



FIONA SMYTH

by Mark Laliberte



Fiona Smyth was born in Montreal in 1964. She moved to Toronto in 1979, went to Central Tech and then studied at the Ontario College of Art & Design, where she graduated in 1986.

Smyth produces vibrant and energetic comics, drawings, paintings and new media work which is widely recognized and highly acclaimed for its distinctive style. Her work probes timely societal, sometimes intense and always relevant topics with a sense of humour and wonder.

You were once called an “honourable thief” by critic RM Vaughan — he described you as stealing from (pop) culture at will, and then giving back to culture through your work. Is this an accurate assessment?

I would say so. I’m grabbing both consciously and subconsciously from so many things: Aboriginal culture, Hinduism, Buddhism, Japanese horror films, manga, anime, television, Hieronymus Bosch, comics, View-Master reels, “outsider” art like Henry Darger, street art and signage, you name it. I hope I do honour to the inspirations — although in the case of the Catholic inspirations, I’m exorcising.

Tell us about your strongest sources of inspiration these days?

Zine and drawing culture, past and present — especially from here in Canada — is very inspirational to me at the moment. I just saw the Keith Jones show at Hunter and Cook and I’m looking forward to the *Pulp Fiction* group exhibition at the MOCCA.

What are your current fixations?

Will Eisner’s *New York* stories. Berlin artist Anke Feuchtenberger. The manga epic, *A Drifting Life* by Yoshihiro Tatsumi. The Swedish horror film, *Let the Right One In*. Toronto’s Wowie Zonk zinester crew. I’m also looking at Seth’s *Clyde Fans* again before I get into George Sprott.

① fionasmyth.com/



You are quite well known in the city of Toronto for your murals. What appeals to you about this public outlet for expression?

The murals are immediately accessible. I like the process of creating them and engaging the public as they happen, especially when it's people who have no connection to "ART". It's magical to them — you feel like a wizard.

Which is your favourite, and why?

The mural at the Dance Cave, because of its longevity (it's been there since '87) and the murals/installations I've done for art shows, like the current one at the Art Gallery of Mississauga's *Man's Ruin* show (work inspired by tattoo culture). Of course, I'm also very connected to the Sneaky Dee's sign because everyone in Toronto knows it — although it needs a new coat of colour badly!

Nocturnal Emissions was an interesting comic book: very loose narrative threads spread throughout a surreal, dense visual space. Can you talk a bit about that period — how did you hook up with Vortex Comics?

I had done my first comics for *Fishwrap* from 1983-86 — that was the Ontario College of Art's paper; I was also producing comic zines for my art shows. Then Vortex publisher Bill Marks asked me to do a regular run comic. Marks knew me as a painter/artist but was aware that I'd done some comics along the way; he asked me in 1990 if I'd be interested in doing a comic book. Four issues of *Nocturnal Emissions* were published with Vortex, from 1991-92. At that time, Bill moved away from publishing and into producing films; I never sought a new publisher.

All of your work at that time was very dense, a kind of horror vacui fill structure was a striking feature of the drawings; it's opened up a lot since then. Could you talk about this noticeable shift in your work?

The shift really happened over a 16 year period — I've been exhibiting and publishing since 1986. Somewhere around '93 it happened: I suddenly let



the icons and figures come forth, break free of the white noise. Huge things were happening in my life at the time: falling in love, receiving my first art grant and dealing with my sister getting sick. It all made for much more serious, literally depth-ridden work.

You are currently working on a sci-fi graphic novel for young teens. Can you give us any details about the project?

It takes place in a soon-to-be childless future and features three kids of this last generation. They go on an adventure through forgotten tunnels and solve a 65 year-old mystery with the help of graffiti and drawings. I'm currently talking to a children's book publisher about the project. Hopefully it will be completed and published in the next year and a half.

You are also editing a drawing/comics anthology zine titled *The Wilding*. What's the idea behind the project?

I wanted to create a venue for comics and drawings similar to what I've seen recently in *Kramer's Ergot* and in the past in *Raw* and *Weirdo*. I ask my friends and students to participate and of course it gets my work out there, in their fine company. The next issue is going to be published by Koyama Press.

As a long-time participant in zine culture, how would you say that scene has changed in the past 20 years?

I would say zine culture is thriving like never before, especially in the comics and drawing communities. It's very exciting seeing what's being created and how it's moving from the page to other mediums, like installations and performances. The computer seems to have taught the contemporary zinester how to make a zine, promote it and connect rapidly with other zinesters.

You often use letters/words/numbers in your drawings. They are present in a tangible way, like cement blocks for characters to trip over, or cotton candy clumps to stretch between their hands; the words you use rarely have a presence as 'language'. Rather, you reduce the building blocks of language to a kind of 'decorative objecthood' in the work. What is your idea behind the use of numbers and words in drawings?

I use numbering to catalogue and chronologically list drawings; sometimes the numbers transform, offer double meanings. That was what happened in the 'Cheez' strip that I did for *Exclaim!* and also in the 'Fazooza' strip I did for *Vice*.

Words in the paintings are a whole other story — they become recurring/repeating mantras. For example 'LUKKIE' references the unfairness of the belief in fate, how some folks are lucky and some are not. 'SWONK' is 'knows' backwards and references the telling of truth without speaking it. I have had an uneasy relationship to words, speaking and writing since I was a kid; drawing and painting are my language. I am fine painting in front of an audience but I don't like public speaking (although teaching at OCAD is helping with that).

