

ArtReview ArtReviewAsia

Greg Parma Smith *Music of the Spheres*

Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich 22 April—27 May

Greg Parma Smith's painting skill puts one in mind of Parrhasius, the Ancient Greek artist who, according to the myth, tricked his colleague Zeuxis into believing that a curtain covered a painting when the curtain was the painting itself. Little wonder that sincerity is continually challenged in Smith's art, given his works' capacity to deceive; in his current series, through which he grapples with ideas of the spiritual infinite, they did so pointedly.

Smith, who is New York-based, is busy; when this show opened he had a survey show of about ten years' production ongoing at MAMCO in Geneva and another exhibition closing at his NY gallery. At Francesca Pia he reveals two tight groups of his work, all from 2017: four 'Offering' paintings and five featuring single flying birds, seen from below, which soar inside circles 'drawn' with small stickers of relieg objects. The former works, such as *Offering with Masks*, are still lifes of fruit and drinks sourced from Smith's urban environment, though referencing religious offerings. Pears, apples, a melon and bananas, including the stickers with which they are sold, are illustrated with boggling realism,

while the titular 'masks' are shaped like two crones' faces painted gold that adhere to the canvas to hover over the background. Painting over objects adhered to his canvases has long been part of Smith's repertoire, though this selection of works is restrained in comparison to others, in which he can paint on either side of canvases that peel back or, in other works, over larger objects in a kind of counter-*trompe l'oeil*, the image attempting to remain concordant even while flowing over the foreign objects. The works in the bird series, not painted from life, are still rendered in a lifelike manner, though with less attempt to appear real. *Roseate Spoonbill with Nimbus* describes the gradation of massive wings in roughly stepped intensities of pink, for example. And around it is a halo (or nimbus, gloriole, aureole or mandorla, as are used in other titles) outlined by cheap plastic decorative stickers, including clear jewel forms, hearts, cupcakes, dogs and all manner of other diminutive icky tat.

Across the two series there is a coming together of a range of nonspecifically spiritual symbols culled from or relevant to Renaissance Christian imagery, Buddhist practice and an

number of belief systems both ancient or new age — a halo here might equally be a mandala, making one great, and hollow, world religion, as it were. And this cultural synthesis is painted with infinite care, then studded with signs of cultural bankruptcy: forms that used to mean something but were put through capitalism's shredder, emerging as empty vessels with which to decorate a phone or other accessory. The press-text fustian, written by the artist, questions whether it's possible 'to hold both the spiritual infinite and a moralistic critique of ideology in mind at the same time.' I can understand why he would lean on highfalutin language when thinking about these things, particularly at a time when painters continually have to justify their endeavour, but it is unnecessary. Look up at those soaring birds, and before long the detritus that surrounds them escapes its base and earthly origin and takes on a rhythmic motion, drawing the viewer up beyond their own realm. Or does it trap you in an earthly limbo of clock faces or loading graphics? The infinite is present, of that there is no doubt, but its meaning is not to be found here. *Aoife Rosenmeyer*



Offering with Sunkist, oil on canvas, 76 x 117 cm. Photo: Annik Wetter.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zürich