

# INSTALLATION

MAGAZINE



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# Dreams of Light

**Guided by a stream of imagery derived from memory and dreams, the sprawling landscape paintings of SAMANTHA KEELY SMITH are illuminated from the inside out. Painting with oil that is infused with light, she captures a feeling that transcends physicality and psychology and celebrates the journey of discovery and exploration.**

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**IMAGE**

Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Sliver* (detail),  
oil, enamel and  
shellac on canvas,  
32" x 48", 2012.

All images courtesy  
of the artist.



**IMAGE**

Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Mutiny*, oil, enamel and  
shellac on canvas,  
60" x 78", 2012.

**Installation Magazine: When did you first know you were an artist?**

Samantha Keely Smith: When I was about sixteen, I realized I needed a creative outlet of some kind because I had a head full of intense images clamoring to get out. I tried music, and then writing, but I was a miserable failure at both. Then, I started drawing and doing small paintings with poster paint, this came much more naturally to me. At seventeen, I started studying with a wonderful artist in the next town, Charlie Nevad. I'll never forget the first time I walked into Charlie's painting studio: the smell of the oil paint and turpentine brought on such a strong feeling of *déjà vu* that I was overwhelmed. I was right at home, I felt as if I had found where I belonged. He was tough in his own way, making me paint on very small canvases with only one big #12 brush, which forced me to do away with line and concentrate on light, form, and color to capture the essence of what I saw in front of me. I still paint this way, and I'm still not a line person.



**IMAGE**

Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Progeny*,  
oil, enamel and  
shellac on canvas,  
48" x 78", 2013.



