

Pete Smith
Stein's Law

January 19 - March 29, 2020





Image: Pete Smith, *Stein's Law*, installation shot of the main gallery of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.

An essay on the exhibition *Pete Smith: Stein's Law* Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, Curated by Sandy Saad.

You don't often encounter an art exhibition that mixes references to Dr. Seuss and a leading economist's ideas with images of local houses and parks, Disney World and climate change. Pete Smith paints broken trees, abandoned sheds, makeshift treehouses, Disney castles, and suburban homes. His wide subject matter ranges from spectacle amusement parks to public parks and includes intimate spaces in his home with his family. Smith's paintings are honest, vulnerable and personal. Like his sketchbooks, his practice is a reflection of his daily experiences and concerns, revealing parts of his life as an artist, a resident of Bowmanville, and a father and husband. He paints the changing landscape of his community nestled within a suburban township, houses in rows along the street, crashed cars, and roadkill. Then, he asks: Can we sustain this? His concerns are punctuated by the paintings that hang in places beyond the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (VAC). In the public spaces of Clarington Town Hall and Public Library are representations of child protestors urging leaders to take action against climate change juxtaposed with Smith's landscape paintings of places in and around the Durham Region. His exhibition is titled *Stein's Law*.

Stein's Law refers to the American economist Herbert Stein's theory that, if something cannot go forever, it will stop. The statement was made while Stein was analyzing the economic trend of increasing international balance of payment deficits. He concluded that such a process is limited by external factors, and requires no government intervention to stop it; it will cease of its own accord. In other words, trends that cannot continue, will not continue. This theory is applied to non-economic matters like climate change. Like the modern capitalist economy, climate change is a symptom of industrialized systems. Mechanized

factories, mass production, and chemical manufacturing are the contributing factors that have led to an unprecedented use of natural resources and fossil fuels to support the consumption of goods. The result is an insatiable appetite for things and depletion of the Earth's resources that are used to produce them. This system has created a new trend. The release of greenhouse gasses from factories, transportation, industrialized food systems, and urban centres has trapped heat from the sun, raising the earth's temperature. Pete Smith applies Stein's Law to his thinking about the repercussions of industrialized models of living in relation to climate change. He questions what will happen if we do not intervene. Will the Earth stop civilization on its own accord?



Images: (above) Pete Smith, *Stein's Law*, installed on the mezzanine floor of Clarington Public Library, (above right) *Cake and Flood*, main floor galleries of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.



Magic Kingdom is a large-scale depiction of Disney World's Cinderella Castle at evening, the emblem for its Magic Kingdom theme park. Smith's gestural painting presents a mammoth castle, brightly lit in the night. Its presence diminishes the monumental crowds of people who stand before it. In 2019, the park hosted 20.9 million visitors, making it the most visited theme park in the world. Disney World is an example of the power and profit that can accompany the harnessing and mobilization of modern society's relationship with media and spectacle. It is a place where dreams are stimulated and visitors are immersed in a world beyond their own realities. Myth and fiction are commodified and work to entertain, divert and reduce consciousness to passivity¹.

The juxtaposition and tension between fiction and reality are exemplified in two paintings that hang side by side in the VAC's main gallery: *Cake* and *Flood*. One suggests pleasure and amusement, while the other a dreadful event. *Cake* is a painting of a dark and grandiose castle looming over a mountain of rocks. Clearly substantial in scale, its towers are topped with coned roofs that pierce the sky. The painting references Hogwarts Castle in The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, a chain of theme parks in the Universal Parks & Resorts. Based on the Harry Potter novels and film series, the park is advertised as an escape following Harry Potter's footsteps through the streets of London, Diagon Alley, and many of the wizarding world's most famous establishments. In *Cake*, Hogwarts Castle perches in front of a blue and purple night sky, foregrounded by a mountain of rocks. It is opulent, haunted, and intimidating.

It hangs next to *Flood*, a very different scene of a wide swathe of trees partly underwater. The area in the painting on which we expect to find solid ground is flooded with water and ice. The trees are not as robust as *Cake's* towers; they are leafless, frail, and thin, some leaning over, while others have broken branches. Similar in composition, both paintings are composed of vertical structures and figures backed by atmospheric skies. They are foregrounded by the foundations that support them. However, one stands on a substantial accumulation of rocks, the other on mud, leaves, and trash. The irony in their relationship is that *Cake* is an image of a park that replicates a fictional story, while *Flood* is a very real depiction of a park that reveals an inconvenient truth.

