



Front cover: *The Bicycle Race III* 1967 (detail)
Title page: *The Golf Links* 1971



JEFFREY SMART UNSPOKEN

CURATED BY POWER PROFESSOR MARK LEDBURY

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY



Coogee Baths – Winter 1962

'GREAT MAGICIAN WITH YOUR MUTE COMPOSITIONS' JEFFREY SMART: UNSPOKEN

POWER PROFESSOR MARK LEDBURY

JEFFREY SMART HAS BEEN PAINTING FOR SEVEN DECADES. His remarkable oeuvre is as compelling as it is perplexing, as playful as it is precise, as murkily complex in its effects and meanings as it is preternaturally clear in its geometries and outlines. The University's rich collection of Smart's work is an extended snapshot, mostly dating from the Sydney moment of the late '50s and early '60s that gave us *Cahill Expressway* (1962) – the 'breakthrough moment' that established Smart as a painterly force. The collection extends to the period of the mid-'70s in Italy, which saw Smart confidently constructing that seductively familiar yet fiendishly complicated visual universe that he has continued to inhabit to this day. The collection mostly came thanks to the generosity of Alan Renshaw, a lawyer, collector and friend of many artists, including Smart, who recalls in correspondence hair-raising rides in Renshaw's antiquated car, the passengers obliged to make hand signals in the absence of indicators. Two works in this exhibition come from other sources. The *Study for The Traffic Reflector* (1974) comes from the Sydney Teachers' College collection. *Morning at Savona* (1976), an oddly vertiginous view of a disconnected balcony and its extending shadow, on which a non-conversation is taking place, is a relatively recent addition from the collection of the late Roddy Meagher.

A LOCAL MASTERPIECE: COOGEE BATHS – WINTER

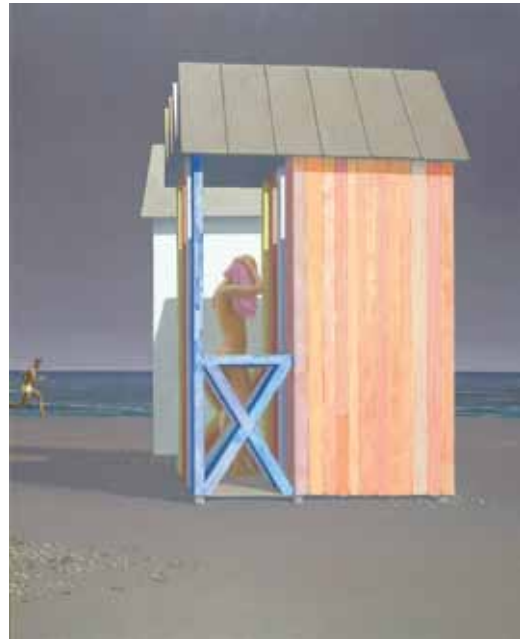
Among the 'Sydney period' paintings, none is more impressive than *Coogee Baths – Winter* (1962). When Smart painted the ocean baths now known as Wylies Baths, they were in a dilapidated state (as the drawing and particularly the painted sketch show). The lease for the baths was bought by Desmond Selby in 1959 and they were renamed the Sunstrip Pool. The pencil drawing is an interesting record of the preliminary observations and ideas about colour and composition that structured Smart's first thoughts. The painting transforms the scene, giving it that spectacular *chiaroscuro*, product of the brooding sky and a low winter morning sun. Smart has often claimed to aim for something of Vermeer's 'dark but luminous' quality, and this is already in evidence in *Coogee Baths – Winter*. But this is not a solemn painting; indeed its playfulness is clear in the partial sign 'sun', which is a witty substitute for the real thing. The wistful high-German Romantic mood is ironised by the would-be *rückenfigur* dressed in trunks. The sense of place is firm, despite the astonishing transformations and idealisations that take us from the dilapidated real to this idealised space between sea and land. The rhythms created by the contrasts of geometries are manifold and satisfying. The intensely busy graphic lines of the sketch have been smoothed out in favour of the focus on light; the boardwalk is miraculously smoothed into perfect regularity, and the strong rectangular rhythms contrast deliberately with the forms of the rocks in their undulating beauty.

