



gallery barry keldoulis

285 Young Street
Waterloo Sydney
+61 2 8399 1240
www.gbk.com.au

Above: *Cliffhanger*, 2008, digital video, edition of 10, 2 min 8 sec, infinite loop.

Front: *Hill End*, 2008, digital video, edition of 10, 3 min, infinite loop.

Flap: (foreground) *Trade off - Balancing Act*, 2008, imported renewable source timber, Jovi clay, shellac, imitation gold leaf, 27 x 110 x 26 cm, irregular. (background) *Picture of a Better World I*, 2008, acrylic on linen, 110 x 60 cm

Inside (l-r):

Under Pressure I, 2008, acrylic on linen mounted on hard board, framed, 115 x 56 cm.

Under Pressure II, 2008, acrylic on linen mounted on hard board, framed, 115 x 56 cm.

Speculation, 2008, acrylic on linen mounted on hard board, framed, 110 x 211 cm.

Trade off - Restoration, 2008, acrylic on pulped Australian forest, imported renewable source timber, Lithgow coal, soil from the oldest gold mine shaft in Australia, soil from the road into Bathurst, Hill End quartz, resin, stands found in Chinatown, Sydney, 34 x 110 x 26 cm, irregular.

New World III, 2008, acrylic on linen mounted on hard board, framed, 118 x 104 cm.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy



Dig a little dirt

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy is the great-granddaughter of a Tracker from Wagga Wagga by the name of Kennedy. He was captured in the Boer war, placed under house arrest by the Smuts family and ended up marrying the youngest daughter of the household.

This story has not only given the artist a terribly romantic pedigree but also explains her unusual name, one that sometimes generates mirth in the United States because it seems like a joke at the expense of the Kennedys, an American political family who were notoriously smutty.

It is the tiny Afrikaans part of the artist's name – the maternal denominator if you like – that is one of the keys to understanding her work. This funny little word 'smuts' means 'particles of soot or dirty matter' and can

sometimes also refer to the smoke stains produced by burning coal. It's the historical corruption of the word 'smuts' that also gives us the word 'smudge'.

I can't remember where I first encountered the word smuts but it was most likely in a book from northern Europe. Perhaps in Hans Brinker, or the *Silver Skates*, or maybe in something by Charles Dickens or else, still more likely, in the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm. For 'smuts' to get a mention in a story, there has to be a fireplace involved and, naturally enough, a chimney.

This word, smuts, is a key to the artist's work because it's the subtle connections between coal, dirt and soot that underpins Smuts-Kennedy's exhibition *Cliffhanger*. It features paintings, sculptures and video of places the artist encountered on a road trip she took last year, following the overland movements of coal and other

minerals in New South Wales. Some of the locations she visited included Hill End, the site of the oldest – but now exhausted – gold mine¹ in the state, and Coalcliff, where she filmed video footage and collected particles of coal and soil to incorporate into her sculptures. In her work, the aftermath or residue of depleted fuel serves as a grubby remainder, and a grubby reminder of eventual extinction.

If smuts are a clue to understanding the artist's subject matter, they also explain the logic of her work's manufacture. Smuts-Kennedy's practice as an artist is a kind of dirtying of surfaces through a strategy of smutting and smudging. Many of the paintings in the exhibition *Cliffhanger* consist of shadowy black veils of pigment applied over a golden ground. They resemble charcoal smudges or the effects of overapplied photocopier toner². Some of their titles, *Under Pressure I* and *II*, remind

us that it is the compression of organic matter over time that forms fossil fuels. In a sense Smuts-Kennedy's approach to painting is to take a clean, prepared surface and proceed to ruin it – and then continue to work back and forth with a repetitive strategy of ruin and repair.

It's significant that her previous exhibition comprised paintings of rubbish and littered landscapes. Grime is a subject Smuts-Kennedy returns to as she explores the residue human beings leave behind in the environment. Her work follows and reveals paths taken by others. Previously, it did so by locating the trace of litter but in this new body of work it's by following the path of commodities and the people who harvest them.

Perhaps the way the artist carefully follows traces is as much a family legacy as is her unusual name. I've mentioned that her great-granddad was a Tracker – a

man whose job it was to find and follow overland paths. There is a sense too in which the artist's great-grandma was a Trekker. Before their name was shortened to 'Boers', the South African descendants of Dutch settlers were known as 'Trekboers' in reference to the fact they were nomadic (the trek part of the word) and farmers (the boer component). The old Dutch word 'trek' is even thought to be the origin of the English word 'track'.

Yet Smuts-Kennedy's tracking is not restricted to following the path of coal in New South Wales. She tracks market reports too, to watch the movements of energy and commodity stocks. Their economic peaks and troughs show up as mountains and valleys on the horizon line of her small landscape sculptures. Resembling trophies displayed on shelves in front of painted backdrops, these crudely modelled dioramas are made up of materials collected on her road trip. Some are real, like the soil

from the oldest gold mine shaft in New South Wales, and some are faked with synthetic clay and gold leaf. These primitive sculptures bear the artists fingerprints all over them, as if she is tracing out the price movements of resources in her own private braille.

By trekking and tracking, smutting and smudging, Smuts-Kennedy follows and reveals our carbon footprint – recording and interpreting it on objects and surfaces by means of her carbon fingerprints.

Christine Morrow
Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

¹ It was of course the political repercussions caused by the discovery of massive gold deposits in South Africa that caused her great-grandfather to go to war with her great-grandmother, figuratively speaking.

² Photocopier toner is derived from carbon – it's one of many commercially produced carbon pigments including lampblack which is a refined soot that regularly finds its way into artists' paints and inks.