome horse in a romantic landscape, declaring, "I don't want all my power. You can have some." It might be a generous sentiment but it only involves giving up some power. Which is not necessarily the same as sharing power. The knight's expression is flat and unconvincing, making him appear slightly insincere. It's as though Smit were painting *Preentious Self-Confidence Trying To Be Generous*. There's a bit of earnestness within the preening self-image and this minor effort to be big-hearted is endearing. Like a liar you want to believe because they're trying their best.

If the pathos of it all were not already eminently apparent, Smit's *Mountain of Skulls* brings home the anguish bacon. An ongoing series, it pits various renditions of skulls against singular words and short, pithy phrases. When Smit first began the series, it may have seemed a clever one-liner series of gags but as he has added dozens and dozens of skulls to the series in a seemingly unending torrent, it has taken on another aspect. If you paint a few of these, it comes across as a self-deprecating expression of the artist himself. When you continue painting them with no end in sight, suddenly there are enough skulls for everyone. Enough desultory conditions for everyone. We are all in the same pathetic, mortal boat.

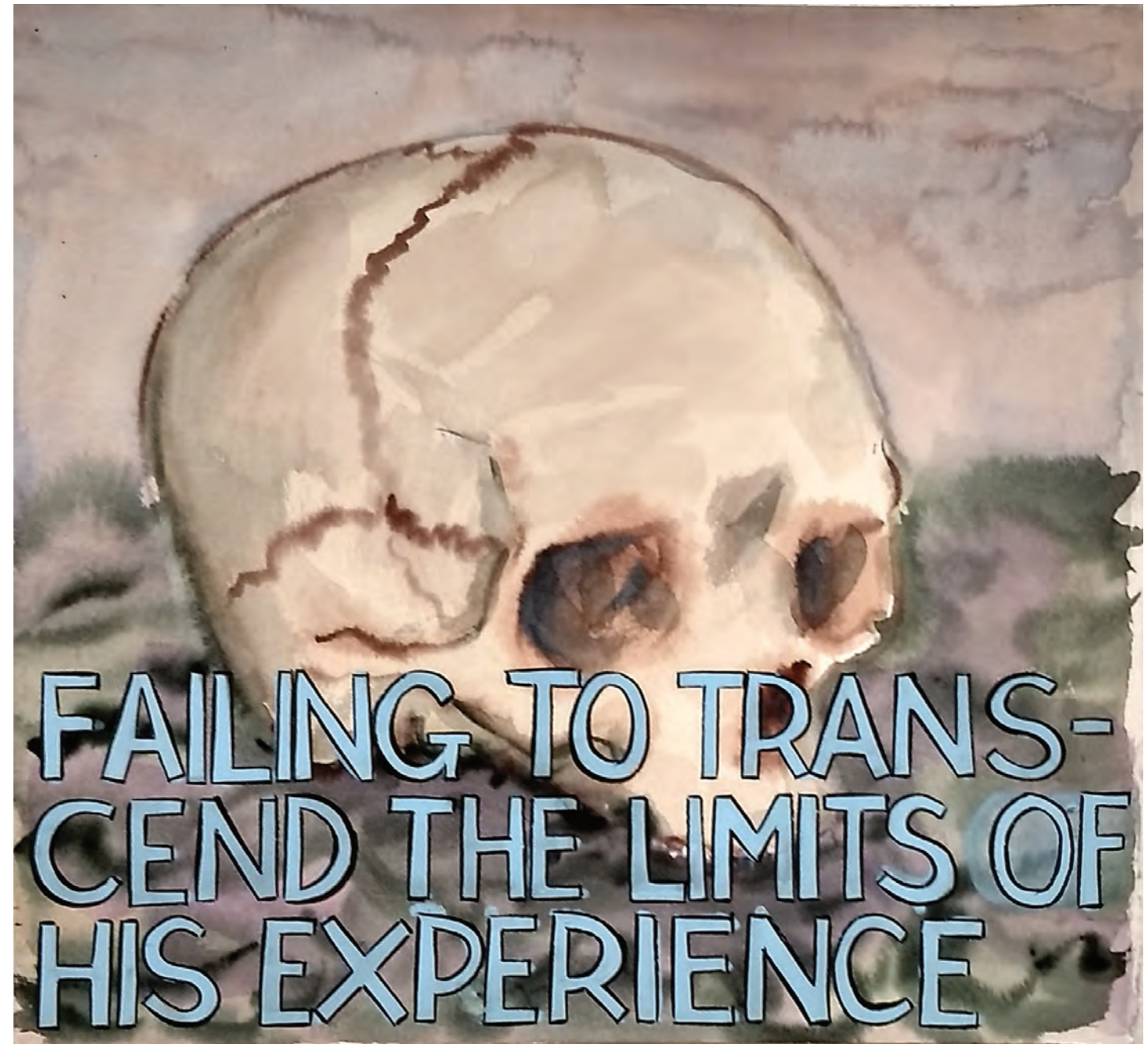
In this context of shared guilt, Smit's imaginary New York Times front pages are not merely a quixotic fever dream for anxious progressives. One headline reads, "Everyone is Pointing. And Laughing. Pointing and laughing." On the surface, it is referring to a particular politician because even the President of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked. More deeply, this is the fear embedded within us all—that everyone is pointing and laughing. Another headline reads, "Anxious Nation Awakens To An Expectant Dawn" which has clear political intonations. At the same time, that phrase could describe most of us every day. So even Smit's explicit satire is tied to a deeper, more communal resonance.

