

# LIAR

PREMIER ISSUE | WINTER 2015

# LIAR



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VINTAGE SHIRT

BACK COVER  
STEVE MILATOS AT VN MODELS  
SKINGRAFT LEATHER JUMPSUIT  
MODEL'S OWN RINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOS KARANTZOLAS

PREMIER ISSUE

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*the* **SEA INSIDE**

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INTERVIEW WITH **SAMANTHA KEELY SMITH** BY CHRISTINE BE

**PROGENY** 2014  
OIL, ENAMEL AND SHELLAC ON CANVAS  
48 X 78 INCHES

**S**AM LOOKS AT YOU, HER PALE BLUE EYES REVEALING NOTHING AND EVERYTHING. SHE IS SOFT SPOKEN AND UNASSUMING, ONE HAS TO LEAN IN TO LISTEN, LIKE PLACING YOUR EAR AGAINST A CONCH SHELL TO HEAR THE SEA ROAR. THERE IS A WORLD INSIDE HER, A ROLLING LANDSCAPE SHE CAPTURES IN OIL AND VARNISH. LIKE THE OCEAN ITSELF, YOU COULD NOT TRULY DESCRIBE THE DEPTH, LUMINOSITY, AND GRANDEUR OF HER PAINTINGS TO SOMEONE UNLESS THEY STOOD BEFORE ONE IN PERSON. WE SIT DOWN FOR A COFFEE TO BREAK THE SURFACE.

**LIAR:** Tell me about your background. Where are you originally from and where did you grow up?

**SAMANTHA KEELY SMITH:** I'm originally from England. I was born in Harlow, Essex, but lived mostly in Hampshire before we moved to the US when I was 9. We came to New Jersey first but soon left to spend a year in Michigan, near Detroit, and then came back to New Jersey. The town where I grew up in New Jersey was really small, but close enough to NYC that I could come in on the train when I was a teenager. I mainly did that to go to see concerts.

**LIAR:** Were you an adventurous teenager? What kind of concerts did you go to?

**SKS:** I was pretty independent as a rule, and then I discovered all this mostly British music that I identified with around 15 or 16 and got totally into that. I went to the city to buy records on St. Marks and just hang around the village. I probably started doing that around 16 years old. Concerts were mostly bands like The Cure or The Smiths, etc. This was mid-80's.

**LIAR:** I have fond teenage memories of record shopping on St. Marks also. I'll always have a warm spot in my heart for The Smiths and The Cure! Those are some pretty angsty bands. Do you consider yourself an angsty person?

**SKS:** Ha ha! I guess I was back then. I was the black sheep in my town by that time. Total outcast. Everyone thought I was a weirdo. Or on drugs. Or both. I didn't much like the small-town narrow-minded outlook and felt suffocated. I was desperate for a creative outlet to get out all these images that had been building up in my head for years. I tried music, and I tried doing some writing, but neither one was working. By the time I was 17 I was definitely looking the part of the town rebel too. Punk/goth girl. I discovered painting at 17 too. That changed everything for me. It felt right immediately. What a relief.

**LIAR:** I think all teenagers naturally feel the need to rebel in different ways. Did your family support you in your creative endeavors?

**SKS:** My Mom was very supportive. My Dad wasn't too keen on my strange outfits and hair colors/cuts, or the idea of me going to art school. He wanted me to get a sensible degree and get a good job, which I can understand now. He didn't think Art was a career. I had no exposure to the arts at all growing up. We didn't really go to museums or anything. My parents were more into film, music and reading novels. I've always read a lot. My Mom worked at the school library for a while. Once I started art school and my Dad saw how hard I worked he was supportive. He's my biggest fan these days.

**SURFACING 2014**  
OIL AND VARNISH ON CANVAS  
30 X 48 INCHES



**LIAR:** When did you first get exposed to fine art?

**SKS:** My first clear memory of seeing a reproduction of a painting that really moved me was a painting on a record cover of one of my favorite bands at the time, called Japan. It was a painting by Frank Auerbach, who is still one of my favorite painters. My Dad liked paintings, and I think we had a couple of books around the house with Renoir and the Impressionists, things like that. That stuff didn't do much for me though. I mean, I saw it and it never occurred to me to try and paint something. The Auerbach painting did do that though. It really spurred me to try. Then, a few months later I found out about an artist in a neighboring town who gave drawing and painting lessons and I started going there. He was amazing. Old guy. Wonderful spirit. He used to set up still lifes for me to paint and then read to me or play old jazz records while I was painting. It was a full cultural experience. The first time I walked into his painting studio I got a chill because it felt so familiar, so right. The smells of turpentine and oil paint, they felt like home. Painting came easy for me too. I knew it was the right thing for me once I walked in there.

**LIAR:** Sometimes you just know it when you see it. Who and what are some of your strongest influences for your art?

**SKS:** I think the reason the Auerbach painting did it for me was because it wasn't pretty, it was visceral, gut wrenching and it felt so honest. Because of that I found it very beautiful. It spoke to me because the barrage of images I had in my head growing up were like that. Strange and terrible...And yet beautiful. I can't really explain where these images come from. It has been suggested to me that perhaps I am getting them from the collective unconscious, or they are just how my mind

takes sensory input and twists it into something new that is more basic or essential, and mainly emotionally based. Music and novels have probably been a stronger influence that looking at visual art.

