

TANYA LEIGHTON

PRESS RELEASE

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JOHN SMITH

SIGN LANGUAGE

26 November 2015 – 27 February 2016

Preview: 25 November, 6–9pm

Tanya Leighton is pleased to announce an exhibition of new and recent works by legendary artist–filmmaker John Smith, his fourth solo exhibition at the gallery. In *SIGN LANGUAGE*, Smith presents two videos: *White Hole*, 2014 and *Steve Hates Fish*, 2015. These videos are joined by two framed reliefs titled *One State Solution*, 2015 and *Plasticine Flag*, 2015, which are sculpted from the eponymous modeling material.

The political and conceptual locus of the exhibition, *White Hole*, is constructed from one solitary image, pictured alternately in both positive and negative. Dependent on when the viewer enters the screening room, the video will either confound or engage. Half of the six-minute seamless loop is accompanied by an unintelligible voiceover, which at the start sounds like an inscrutable foreign language, but after a few moments of listening reveals itself to be reversed English. This soundtrack accompanies viewers on an uncharacteristically slow journey to the end of a train tunnel, eventually giving way to bright, unblemished white. But the train continues on, a tiny black speck appears on the horizon, and this time we hear the artist speaking to us.

With characteristic calm, Smith describes his only visit to a communist country – Poland in 1980. As a young leftist based in Great Britain just after the election of Margaret Thatcher, Smith recalls being pleasantly surprised by the lack of advertising signs, finding it amusingly difficult to determine from their window displays what shops were selling. By contrast, most Poles that Smith met longed for the capitalism of Western democracy. The artist then takes us 17 years forward to Leipzig, well after the fall of the Iron Curtain and just after the election of Tony Blair in Great Britain. The former East German city seemed to be flourishing under capitalism, yet growing unemployment and income disparity had fostered feelings of disquiet among the city's residents, who coined a new aphorism – they felt like they could see 'a tunnel at the end of the light', just like that experienced by many British socialists after their initial enthusiasm for Blair's 'New Labour'.

Smith has long engaged with the concept of misunderstanding – be it ideological, political, linguistic, or misunderstanding that arises from subjective narration, filmic devices, and our relationship to the media that shape our view of the world. Smith's latest video, *Steve Hates Fish* is an exploration in manufactured misunderstanding. By deliberately confusing the popular 'Word Lens' translator app for smartphones, which translates text in real time using the phone's camera, Smith recasts the shop signs in his local neighbourhood as a bazaar of dada-ist plays-on-words. The jumpy, often useless jumble of words onscreen inspires a kind of empathy. Watching the app search its memory for a corresponding translation is somehow not far

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from the futility of trying to make heads or tails of signage in a country where one does not speak the language.

Alongside *Steve Hates Fish* are Smith's two Plasticine reliefs, the most overtly political pieces in the exhibition. *Plasticine Flag* is simply that – a Palestinian flag sculpted from unaltered lengths of coloured Plasticine. *One State Solution* uses the colours of both the Palestinian and Israeli flags to spell 'PALESTEIN' in block capital letters. For an artist who has long engaged with politics – those both as local as neighbourhood house demolitions and as global as international border disputes – Smith's directness presents a stark political imperative: act now and direct the course of the future away from the tunnel at the end of the light.

John Smith's work has been widely shown internationally for more than three decades. It is regarded for its formal ingenuity and its ability to combine compelling narrative with an acute observation of the everyday, often subverting the boundaries between documentary and fiction. As Smith puts it, '...if you look hard enough all meanings can be found or produced close to home'. Smith was the winner of the 2013 Jarman Award for achievement in artists' filmmaking. His solo exhibitions this year include Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig; Vita Kuben, Umea; and Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg. Retrospective programmes of his work were presented during 2015 at international film festivals in Leipzig, Munich, Stuttgart and Vilnius.

For more information and images please contact info@tanyaleighton.com or telephone +49(0)30221607770. The gallery is open Tuesday – Saturday, 11am–6pm and by appointment.