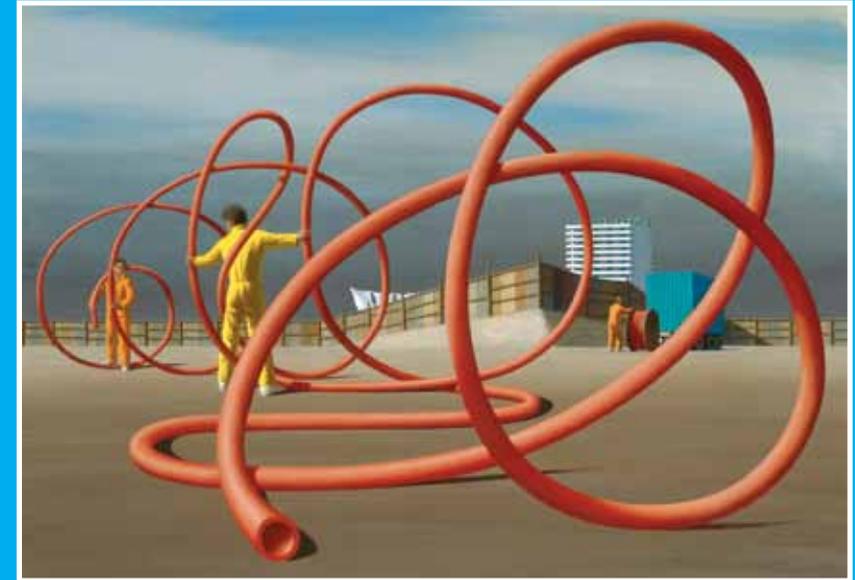


*The Underpass* 1986–87  
opposite: *The Plastic Tube* 1980  
front cover: *Night Stop, Bombay* 1981



## JEFFREY SMART 1921 – 2013

### RECONDITA ARMONIA – STRANGE HARMONIES OF CONTRAST

CURATED BY DAVID MALOUF

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY  
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

## JEFFREY SMART 1921 – 2013 RECONDITA ARMONIA – STRANGE HARMONIES OF CONTRAST

DAVID MALOUF

JEFFREY SMART IS A SUPREMELY self-conscious artist. His output is by comparison small – he regularly destroyed paintings he felt were not up to the mark; as late as 1996 he speaks of himself as ‘a painter who feels the constraints caused by lack of ability’. None of this is unusual. Like most artists he makes choices that take account, in a clear-headed self-critical way, of his strengths, which are also of course his weaknesses. This exhibition, within its modest limits, attempts to track those choices. Centering on what seems to me to be Smart’s richest and most inventive period, 1967–87, it is book-ended with two paintings from 1947 when he was in his middle twenties and *Labyrinth* (2011), his last painting, which he embarked upon, in full knowledge that it was to be the last, when he was ninety.

*Cape Dombey* and *Vacant Allotment*, *Woolloomooloo* (both 1947) already present us with elements of the visual language that would occupy him over the whole of his painting life. The obelisk in the first reappears twenty years later, as we see here, in *The Steps* (1968–69) and in many other pictures. The windowless square tower of *Vacant Allotment*, and its glowing rectangular fences, form part of Smart’s repertoire of geometrical forms – cubes, squares, rectangles, circles and part-circles, curves, quadrants, ellipses – for the next six decades.

*Vacant Allotment*, stands out as an early masterpiece but of a ‘painterly’ career that Smart chose not to pursue. When he moved to Sydney in 1952, after two years overseas in which he studied briefly in Paris and made his first overwhelming discovery of Italy, he gave up painting for a time while he reassessed what sort of painter he might be. When he came back to it in the middle ‘50s he abandoned the palette knife, and what he calls rather dismissively ‘the swirling, loaded brush’, for something cooler and more detached.

*Coogee Baths – Winter* (1961) is highly planned; Smart prepared for it with an ink sketch and a study in ink and gouache. It is abstract in its interest but in no way ‘expressive’. In defiance of the two movements that were sweeping the world of contemporary painting, Tachisme in Europe and Abstract Expressionism in the US, it is boldly representational. Hard-edged and objective, it lays out on a diagonal across the frame a set of squares in primary colours, red, blue, yellow, that cast clean rectangular shadows on a planked deck. In a form of visual/verbal play that Smart will increasingly make use of, a lettered sign, SUN, broken by another diagonal that runs in a contrary direction to the first, stands where the sun itself might be in what will become another Smart trademark, a darkly sunless sky. The

lone figure at the rails looks away from us and gives no clue to his presence here, unless the painting is itself a reflection of his mood.

