

Against the Flow, 2011, oil on linen, Wendy Smith

# Seaflowers - Wendy Smith

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**Rochester**  
art gallery  
and craft case

## Seaflowers – Wendy Smith

Essay by **Caren Bland**, June 2011

*Caren Bland is a curator and Visual Arts Development*

*Officer at Medway Council.*

*Images courtesy of the artist.*

Seaflowers is an exhibition of contemporary paintings and textile installations by Kent-based artist Wendy Smith. The exhibition has been conceived as a celebration of colour and ritual.

For Smith, painting is a visual language for exploring beauty found in nature, the richness of culture and day-to-day hustle and bustle. Part of the challenge she gives herself is to create paintings that capture the essence of everyday narratives.

Informed by a recent self-initiated residency on the coast in Karnataka, South India earlier this year, Smith presents new work that responds to rituals, interwoven into the necessities of daily life and vibrant street culture in South India.

During her residency Smith immersed herself in everyday routine and the ritual of making. She observed women and children selling flowers to pilgrims and tourists outside the temples each morning, while local fishermen went out to sea night after night, as their families sold the day's catch at the market. She bought flowers from the temples each day to draw at her studio and visited the nearby fishing village to watch the villagers repairing and making nets and offering temple flowers to the sea.

Flower Market, Wendy Smith





Indian Reflection, 2011, oil on linen, **Wendy Smith**

Smith embraced India's fascination with the extravagant and the unassuming. Highly decorated and ornamented temples stand out with their brightly coloured painted columns and adorned entrances, in comparison to the surrounding dusty, basic conditions in which residents live. The contrast between traditions surrounding ritual and everyday necessities continues to interest Smith. She explores the exotic and the routine, from street scenes after a festival in *The Festival Ends*, 2011 to the intoxicating colours and commotion found on India's streets in *Parallel Paths*, 2011.

Rival forces are evident in Smith's paintings. A kinetic energy and sense of calm can be found in *Solitude*, 2011 and *Sea Rhythms*, 2011 where she explores the turbulence and tranquility of India's seascapes. In the exhibition *Seaflowers* at Rochester Art Gallery, she has explored pattern and space, absorbing herself within the richness of Indian

colours. She has introduced elements of printing, combining her passions and treating the canvas as both textile and painting.

Using oil paint as her chosen medium for this exhibition, rather than her usual medium acrylic paint, Smith has been able to pre-determine the pace at which she creates her paintings. The slow drying paint enabled her to reflect on the paintings as they evolved, allowing her to create subtle layers using a pallet of blended colours. Photographs, drawings and sketch paintings gave Smith the freedom to be playful and experimental in her work. The way texture, colour and light play on the surface of *Indian Reflection*, 2011 demonstrates this.

Other-worldly places and journeys of migration can be found in *Leaving for Calmer Waters*, 2011. Warm pink hues are interrupted by cloudy grey forms, while a repeat pattern in the shape of a bird seems to invade but also

be escaping from the painting, suggesting that the time has come to move on.

In her pursuit to investigate her passion for painting and textiles, Smith successfully employs printing techniques using hand-made wooden blocks bought from a market in Delhi, to create increasingly complex patterns and layers of depth. Animals, seeds and flowers are chosen to create repeat patterns and motifs which continue to be a part of India's visual landscape, from stencilled pigments on the tiled ground, to painted temples and courtyards. Smith's delicate yet confident use of printing within her paintings, as seen in *Emerging*, 2011 and *Against the Flow*, 2011 make reference to this charming and intriguing tradition.

Smith devised a symbolic language that crosses textiles and painting. Using a spectrum of different colours, repeat patterns, mark-making and layering to create depth, she developed a combination of techniques that allows her to explore new ways to represent reality through abstraction.

*Bed of Roses I & II*, 2009 are large-scale textile installations in the exhibition. These works show the starting point for Smith's desire to capture India's relationship with rich and sumptuous fabrics and colours.



*Emerging*, 2011, oil on linen, Wendy Smith

Inspired by the textiles in India, Smith set out to spend two hours a day making textile flowers from sari material. Sometimes she would get help from a local friend in the village, but mostly she spent this time as part of her own ritual of making. This making process has continued back in the UK with help from friends and family.

The result of this process is *Seaflowers, 2011*, an installation piece made of 2011 hand-made flowers. The flowers, which represent the fisherman's offerings made to the sea, are stitched onto a fishing net that was sourced from her residency. A rusted steel fishing vessel made by Smith is the focal point of this piece, offering salvage for those who seek refuge.



Detail from *Seaflowers, 2011*, Wendy Smith

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