NOT QUITE STRAIGHT ... IRONY, DESIRE AND SEX IN SMART

The culture and architecture of bathing are represented here in *Coogee Baths – Winter*, and also in the more perplexing, more strained *Sunstrip Baths* (1961–62). Set in the same establishment, the brilliance of Smart's rendering of peeling paint layers makes us reflect on the reason for the deliberately pained and

uncommunicative placement of the figures: one feels too near, the other too far away. Their lack of interaction and strangeness of pose and scale are surely deliberate, and suggestive, not only of Smart's formal debts to Piero, Picasso, and a Surrealist tradition, but also to a wider and more covert theme in his work – the desired male.

Smart has often insisted on his figures being mere compositional ploys, not drivers of meaning. However, *Sunstrip Baths* shows an emphasis on the strangely gangling and compressed frontality of the male figure. Like *Lunch hour* (1959) it emerges from the moment when Smart had taken on the teaching of life drawing at East Sydney Technical College (now known as the National Art School) in the early 1960s. Smart's role there might account for his foregrounding of the male during this period, a period in which he evidently rejoiced in the narrative ambiguities and incongruities of the male figure. In both *Sunstrip Baths* and *Lunch hour* the female figure, though nude, is a distant background figure. In both paintings there is no hint of that erotic or voyeuristic relationship we might be led, by tradition, to expect between man and woman. Instead we are faced with a strange dislocation and lack of communication between the two figures, expressed in their scale and relative position. On the other hand, in both paintings, the spectator is invited to engage directly and even erotically with the young male figure, unavoidably the centre of attention. As a public figure in Australia in the late 1950s, radio broadcaster for the ABC *Argonaut's Club* children's programme and reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*, Smart was probably in no position to have foregrounded his sexuality, even if he had wished. In retrospect these paintings and others painted in Sydney between the late '50s and the early '60s are, in theme and tone, the product of a powerful gay sensibility. The move to Italy in the '60s allowed Smart a great deal more painterly freedom in this regard. The beautiful *The Bathing Boxes* (1968–69), an Italian period work, is more explicitly and playfully a study in voyeurism, in which the female is entirely absent. In this work we glimpse the male body in a hut from a sideways angle. The figure's naked lower-half is blocked from view by the prohibiting double 'X' of the wooden structure. While an intense, vaguely Picasso-derived runner, in pristine white shorts, enters earnestly, yet



The Bathing Boxes 1968-9

somehow comically, from left. The University's collection of Smart's work with all its teasing ironies and play with sexuality, does provoke us to think about desire, and does so in a way which might be described as 'queer', in both its traditional and modern critical senses. However, much critical writing on his work, and the artist himself, has shied away from such a reading.

MAKING THE STANDARD STRANGE: SMART'S VISUAL VOCABULARY

In our age of identity politics as passport to artistic notoriety, we must actively resist making homosexual desire Smart's secret key. Indeed, what makes his work so compelling, and so well-loved, is more distinct, more painterly, more elusive, inscribed not in the figure, but in compositional values of architecture, pattern, colour and light, and in those components of Smart's unique vision of the world that are so present in the exhibition. These would include: the signboard and the hoarding, the lettering of the city; the road sign and road marking; the verge;

the brooding skies; the assertive verticals and the grafting of concrete into graceful architectural serpentine lines. Such motifs structure a painterly world created out of the familiar, but made rich and strange. Smart has always claimed that great work is likely to emerge from traditions, and there is plenty of evidence throughout the exhibition of Smart's engagement with a panoply of visual sources – from Renaissance painting, to Vermeer and Dutch genre painting, to Cezanne, and to the aesthetics of sixties cinema. However, the paintings exhibited also provide abundant evidence of the singularity of Smart's world-view and particular visual repertoire.