*On the Roof* (1966) is equally formal but in a different mode. The view this time is frontal. The title suggests an exterior, but with the horizon obscured by a long wall – greyish in colour but variegated, cut on a diagonal above, then truncated and embayed but extending right across the frame – it has the feeling of an interior; a stage set perhaps. In recessive perspective behind, the windowed façade of an orange-red palazzo. The door in the wall is open but dark, guarded by a seated woman in black, very formally dressed with a black handbag at her feet and wearing a scarlet hat. All the elements of the picture, line, colour, composition, are harmonious. The feeling it creates is not.

Other works use the same elements we see here but in other and equally playful ways.

*The Red Arrow I* (1972), *The Four Closed Shops* (1982) and *Garage Attendant* (1981) also present frontal views, but in *Closed Shops* the eye is tempted, by the fall of shadows from two sets of low rails, to read the painting from right to left rather than move into it; in *The Steps* and *Over the Hill*, *The Bicycle Race* (1973) the perspective is from below; in *Morning at Savona* (1976), even further below. In *Night Stop, Bombay*

(1981) the play is with various forms of the circle and the view from above. The view in *The Underpass* (1986–87) is even higher and the play is with two horizontals, the one at the bottom of the picture very close, the one at the top further off, so that the picture’s deep space, with its vertical shadows, is well-like. The palette too, for Smart, is unusual: white, creamy-gold, mauve; even the truck is a lyrical lolly-pink. As if here too the world of the painting might be a reflection of the dreamy inner world of the lone female observer on the overpass above.

*Garage Attendant*, one of Smart’s most intriguing images, presents us with a well-lighted underground interior. The play is with slanting stripes, blue on luminous cream, round the base of receding square columns and across a diagonal back wall, with the added small puzzle, as in Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, of where exactly with regard to the viewer – that is, inside or outside the picture – the overalled attendant is standing that would allow him to appear in the circle of a reflector, where he is reduced to the same size and status as the multi-directional arrows in the sign below. This is just one example of the way in Smart’s world, and increasingly as he goes on, walls, fences, open spaces are enlivened with lettered signs, graffiti, and the rich non-verbal language of traffic

indicators and directives. *The Red Arrow I*, for example, is the earliest of a set of variations on a theme that occupies Smart till the end of the decade.

As early as *Cahill Expressway* (1962, collection National Gallery of Victoria), he discovers the poetry of highways, perhaps from what he had seen the beginnings of in Italy in the early '50s; but it is when he settles in Italy in the following year that the landscape of passage and destination emerges as a preoccupation that will make the world Smart works in uniquely his own.

The Italian autostrada system constitutes an enclosed, nationwide phenomenon from which Italians, with their flair for visual drama and their highly developed social sense, have created a complete world, with its own culture of monumental forms and its own coherent mythology and language: so much part of the contemporary Italian scene that they simply take it as given.

Jeffrey Smart, with an outsider's eye for the particular, the exotic, reads it metaphysically: in flyovers, bridges, the baroque curve of entrances and exits; in glimpses from far off and in passing, towers of wrecked cars, piles of brightly coloured oil-barrels, stacked containers, abandoned farm-houses; in men in overalls at maintenance work and prostitutes waiting for truck-drivers at turn-offs, he sees images of a secular industrial poetry, a world not of nature but of our second nature, objects and occasions that, within the formal order of a style of painting that is an extension as he sees it, in contemporary form, of the Central Italian schools of the Cinquecento, are the icons – real, functionally purposeful, sometimes brutal, but also transcendently mysterious – of what beauty and even grandeur might be in a fast-moving, efficient, but also isolating and impersonal world.

The vision, which comes one guesses in a brief glimpse, is inward and spontaneous, but the process Smart follows in getting it on to the canvas is painstakingly slow.

The challenge is to keep the image fresh.

Too little or too much 'surprise' and the image can seem forced, confected. A compositional problem too obviously set, and the solution, however elegant, will look like mere calculation or cleverness. Then there is the difficulty, for all artists who work as Smart did over an extended lifetime, of what Henry James calls 'keeping it up'. Of avoiding repetition or the lapse into formula; into self-imitation, self parody.

How well an artist survives all this determines how high a place we accord him in a shaky pantheon.

