

The fact of other people should be a constant revelation to any careful observer. The other, whether known or unknown, barely noted or deeply beloved, is essentially an unfolding mystery. “Only connect, the prose and the passion,” E.M. Forster wrote in *Howard’s End*, “and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.” To cease to live in fragments is easier in aspiration than deeds, of course, especially in a world itself so fragmented by technology, urbanization, isolation, and other human constructs.

Alex Colville, in commenting on a work by Jeremy Smith of a sleeping airline passenger, expressed the essential fascination of the individual with the other: “I have often thought: this (flying) must mean something, must have some deep (perhaps unconscious) significance; there must be some way to express this so that the person seeing the work will be engaged (not detached) by the image’s encapsulating of a human experience.”<sup>1</sup> Smith, Colville concludes, does this.

Often in the work of Jeremy Smith, the human experiences he chooses to portray are fleeting moments of connection, instants when an emotional spark seems to be set off between the observed and the observer. Whether his models are drawn or painted, Smith has a remarkable ability to convey their particularity, their specific presence. Looking at a work such as *Artist and Model*, 2012–2013 or *Reflection*, 1975, the viewer becomes the viewed; the unspoken phrase between us and them, between the looker and the looked at, is simple: I see you. Being seen, and feeling as such, is no simple thing, and it is, indeed, an encapsulation of a basic, and vital, human experience.

When viewing a Jeremy Smith painting—*Commuter*, for instance—we stand in for the artist, we see from his point of view. *Commuter* represents an instant, a farewell perhaps, as a subway train pulls away from the viewer. A young woman looks back, her fingertips flattened as she presses against the glass of the door in a tender and poignant gesture. Why this sense of melancholy? Is this someone known to the artist, a goodbye that is causing sadness? Commuting, of course, suggests repetition, a daily grind. Why is this moment special? There are stories within stories here. Perhaps this is just one of those momentary glimpses of another person, eyes meeting randomly, any connection something invented by the viewer. But maybe the scenario is more fraught, some sort of life change, the beginning or ending of something significant. We cannot know, but we are buffeted by the emotion, as if by the air of the departing train.

“Painting, somewhat like a descriptive novel,” says Smith, “takes shape over a long period of time and has a base in reality.”<sup>2</sup> A passing moment, fixed, painstakingly crafted—even the graffiti on the subway car is meticulously rendered—over a long time. *Commuter* implies a story, leaving us to fill it in. What we decide—it’s a random look, a loved one’s leaving, a regret, or a promise—tells us more about ourselves than we may want to know. Smith strives for simplicity in his work, he says, and sees it as “a destination, not a starting point.”<sup>3</sup> *Commuter*, perhaps, is about seeking a connection, and it is we, as viewers, who are travelling.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Colville, foreword, *Jeremy Smith*, Dundurn Press, 1988, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Smith, *Jeremy Smith: New Paintings and Drawings*, Mira Godard Gallery, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Smith, *Jeremy Smith: Paintings & Drawings*, Mira Godard Gallery, 1998.