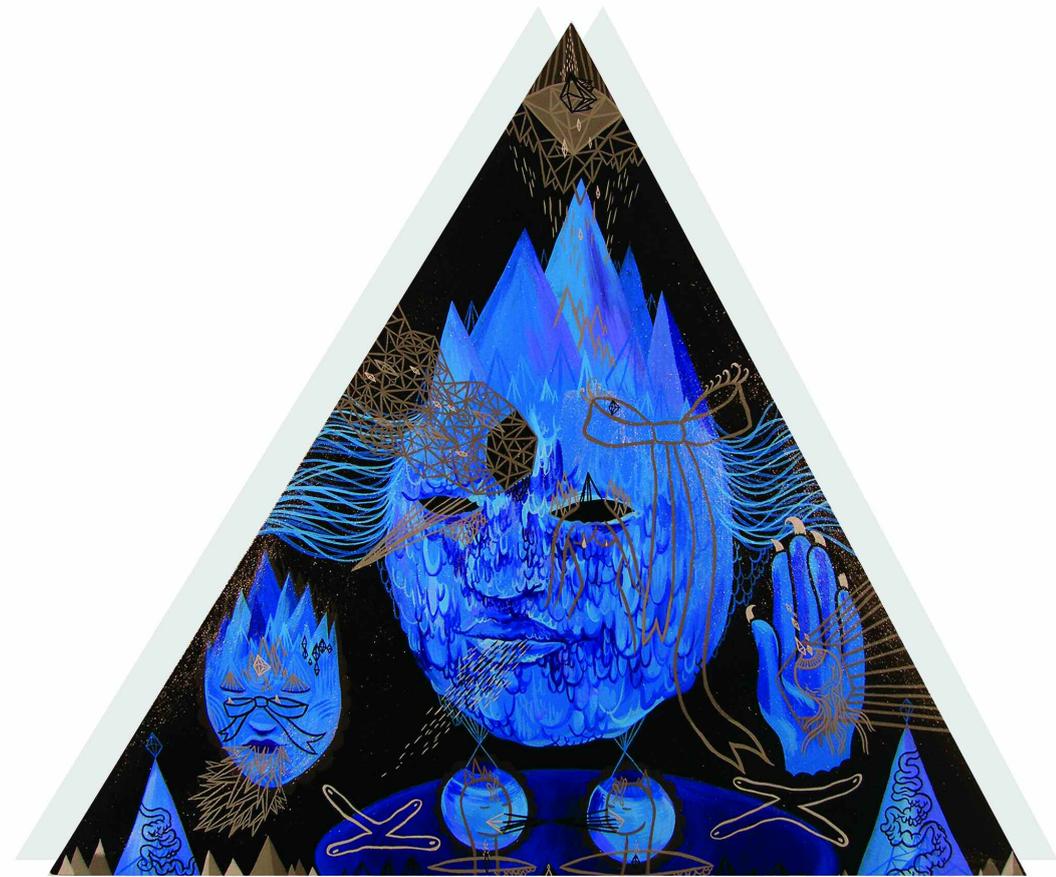
The words and numbers become living things, characters in the stories. It also happens to the icons I'll repeat over years, like the ribbons of late: they were decorative at first but now the loops have eyes and the long loose pieces are legs.

I recently saw a documentary on Keith Haring and certainly noted some stylistic overlaps — how he dealt with space, his comfortable relationship with street culture, his playful and curious exploration of sexual iconography, how his line was a kind of visual shorthand. Surely he must have been a significant early influence?

When I first saw Haring's poster of the body-painted dancer, Bill T. Jones, at my sisters' highschool in the mid 80's, everything made sense. He was a huge influence, so much so I cringed at the mention of his name when I was a young artist; you don't want to be compared to anyone. But Haring was it. The aesthetic and the performative aspects of the



① *The Trials of Agatha and Lucy*, acrylic on canvas, 2008 ▼



work were inspirations. Painting fast and being able to generate ideas fast and make them clear/legible was the best education I ever got. His work was also about taking art out of the galleries, making it unprecious.

You list Matthew Barney as one of your heroes, which is a bit surprising to me, since aesthetically speaking, he's on the other side of the planet from you. His approach is so epic, very tactile and conceptually heavy. He's connected to a completely different set of histories, in particular the history of avant-garde cinema. Can you tell me what appeals?
It's because of the grandeur of his work and because it is markedly male, whereas my work is all female. It's a male expression we haven't really seen before. Plus, there's a connection to punk rock.



After many years of delivering slightly surreal, mostly happy cartoon bodies, your work with the figure seems to have taken a radical turn in the past few years. Your bodies have become less identifiable — informal blobs bending and flowing — and a little more tormented by their biological impetus. What's going on?

The work has always had a dark side, even with my first show *Whore/House* in 1987, juxtaposing whores and housewives. I was showing the different roles women play (or are forced to play) and the choices we make, both confining and stereotypical. I moved from that work to overly sexualized hermaphrodites, trying to connect to maleness. From there was a period of patheticos, cutesy/sexy toys and dolls playing together. During this time I was happily in love, but in contrast to that, there was illness in my family. I have two sisters and over a period of ten years they have both been diagnosed with chronic illnesses. The female body in my work began to turn inwards to the viscera and even molecular level, to turn inside out. I am trying to understand what is happening to my sisters and to reconstruct our shared past. My work has always been about empowerment/identity but now it's about resilience and survival and the histories our bodies carry.

In relation to your practice, where do you see yourself 20 years?

Still making stuff, but hopefully with more financial stability; more books, animations and a Schnabel-sized studio for painting. Doesn't everybody want that?

What did you work on yesterday?

Some tattoo flash for Detroit tattooist and *Wilding* contributor Gary Roscoe Johnson. I've owed it to him for 2 years — patient guy! ✨

① Special thanks to Fiona for providing us with access to her most recent sketchbook — which is where the majority of the images accompanying this interview originated.