The subject of Smart's last painting, *Labyrinth*, is very appropriately the directional problem of that most artificial of all road-systems, the maze. Not the leafy maze of the formal garden but what looks like a roughstone maze that might be the remains of a classical ruin. Once more Smart's favourite imagery of the journey, of passage and destination, with at its centre, or rather at the cross-hairs of the Golden Mean, the old time-traveller himself, H.G. Wells. Typically, the image is as much literary or philosophical as visual, but instead of hard-edged lines and primary colours there is a return here to the very personal presence of the artist's hand; of individual brushstrokes as the paint goes on.

In every way a final work that is managed and presented as a considered statement, about space, time, travelling, the human predicament; a demonstration of human fragility and endurance. Most of all a work that preserves, to the very end, something of the painter's objectivity, both about himself and about his art. His belief in the form itself as the message. His urbanity and wit.



*Labyrinth* 2011



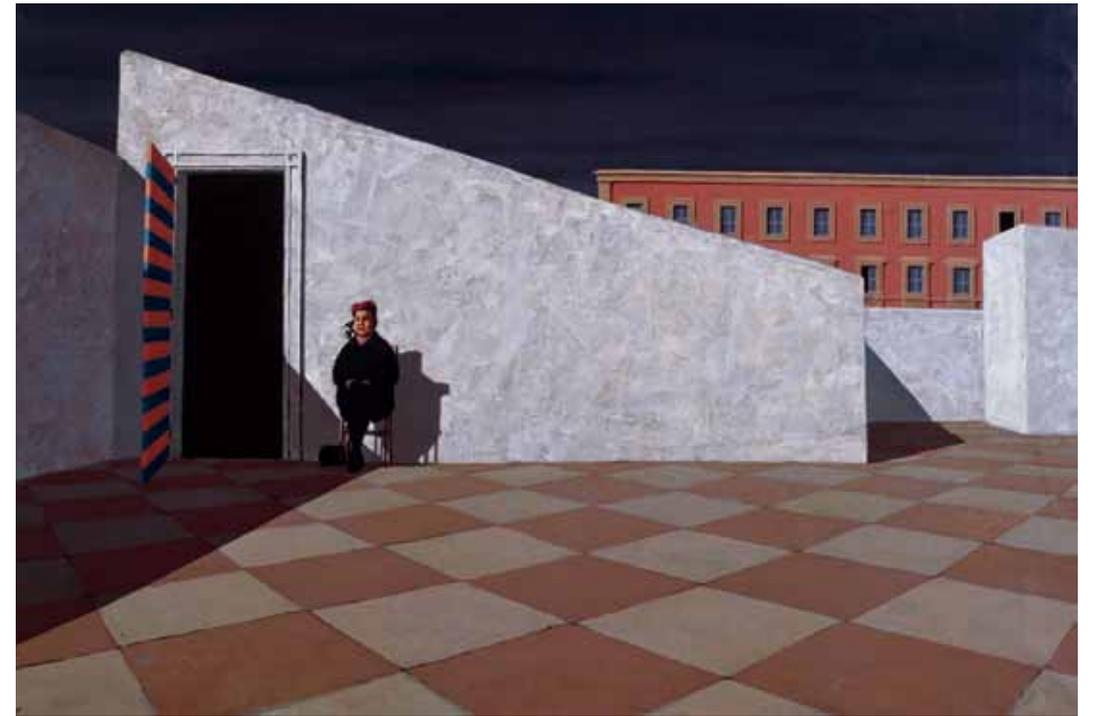
*Cape Dombey 1947*



*Vacant Allotment, Woolloomooloo 1947*



*Coogee Baths – Winter 1961*



*On the Roof 1966*



*The Steps 1968-69*



*The Red Arrow I 1972*



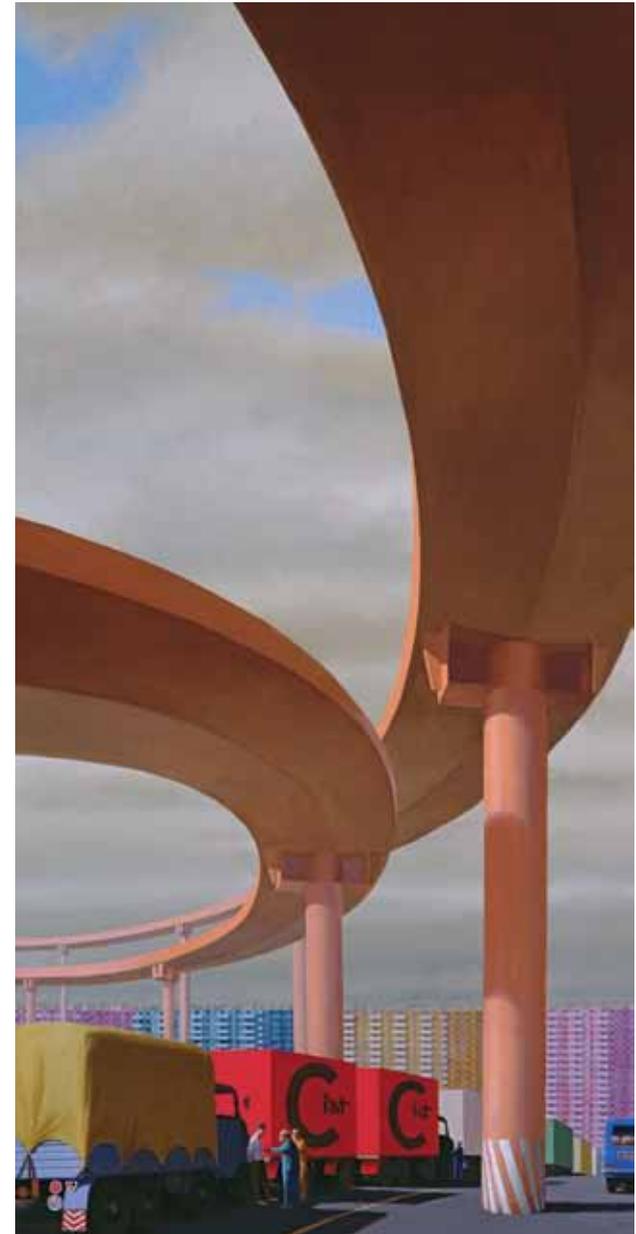
*Over the Hill, The Bicycle Race 1973*



*Morning at Savona 1976*



*Garage Attendant* 1981



*The Argument, Prenestina* 1982

## LIST OF WORKS

### *Cape Dombey* 1947

oil on hessian, 51 x 61cm  
Donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw bequest 1976  
University Art Collection UA1976.54,  
The University of Sydney

### *Vacant Allotment, Woolloomooloo* 1947

oil on canvas, 51 x 61cm  
Gift of Chandler Coventry, 1979  
The Chandler Coventry Collection,  
New England Regional Art Museum

### *Coogee Baths – Winter* 1961

oil on canvas, 91 x 122cm  
Donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw bequest 1976  
University Art Collection UA1976.57,  
The University of Sydney

### Study for *Coogee Baths – Winter* 1961

gouache and ink on card, 36 x 47cm  
Donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw bequest 1976  