Stein's Law is divided into different parts, where various aspects of Pete Smith's life and concerns are revealed. The small gallery at the VAC shows a collection of very intimate and personal paintings of Smith's home and personal life. Dark bedrooms reveal spaces of quiet seclusion, and a small vase holding one flower suggests an area that has been personalized. In the same space hang paintings of one of his sons cuddling in bed with their family dog, and his wife holding a newborn. Included here also are paintings of suburban houses lined up along streets, birds resting on tree branches, a snowman built by his kids, and his children walking in the park. Here, Smith lets us into his personal life, a very different reality, intimate and private. These paintings communicate a sense of vulnerability and honesty. They take place in and around a home in a suburban commuter town that is also part of the industrialized system he is concerned about.



Image: Pete Smith, *Stein's Law*, installed on the first floor of Clarington Town Hall.

In the public spaces of the Clarington Public Library and Town Hall hangs a distinctly different collection of works. Paintings of forests and parks confront images of child protestors, anxious about their future on a warmer planet and angry at world leaders for failing to arrest the crisis. Pete Smith paints regions and parks within the Durham Region that can be recognized and admired through his interpretation. He depicts creeks that reflect their surroundings in setting sunlight and forests of trees with snow that has fallen perfectly on each branch. The beauty of nature clashes with paintings of protestors concerned about losing that very thing. Smith's paintings depict masses of young people pouring into the streets for a day of global climate protests. They stand in winter coats holding protest signs that read: "Earth Deserves A Future". He brings this message home and very deliberately places it in Clarington Town Hall and Public library, spaces where policy decisions are made and knowledge acquired. His message is punctuated by a painting of a tweet by Peter Gleick, an American scientist and communicator on global water and climate issues:

"Not only have we the #climate science community, been overly conservative in estimating how quickly severe impacts of #climatechange would manifest themselves, but I'm afraid we may have overestimated how resilient society is to climate disruption."

¹ Loy, Caroline, "Walt Disney World: Marxism and Myth Creation" *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*, Vol. 2012, New York: New York University.

In many ways, *Stein's Law* serves as a reflective and vulnerable account of a world seen from Pete Smith's perspective. In his process of recording his personal interpretations, he paints boldly and honestly. He does not shy away from making his brush strokes apparent, nor refrain from adding the thick and weighted impasto that hangs from his canvases. Smith's works are distinctly paintings: expressive, gestural, and evocative. Painting is Pete Smith's voice, his personal reflection and public call to action. Through it he starts a conversation and calls viewers to participate and be just as bold with their own voices. This sentiment is perfectly articulated in Smith's painting of a quote from the Mayor of Whoville, in Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*:

And he climbed with the lad up Eiffelberg Tower.
 "This" cried the Mayor, "is your town's darkest hour!
 The time for all Whos who have blood that is red
 To come to the aid of their country!" he said.
 "We've GOT to make noises in greater amounts.
 So, open your voice, lad! For every voice counts!"

- Sandy Saad

Exhibition Programming:

Pete Smith: Approaches to Landscape
Sunday, March 29, 2 PM - 4 PM

Pete Smith's subject matter includes polluted parks, abandoned sheds, and dead animals. His distinct approach to painting landscape calls attention to places where we live, specifically the Durham Region, and some of the impacts we've had on it. In a tour and talk, Pete Smith will discuss his approach to painting landscape, why he has shifted his focus to scenes that are often overlooked, and what he hopes to achieve through his practice.

Biography

Pete Smith has exhibited his work extensively since completing his BFA from York University in 1998 and his MFA from the University of Guelph in 2007. Smith has shown his work in solo exhibitions in various parts of Canada and around the world and his writings on art have appeared in Canadian Art and Border Crossings magazines. He is a lecturer in drawing and painting at the OCAD University.



Image: (above left) Pete Smith, *Stein's Law*, installed on the mezzanine floor of Clarington Public Library, (above right) Pete Smith, excerpt from the book *Shelter from the Storm* installed in the small gallery of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.



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For up to date gallery hours, please visit the VAC website.

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Publication to accompany *Pete Smith: Stein's Law* at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, January 19 - March 29, 2020. The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington is supported by its Members, Donors, Municipality of Clarington, Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Ontario Arts Foundation and M & R Catering Co.





Life doesn't
require ideals.

It requires

standards

of

action.