Road signage is perhaps the most interesting of all Smart's 'constants'. The standardisation of road signage, and the visual logic of the painted markings of roads, their purposeful clarity, is a product of a specific, post-WWII Euro-American consensus, a move towards transparency and quick and unambiguous visual communication. This was necessitated by the vast increase in car traffic and enshrined in the *Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals*, 1968. We look around the exhibition with its countless road signs and markings, and wonder, 'where are all the cars?', and 'who is following these directive signals?' In *Over the Hill, the Bicycle Race* (1973), as in other celebrated Smart paintings such as *Near Ponticino* (1973), we are witness to a kind of over-attentive foregrounding of road signs, markings and paraphernalia which is utterly discombobulating. The works are robbed of their logic, just as many of Smart's roads are deprived of traffic to obey them. Although Smart has been publicly skeptical of abstract tendencies in art, we often end up seeing these signs not as function but as pure pattern, and visual rhythm. They are heaped up, repeated, reflected to the point of absurdity, but also of poetic beauty.

BICYCLE RACES

The bicycle also serves in Smart's work to joyously trump the 'system' of the road. Bicycle races close roads to traffic, robbing them of their quotidian purpose, staging sporting theatre on the site of daily tedium. Smart's love of the bicycle, as the vehicle of freedom, as far back as his boyhood in Adelaide, seems to have been extended and intensified in those Italian years in the '60s. As

Smart settled in Italy, Gimondi and Anquetil fought it out on the *Giro d'Italia* and the bike was enshrined as a cult object, with the cyclists the Olympians of the road. In the bicycle paintings, however minimally the canvas is covered by the bicycle, its symbolic power as interrupter of road rhythms, the conqueror of the car culture, remains powerfully present.

The most striking bicycle painting here is *The Bicycle Race III* (1967), a work well known and oft analysed, especially since Peter Quartermaine's publication of the photograph on which it was based in 1983. Notice the trademark colliding of strong horizontals with elegant serpentine curves, the rhyming of riders with the architecture of the road, the apparently gratuitous spheres in sync with the cyclists' heads, as the arch of the backs echo the architecture of the bridge. The structures that Smart creates with the three cyclists in foreground, middle ground and distance are so elegant that we forget that no professional cyclist would allow himself to lose time by taking this bend so wide. A dominant feature of the painting is the quasi-heraldic advertising board displaying the logo of the Italian petrol and gas company, AGIP. Smart deliberately substituted this design classic (created in 1953, by the artist and sculptor Luigi Brogini) for the the Campari hoarding we see in the photograph. Let's look closely at the hoarding: the apparently incidental missing piece of the billboard is no mere reality effect. Not only does the missing rectangle paradoxically emphasise the strong rectangles of the upper half of the composition, more importantly, it is a symbolic token of a greater absence. This logo is known as the 'six legged dog', but the six legs, its principal attributes, are deliberately hidden from view by Smart's manipulations of angles of view. The only six legs we can see in this image belong to the cyclists. Whether we choose to see this as witty play or some kind of nostalgic nod to an idyllic and ideal harmony of legs and wheels, it certainly attests not only to the intricate complexity of Smart's formal thinking but to his wit and erudition.

That wit is extended to absurdity in one of the oddest, most perplexing and surreal of all Smart's works in this exhibition *The Golf Links* (1971). The painting's incongruities are plainly obvious: the curves of the double bunker, the placement



The Mutes 1963

of the flag *in* the bunker and the bottle shaped signboard on the course, are all highly unlikely and impracticable. The bench and female spectator are even more out of place. Odder still, is the intricate 'mosaic' pattern on the billboard's reverse, with fragments of statuary, modern Greek script, primary colours and the large 'E.S.'. Given Smart's penchant for brilliant, allusive play with billboards, this painting can be read more than anything else as a wry, absurdist meditation on his art and its practitioners.