University Art Collection UA1976.25,  
The University of Sydney

### *On the Roof* 1966

oil on canvas, 55 x 81cm  
Westpac Corporate Art Collection

### *The Steps* 1968–69

oil on canvas, 81 x 65cm  
Donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw bequest 1976  
University Art Collection UA1976.62,  
The University of Sydney

### *The Red Arrow I* 1972

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 80 x 100cm  
Private collection

### *Over the Hill, The Bicycle Race* 1973

oil on canvas, 100 x 134cm  
Donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw bequest 1976  
University Art Collection UA1976.28,  
The University of Sydney

### *Morning at Savona* 1976

oil on canvas, 60 x 49.5cm  
Donated by The Hon R P Meagher  
through the Australian Government's  
Cultural Gifts Program 2011  
University Art Collection UA2011.26,  
The University of Sydney

### *The Plastic Tube* 1980

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 84 x 120cm  
Private collection, courtesy  
Sally Dan-Cuthbert Art Consultant

### Drawing for *The Plastic Tube* 1980

pencil on paper, 23 x 17.5cm  
Private collection, courtesy  
Sally Dan-Cuthbert Art Consultant

### *Garage Attendant* 1981

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 75 x 110cm  
Private collection

### Third drawing for *Garage Attendant* 1981

pencil on paper, 40 x 45cm  
Private collection

### *Night Stop, Bombay* 1981

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 100 x 100cm  
Private collection, Sydney, courtesy  
Philip Bacon Galleries

### *The Argument, Prenestina* 1982

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 120 x 60cm  
Private collection, Sydney, courtesy  
Philip Bacon Galleries

### *The Underpass* 1986–87

oil and synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 120 x 75cm  
Parliament House Art Collection

### *Labyrinth* 2011

oil on canvas, 100 x 100cm  
Collection Estate of Dr Jeffrey Smart AO,  
courtesy Philip Bacon Galleries

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PHILIP BACON  
GALLERIES

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The University of Sydney

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