Are we all guilty of everything? If so, is there a redemptive space that remains or are we merely fallible and hopeless? Smit leaves these questions ambiguous and the uncertain moral compass wafting through these works is meant to leave open a space of possibility. None of the shame, failure, or anxiety he depicts throughout the works are sufficient to consume us. His very manner of depicting these desultory emotions to us is enough to undercut or complicate their message. Even a bridge emphatically burning—a spiteful, vengeful metaphor for decimating the past—is a lush, beautiful thing.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator



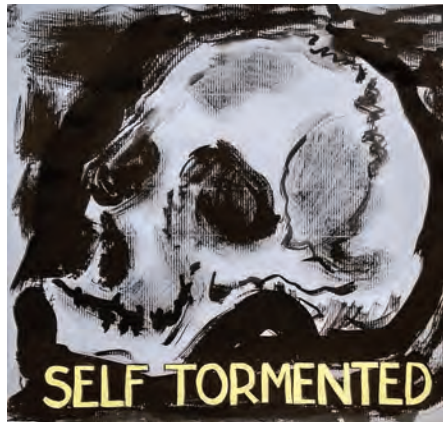
*Consultation*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 inches



from *Mountain of Skulls*, 2015—, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 16 inches



*I Don't Want All My Power*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 inches



from *Mountain of Skulls*, 2015—, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 16 inches each



*Arrested*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 inches



New York Times: November 7, 2018, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 41 x 24 inches



I Shall Burn Every Bridge, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 inches



GUY RICHARDS SMIT

*Guilty of Everything*

November 9 to December 21, 2018

For the last decade, Guy Richards Smit has been known for his paintings, video installations, musicals and performances exploring the themes of narcissism, desire, power and failure. Using pop cultural forms such as Stand Up comedy, Pop Music, Comic Books and paintings of newspaper front pages he's conveyed a sharply observant cultural and political message with philosophical observations and humor. Guy Richards Smit's work has been seen at the Pompidou Center (2015) and in biennials in Havana, Valencia and at ARCOMadrid in 2008 and Dublin Contemporary in 2011. Solo exhibitions include The Grossmalerman Show at Pierogi Gallery (2014), Schroeder Romero & Shredder, New York, USA 2011; Fred [London] Ltd., London, UK 2009; Nausea 2, Premier Series, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA 2004; QED, Los Angeles, CA in 2006. He has received awards including the Penny McCall Foundation Award in 2004.

[www.guyrichardssmit.com](http://www.guyrichardssmit.com)

above: *I Will Bury You All*, 2018, watercolor, 11.75 x 10.75 inches

front cover: *Sorrow of the Consensus Builder*, 2018, watercolor on paper, 12 x 12 inches



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