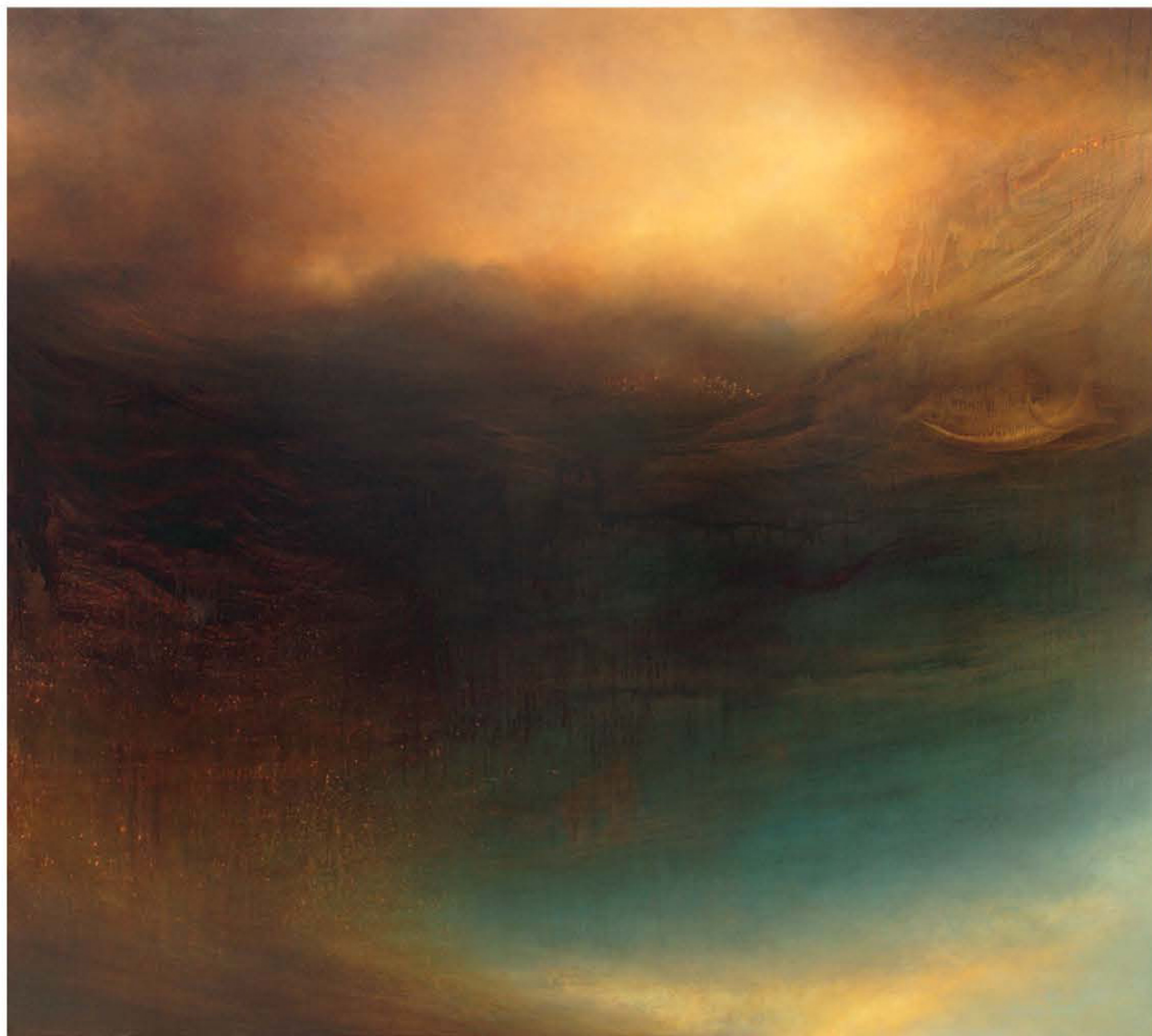


## Did you study art? How has your education impacted your practice?

I went to art school and got my BFA degree in Painting. I'm not sure that I learned all that much about painting when I was in school though. I learned the basics from Charlie, and after that it felt like it was mostly a matter of doing, experimenting, and learning from my mistakes. I have always been working from these images in my head, which aren't very concrete, so my practice has mostly been 20 some years of frustration over my technical capabilities falling short of capturing what I see in my mind. I'm getting closer all the time, but I feel like I constantly need to change tactics slightly, as if I'm pursuing something that doesn't want to be caught. I spent a lot of time in my studio while I was in school working through my ideas, and sometimes even skipped classes. I must say that I wish there was more practical advice about the business of being an artist when I was in school because I graduated with very naïve ideas about the art world.

### IMAGE

Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Semblance*,  
oil, enamel and  
shellac on canvas,  
50" x 78", 2011.





## **Are the landscapes representative of places that you have visited or are they born from your imagination?**

**IMAGE**  
Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Transmission*,  
oil, enamel and  
shellac on canvas,  
60" x 68", 2012.

I used to do figurative work although it was always somewhat dreamlike and not very realistic. That continued until about 1999, when the paintings gradually became more abstract. My earlier works were mostly based on recurring dreams I've had since I was very young, and, at the time, painting helped me figure out what the dreams meant. Once that happened, I felt free to move on to paintings that attempted to capture the world of emotion within me, and how that world intersected — or sometimes collided — with my reality. For this reason, it made sense for the work to be more abstract. The work I'm doing at the moment definitely has a feeling of some sort of landscape or place, but they have nothing to do with real places, they are emotional and psychological places.

## **Which artists influence your practice the most?**

I'm more influenced by music and novels, and the things I see around me in the city on a daily basis. There are painters whose work inspire me because of their ability to transcend time and place. The most obvious would be Turner's later work. But because I have always been working from such fleeting internal and personal images, I felt I had to build my own language for my paintings. I had no idea how to go about it, and I knew it would take many years of work, but I do feel I am slowly getting there. The paintings look more and more like the glimpses I get of these places in my mind's eye. I've got a long road ahead, but I feel very lucky that I have this seemingly endless stream of images to work from.





**Your paintings have an incredible light that comes from within them — how do you accomplish this?**

Light plays an important role in my work. Because the work addresses the contrast and connections between an internal psychological space and my daily reality, they often depict dualities of light versus dark and order versus chaos. Light plays many roles in my work, but most often it is one of hope. Technically, the light is built up with thin translucent layers of paint and layers of shellac. I usually do this with the entire painting, but occasionally there are areas that are more flat and are about the actual material – the paint itself. I’m madly in love with oil paint and the process of painting.

**IMAGE**

Samantha Keely Smith,  
*Vessel*,  
 oil, enamel and  
 shellac on canvas,  
 60" x 60", 2012.



## **What inspires the composition of your paintings?**

### **Is it premeditated or does it occur organically as you paint?**

My paintings evolve in an organic way. In fact, what I start with often disappears completely by the end of the painting. I see the first layer as a takeoff point. It was so much easier when I was doing figurative work and could have a plan or sketch to start with. But sketching out these images would be impossible. I often say that I see the images the way you see things with your peripheral vision because they're so fleeting that I can never be totally sure of what I've seen. It's a frustrating process, and the paintings take a long time to finish because of this – usually 1 ½ to 2 months each, with me painting about 60 hrs a week. I only know a painting is finished when I can see there is nothing “off” about it, and that it feels like what I saw in that first fleeting glimpse.

## **Where is your work headed?**

### **What would you like to accomplish as an artist?**

I would like my painting to reach a place where my technical skills are so improved that they no longer hold me back from capturing these images. I'm always learning, and I hope to keep doing so. What I would like to accomplish as an artist is for my work to connect with people on a deep, fundamental level, and to be able to do that as often as possible. In other words, I would like, one day, for my work to be in museums so that as many people can interact with it as possible, not just those who can afford to buy a piece and put it in their homes.