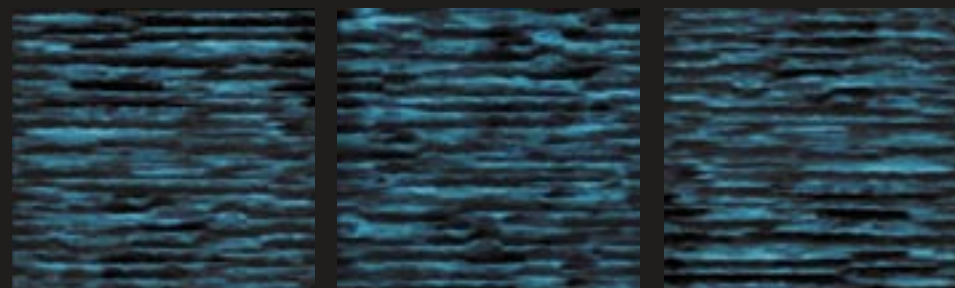


Sarah **Smuts-Kennedy**

Front top: *Life Drawing* 2004, C-type, metallic paper, 120 x 180 cm
Front bottom: *Distance Learning* 2004, C-type, metallic paper, 98 x 259 cm (triptych)
Centre: *Still Life* 2004, C-type, metallic paper, 120 x 90 cm
Above: *Ascension* 2004, C-type, metallic paper, 75 x 75 cm



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Sarah Smuts-Kennedy Ascension

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's photographs are objects that simply have to be experienced. Produced in the medium so often regarded as the very definition of technical reproducibility, they nevertheless confound all attempts at reproduction. The subtle, barely differentiated hues of her images are almost impossible for electronic scanners to read. Positioned behind highly reflective glazing, they are a never-ending frustration to attempts to photograph them. And anyone who does actually succeed in capturing a clean and accurate image is faced with the daunting task of replicating the vibrant sensuality of their surfaces.

The best that can be managed is an approximation, for this is art that demands to be seen in person. These are works to which the presence of the viewer is crucial; they are necessarily open-ended, encouraging reflection figuratively and literally in a play of light and surface. As a conceptual device, this renders the parameters of the dialogue, the encounter between the viewer and the work in a given space, abundantly clear. The viewer cannot help but be included in the field of vision: the act of looking at Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's images is a process of negotiating one's own image.

For *Ascension*, Smuts-Kennedy has forgone previous works' overt pictorial references to Rembrandt and Goya – their near monochromatic browns, their delicate apparent fall of light, their muted, searching subjects – while the solitary, apostolic male figures of *Ecce Homo* (2002) and *Manifestation and Revelation* (2003) have been left to their moments of private contemplation. It is instead the vast colour fields and shimmering gradients of Mark Rothko that form a painterly touchstone, and a single cloud that stands as a cipher for Smuts-Kennedy's ongoing inquiry into the use of knowledge.

In producing this series, Smuts-Kennedy has appropriated the advertising technique of using photography to imbue inanimate objects with human, often masculine, qualities. In the form of the 'hero image', even the most banal of mass-produced commodities can be presented as the embodiment of happiness, social success or liberation from boredom. But Smuts-Kennedy's 'hero cloud' represents neither an acceptance nor a simple parody of this process; it is rather a complex exploration of the sense of dislocation and emotional paralysis that such commodity fetishism is at once symptomatic of and contributes directly to.

The cloud is both allusive and illusive. In religious and popular imagery alike it represents divinity, the sublime, a near-unobtainable spiritual dimension, the realm of gods and only the most pious mortals. But the cloud is also ephemeral, a trick of light and water that is transformed forever as soon as it is perceived. Our 'hero cloud' no longer exists – not in reality, and not in Smuts-Kennedy's images. It has been manipulated, distorted, stretched to breaking point. Reworked by the artist as the raw material for her vast imaginary vistas, its original form appears nowhere in the series. Photography, traditionally the vehicle for capturing objective reality, is here the medium for its distillation and reformulation.

This metaphor is central to Smuts-Kennedy's interest in ideological conflict and the fugitive nature of truth, and in the means by which knowledge is accumulated and expressed in our society. She produces gorgeous photographs that nevertheless examine their own status as photographs and their role in the image economy. By incorporating the viewer, by overlaying their physical presence as an integral element of the work, Sarah Smuts-Kennedy seeks to open up to dialogue the questioning that is the very basis of all knowledge.

Reuben Keehan
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