THE MUTES AND THE ART OF PAINTING

When Diderot encountered the work of the great genre painter Chardin, after an absence from public display, he exclaimed, "Welcome back, great magician, with your mute compositions!" One might argue that part of Smart's enduring appeal is that same sense of mute magic. In two works in this exhibition Smart makes muteness, and painting, a theme. It has long been his practice to exhibit studies alongside finished paintings. Such studies are not purely preparatory but are also 'alternative' to the painting. In *The Mutes* (1963), the study makes the ambiguity of the location a key. Somewhere between a warehouse and studio, a large board/canvas leans up at right heavily graphically marked as if it were the *ébauche* for an abstract painting. Or is it simply randomly marked by scuffs? The domestic-scaled door adds to the

ambiguity. Within this we clearly perceive two young men, in close proximity, signing to each other. We are witness to intense communication but excluded from its precise content.

Smart makes this the dilemma of our involvement with the finished painting, which smoothes out the graphic traces. The marks on the large boards/canvases are now much less pronounced, effaced even. Contrasts of light and shade dominate; the space is somehow more funnel-like, leading us, along with the newly-included wooden sticks, to the figures. At the same time the composition obscures our sense of the space, enclosing whatever sense-making we might wish to make within the logic of chiaroscuro. The figures are remoter, more sculptural, graver. Painting is a mute and difficult art, its beauties emerging from extraordinary effort and layers of deception, its revelations achieved by suppressions and effacements. This is what *The Mutes* speaks of.

However tricky, *The Mutes*, painting is one of the few which depicts a real intimacy, and indeed proximity, in both the University's collection and in Smart's wider oeuvre. It is one of the few paintings to depict two humans in intimate conversation rather than bartering, or locked in sinister, tawdry or apparently fruitless exchange. There is a perceptible tenderness here that is certainly rare in a body of work often both humorous and slightly wicked in its treatment of human relationships.

If *The Mutes* might be seen as a reflection on the painter's art, so too might another work, the *Study for The Traffic Reflector*. Here again, Smart expertly synthesises his street vocabulary with the precision of a genre painter chronicling reflections, mirrors and lettering. This strangely composed study is indebted to Van Eyck, Velazquez and Vermeer, and yet is modern. It is funny, not only in a boulevard way, (the man walking in the opposite direction to the *senso unico* sign is a humorous counterpoint) but because it plays with forms, colours, and illusion and makes cars reflective objects, not vehicles of an oppressive modernity.



The Bicycle Race III 1967

THE VIRGILIAN VERGE: SMART AS PASTORALIST

Road verges are usually scruffy places, often irregularly grown and unkempt. Smart's verges are lushly inviting, often encompassing and softening, 'bedding' the concrete and aluminium of road and sign. The lush grasses can also be dominant compositional elements, as in *The Bicycle Race II* (1967), in which one third of the canvas is taken up with them, swaying and rhyming with the movement of the bicycles and countering the signage arrows. If we remember how often Smart has posed seated, relaxing figures in such lush grass we might want to speculate that these verges are not simply compositional or colour expediences, but signs of Smart's smuggling of certain poetic landscape allusions into the unlikely margins of his urban scenes. These lush verges are one element of what might be called an urban pastoral. The *locus amoenus*, the bucolic glade of tradition, is now brought into the city limits. We might even see this pastoral tradition transposed

to the rooftop (as in *Lunch Hour*, where the city's heights become an unlikely idyllic space). It might seem counter-intuitive to label Smart a pastoralist, but if we enlarge our vision of what pastoral might be, we might be prepared to accept that from his Virgilian haven in Tuscany, Smart sometimes paints the city with a pastoralist's eye, rather than the angst-ridden sensibility of those, like Hopper, to whom he is often compared.

As we see over and over again in this exhibition, Smart can make the everyday appear strange and beautiful, by the concerted act of looking and by his repeated and intense engagement with the forms of the familiar. This necessarily limited, but rich and diverse selection of Smart's work, will, I hope encourage visitors not only to marvel at Smart's extraordinary inventiveness and technical skill, but also to look at these familiar images anew and to meditate on how the mute art of painting works its elusive, deceptive and seductive magic.

