

THE
NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON
ABOUT TOWN

Emily Mae Smith

By Johanna Fateman | October 5th, 2020

This fascinating young painter depicts a twilight mythic realm in her arresting new canvases at the Simone Subal gallery—densely symbolic, sharp-edged scenes, which achieve their meticulous illusionism thanks to Smith’s keen graphic sensibility. “The Idle Servant” seems to show a pivotal moment from a fantastic narrative. A melancholic broom woman (a recurring character in Smith’s œuvre) sits by a giant round window at sunset, overlooking a placid lake. This figure of dejected domesticity—and transgressive magic, perhaps—contemplates an ornate trunk with a lock, a potential Pandora’s box. In other compositions, supernatural thread whips around an upright needle, mice conspire, or industrial disaster looms on the horizon. Motifs of wheat sheaves and ginkgo leaves unite the works on view, suggesting an overarching allegorical significance, though pinpointing one proves impossible. Smith’s enigmatic paintings, which allude to folklore and “Fantasia” alike, are rendered beautifully, and mingle seamlessly, in a provocative meta-mystery.