**LIAR:** If your paintings were a piece of music or a novel which ones would they be?

**SKS:** Ok. I'll pick two things that had a huge impact when I first experienced them and that I felt plugged into things that I was trying to express through my paintings: Arvo Pärt "Spiegel im Spiegel" for piano and cello and Dostoevsky's amazing novel "Crime and Punishment."

**LIAR:** Those are both pretty classical and epic pieces, they suit your work. There is a real sense of familiarity in your work, yet they also feel fresh and modern. What type of mediums do you work in?

**SKS:** I only work in oil paint. I keep thinking I should expand, branch out, try new things, but oil painting is my love. I recently started doing some paintings on paper, which are also smaller, and which I am trying to keep a little less "worked" than my paintings on canvas, which can have many layers and take a couple of months to paint. So that's my big adventure! Ha ha, doing work on paper.

**LIAR:** Your large-scale works are very powerful. How long does one painting take to complete?

**SKS:** The big paintings usually take a couple of months to complete. I've started working on a few at once now, so that I can always be working on something while a layer is drying on



“STRANGE AND TERRIBLE...  
AND YET BEAUTIFUL.  
I CAN'T REALLY EXPLAIN WHERE  
THESE IMAGES COME FROM.”

**MUTINY** 2012  
OIL, ENAMEL AND  
SHELLAC ON CANVAS  
60 X 78 INCHES



**HARBINGER** 2014  
OIL AND VARNISH ON CANVAS  
64 X 78 INCHES

“THE SMELLS OF TURPENTINE  
AND OIL PAINT, THEY FELT LIKE HOME.”

**EBB** 2012

OIL AND VARNISH ON CANVAS

52 X 70 INCHES



one or two of them. The works on paper are layered as well but I'm trying to have fewer layers with those.

**LIAR:** When do you know when to stop? Is it a "know it when you see it" type of situation?

**SKS:** Yes. It's time to stop when nothing is stopping my eye as it travels around the canvas, I mean nothing that seems wrong or to not be working. Some paintings take a lot longer than others because of that.

**LIAR:** Your paintings are sometimes described as abstracts. Sometimes landscapes. Some of your work has the feeling of water. Some fire. Where does your imagery come from?

**SKS:** It's my "inner landscape". My current emotional state interpreted as a place. All the things I hear and see and feel, taken in and processed, and spat back out as this. The paintings are self-portraits in a way. But it's important to me that they be more open than a straight portrait or a landscape painting. They are places that don't make sense in terms of the reality we see around us, and because of that perhaps they leave more room to imagine and expand?

**LIAR:** There are also definite names for your paintings. They are strong, single words like "Harbinger", "Progeny", "Mutiny" etc. How do these names play a role with the artwork?

**SKS:** This may sound strange but the names are something I start to think about when the painting is almost finished. Like they are finally coming into their own at that point and have a presence that demands a certain name/title. I keep a list of potential titles that I jot down when I'm reading and I see a word that feels like it could be a painting. Then I find the right title from that list. Mostly, anyway. Sometimes none of the words on the list seem right and I have to look around for something that works better.

**LIAR:** I think all the names have added a real "third dimension" to the work. And they always seem to fit in really well! What is your studio workspace like?

**SKS:** Thanks. To me the paintings are their own beings once they're finished, so it's great that the titles are adding something that helps define that. My workspace is very bare boned. I have all my finished paintings covered up and usually only the painting I am working on that day is in my line of vision. The others that are in progress are off to the side, so I don't get distracted while I'm working. I sit on a pillow on the floor across the studio from my painting while I take a break, eat, drink coffee etc. and look at the painting. I don't have a very big space; at least one third of it is taken up by storage for many large paintings going back to 1998. It's good that I keep selling paintings once in a while or I'd run out of workspace. I almost always listen to music while I'm painting. A lot of different kinds of music. It depends on the painting and the mood of that stage of the painting.

**LIAR:** Let's end with a game called "Two Truths and a Lie." State two truths about yourself and one lie. Don't tell us which is which.

**SKS:** 1. I often sing along loudly to whatever music I'm listening to and dance my way backwards across the studio when I need to get a full view of the painting I'm working on, and then dance my way back to the painting.  
2. I mostly paint with my fingers or a palette knife.  
3. Sometimes I make photo collages to use as an image to start off a painting, but usually put it aside once the first layer is done, or even before the first layer is done.

**LIAR:** I can totally imagine all of these things! Especially the singing. Thanks so much for taking the time for the interview.

**SKS:** Thanks Christine for asking me. *L*



“THE PAINTINGS ARE THEIR OWN  
BEINGS ONCE THEY’RE FINISHED...”

**STRAY** 2014  
OIL AND VARNISH  
ON CANVAS  
48 X 64 INCHES