WORK EXHIBITED

- 1 *Lunch hour* 1959
oil on canvas
46 x 76cm
UA1976.33
 - 2 *Study for The Traffic Reflector* 1974
oil on canvas
39.6 x 46.0cm
purchased 1976. Transferred from Sydney
College of Advanced Education 1990.
UA1990.271
 - 3 *Coogee Baths study* 1961
gouache and ink on card
37.5 x 48.8cm
UA1976.25
 - 4 *Study for Coogee Baths* 1961
black ink on card
18.2 x 26.5cm
UA1976.35
 - 5 *Coogee Baths – Winter* 1962
oil on canvas
91 x 122cm
UA1975.57
 - 6 *Sunstrip Baths* 1962-3
oil on composition board
77 x 69cm
UA1976.43
 - 7 *Sketch for The Mutes* 1963
gouache and pen on paper
27.6 x 33.8cm
UA1976.42
 - 8 *The Mutes* 1963
oil on canvas on board
68.5 x 81.0cm
UA1976.42
 - 9 *The Bicycle Race II* 1967
oil on canvas
80 x 70cm
UA1976.55
 - 10 *The Bicycle Race III* 1967
oil on canvas
53.5 x 80.5cm
UA1976.26
 - 11 *The Bathing Boxes* 1968-9
oil on canvas
91 x 73cm
UA1976.30
 - 12 *Approach to the EUR* 1970
oil on canvas
60 x 92.5cm
UA1976.34
 - 13 *Morning At Savona* 1976
oil on canvas linen
60 x 49.5cm
donated by The Hon. Roderick P AO, QC
through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program 2011
UA2011.26
 - 14 *The Golf Links* 1971
oil on canvas
81 x 90cm
UA1976.27
 - 15 *Over the Hill, The Bicycle Race* 1973
oil on canvas
100 x 134cm
UA1976.28
- All works © Jeffrey Smart
All works University Art Collection
All works donated through the Alan Richard Renshaw
bequest 1976, unless otherwise noted

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have made this exhibition possible at such short notice. First and foremost, Ann Stephen, Senior Curator of the University Art Gallery and Collections, for suggesting the possibility and being so supportive of the unlikely idea of a recently arrived British scholar of French painting curating a show on a contemporary Australian artist. Her colleagues Luke Parker and especially Hannah Kothe have worked so hard on all fronts to make the exhibition happen, and have been scrupulous readers and editors. Helen Ledbury was as patient and keen-eyed with the text as she was tolerant of me writing it. Pam Bell provided wise advice and suggestions, and John Spencer facilitated access to material on Smart in the Schaeffer library with his customary intelligence and efficiency. At Sydney University Museums we would like to thank Julie Taylor and Alayne Alvis. Our thanks are also due to catalogue designer Peter Thorn, Australian Galleries director Stuart Purves and of most of the artist himself, Jeffrey Smart.

Public Programs

David Malouf: A conversation on Jeffrey Smart
Friday 7 October 6-7PM
New Law Building

Dumb and Smarter: Eloquence and irony in Jeffrey Smart
Mark Ledbury, Power Professor and exhibition curator
Tuesday 18 October 12-1PM
University Art Gallery

Published in conjunction with the exhibition

Jeffrey Smart: Unspoken

University Art Gallery

The University of Sydney

2 October – 27 November 2011

Exhibition curator: Mark Ledbury

Editors: Luke Parker, Hannah Kothe and Ann Stephen

© University Art Gallery and authors 2011

This catalogue is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means or process whatsoever without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All images are © Jeffrey Smart

Design and print production: Peter Thorn

Printed using Forestry Stewardship Council approved paper

Published by University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Ledbury, Mark.

Title: Jeffrey Smart : unspoken / Mark Ledbury ;
editors: Hannah Kothe, Luke Parker, Ann Stephen.

Edition: 1st ed.

ISBN: 9781742102528 (pbk.)

Subjects: Smart, Jeffrey, 1921—Exhibitions.
Painting—Australia—20th century.

Other Authors/Contributors:

Kothe, Hannah.

Parker, Luke.

Stephen, Ann.

University of Sydney. University Art Gallery.

Dewey Number:

759.994



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY