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*Jeffrey Smart (1921–2013), a painter's eye to poetry and story;
through thirteen key works from 1962 to 2011*

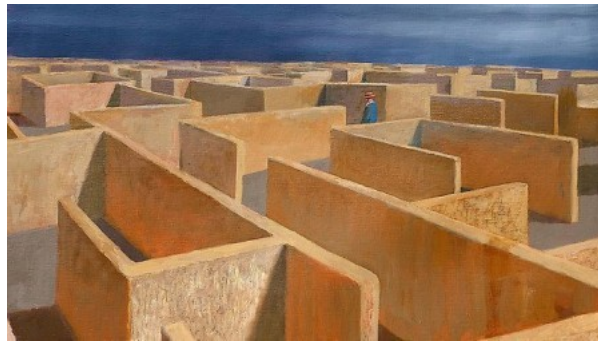
Much has been written about Jeffrey Smart in serious art journals, scholarly publications and retrospective catalogues, and his place within contemporary Australian art is firmly established. Always a polished raconteur, Smart was a welcome guest for radio and television interviews, and became the subject of film documentaries and numerous newspaper and online profile pieces. But Smart's many fascinating links with the literary world, with writers and writing, still remains to be fully explored, and is my main focus in this admittedly long-time fan's tribute, which tries to do some justice to some of his most iconic works.

Jeffrey Smart died in June 2013, barely a month before his ninety-second birthday, after producing striking images of the post-modern industrial landscape; his very consistency of vision becoming a sort of fixed signpost within a rapidly changing world.

Born in Adelaide in 1921, Smart lived out his final years in productive serenity after a long struggle to accept his homosexuality and develop the self-confidence to perfect and make a living from his art. His paintings are now both prized and widely collected, but on the way to acceptance, Smart endured many setbacks, including fraught love affairs, and financial uncertainty. He also faced recurrent self-doubt, and had to negotiate the ever-changing credos of contemporary art, its various isms and schisms.

Smart completed his final painting in 2011, not long before he became wheel-chair bound: titled *Labyrinth*, it was part of a major survey exhibition of 2013: *Master of Stillness*, assembled by curator Barry Pearce, in partnership with Adelaide's Samstag Museum. *Labyrinth* shows a blue-suited man standing in a paint-scumbled, terracotta

maze, which stretches all around him to the far horizon, and presumably to infinity. The man, who represents H.G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine*, but might equally be Smart himself, looks directly back at the viewer, as if unsure whether he has arrived at the centre of his ambitions, or is now entirely lost. The image is typical of Smart: a work of strict compositional exactness, yet full of wit and ambiguity. If the painting is metaphorical, then perhaps Smart always belonged in this maze where, as in T.S. Eliot's lines from "Four Quartets": "the end of all our exploring / will be to arrive at where we started / And know the place for the first time."



Labyrinth, 2011

Smart's 1996 memoir, *Not Quite Straight*, is not meant to be a scholarly work. Its puckish breeziness flies in with the title, which refers to a whim of Smart's father, an Adelaide land developer, who named a certain "Jeffrey Street" after his newborn son in 1921. But, as Smart relates, the street "had an odd little bend to it," then adds: "The kink is still there, softened by age." Smart's memoir is an agreeable read; chatty, witty and intelligent. It is also very honest about coming to terms with his homosexuality, even relating how, as a young adolescent, he removed his clothes to embrace a naked bronze statue of Hercules in a public park. Smart says: "When I read Proust 10 years later, I was tremendously moved to read he had done the same thing in the Tuileries."

After his parents rejected architecture as a first-choice career for their son, Smart became convinced he was "born to paint," but over a long life's journey to that end, had sometimes to take on many transitional roles: as an art teacher, ship's dishwasher, ABC

broadcaster, pioneering expert in TV studio lighting, newspaper art critic, memoirist and much-travelled wit and raconteur.

Remarkably it was only in 1965, when the self-doubting Smart was forty-four, that he thought “my painting was getting somewhere.” He found his ideal environment to work in the early 1970s, moving from Rome to his Tuscan farmhouse-cum-studio, *Posticcia Nuova*, which he discovered with Ian Bent, his boyfriend of the time. Smart was forty-nine when he and Bent purchased their little *fattoria*, in 1971. Thereafter, it became the stable base for Smart’s many travels. (Significantly, Smart never really disowned Australia, and often returned to his country of birth, describing himself as “an Australian who lives overseas.”) After breaking up with Bent, Smart shared *Posticcia Nuova*’s congenial domesticity with the person who would remain his major life partner for more than thirty-five years, the Gippsland-born Yale MA in Fine Arts, happily turned Tuscan farmer, Ermes De Zan.

Smart jokes that his alignment with things literary, and particularly with poetry, may have been “fore-destined,” recalling how his otherwise business-minded father prized a collection of verses by the nineteenth-century British poet Arthur Hugh Clough, and even visited Clough’s grave in Florence, oddly convinced that he, Smart Snr., was literally Clough reincarnated! Before he died in 1959, the family discovered that Jeffrey’s father was secretly keeping a mistress. As Smart writes: “All this tied up with Dad’s interest in A.H. Clough, who was also a lifelong and dedicated adulterer ... Mum showed me ... (an) engraving of Clough—there was a resemblance.”

Smart’s own life-long immersion in poetry began with T.S. Eliot’s “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” which confirmed his dawning artistic fascination with the slum streets and vacant lots of Adelaide, its new urban-fringe landscapes. In Eliot, Smart discovered “authentic poetry with images I could accept immediately.” An early Smart canvas is titled *Wasteland I, 1945*, and *Wasteland II* soon followed. Smart eventually committed most of Eliot’s work to memory, along with the verses of other poets he admired, including W.H. Auden. Smart was always an avid reader, an artist for whom books and ideas were important, even vital. Senior curator Barry Pierce has pointed out Smart’s “eidetic memory for poetry.”

Smart was eventually to meet Auden in 1950, at the invitation of the latter's partner, the librettist Chester Kallman, at Auden's "pretty grotty house in Forio," on the island of Ischia off the coast of Naples. Waggishly, Smart tells how Auden was being visited at the time by a rather po-faced pair of married academics on a research mission: "like pious pilgrims ... come to worship at a tarnished shrine." Smart and Auden shocked the couple by loudly discussing the not-so-hidden charms of certain local fishermen who doubled as part-time bisexual prostitutes in the tourist season.

Some of Smart's links with books and their authors, and with more ephemeral forms of writing, such as journalism and radio scripts, were incidental and tangential, albeit interesting; while others I believe go to the heart of his inspiration as a major artist, and central again to this is the concept of *poiesis*.

Through his depiction of a visual world distilled to its essentials, Smart's work provides much immediate pleasure to the eye, prompting us to look again freshly, as if for the first time, at the "elusive obvious," the wonderfully strange and the strangely wonderful things that daily ground and surround us.

But Smart's approach is traditional, in the style of the second-century BC mosaicist Dioskourides of Samos, or Renaissance masters such as Piero della Francesca, both of whom he claimed as essential influences. Always, Smart's hard-edged brilliance is imbued with an elusive quality of compositional repose, of silence and stillness, the same as he found in T.S. Eliot.

Although Smart makes no mention of Wallace Stevens in *Not Quite Straight*, and I have found only scattered mentions in critical writings about Smart, I am convinced that he was also thoroughly steeped in Stevens's poetry and philosophical ideas. They surely resonate so much with his own thoughts, as Stevens wrote in the poem "Credences of Summer": "Let's see the very thing and nothing else ... // ... desiring an object that was near, / In face of which desire no longer moved ... / The meaning of the capture, this hard prize, / Fully made, fully apparent, fully found."

I believe Smart shares with Stevens a common approach and sensibility. And Smart likely *did* read Stevens, being such an avid reader of poetry, and considering Stevens's mid-century prominence. Be this as it may, a discussion of Stevens will help us to more

fully appreciate Smart's world, and precisely how it seems to emerge through "a glass sharply."

According to Stevens, the true uniqueness or individuality of things is never final or fixed. It emerges most fully into being precisely at the point at which reality is about to change. The trick is to really *see* that change, and capture it, at the fullness of its emergence. Only then does reality seem to take on a sudden, novel resonance—when we are most aware of change, and hence of reality's inherent, self-creative potency.

Stevens's idea of *poiesis* is akin to philosopher Martin Heidegger's description of *becoming* as a "bringing forth," like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, or plant from a seed, through which its essential indwelling *being* is revealed. For Stevens, this process is a disclosure of immanence, and simultaneously a natural, cultural and individual process—essentially, a democratic process—to which everyone contributes. Stevens celebrates this in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "The poem of pure reality, untouched / ...straight to the transfixing object... / At the exactest point at which it is itself / ...with the sight / of simple seeing ... We seek / Nothing beyond reality. Within it / Everything"

Auden also touches on active seeing, as apposed to just casual looking—but in much more ordinary and everyday sense—in the poem "Sext": "you only have to watch his eyes: / a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon / making a primary incision / a clerk completing a bill of lading ... / How beautiful it is, / that eye-on-the-object look."

Germaine Greer applauded Smart for having: "eyes to see the poetry of our demotic culture ... It takes a rare insight to transform the longing for the beautiful into a creative way of seeing ... Beauty is ... a characteristic which intelligent beings confer upon chaos as a way of comprehending ... or controlling it."

At its most profound, Smart's work resonates with a philosophically mediated understanding of *poiesis*, of an active *making* of the beautiful; but always with a painter's specific comprehension, and expressed in plastic terms. For Smart, it begins with a sudden recognition of potential subject matter, the capturing of a fertile "seed" image. Perhaps when driving on the outskirts of an industrial town, a detail leaps out at him from

the surrounding view; a percept or motif almost demanding to be worked into a new painting, standing in clear definition against a world noisy with clutter and distractions.

As Smart explained: “Sometimes, I’ll drive around for months ... then suddenly I will see something that seizes me. A shape, a combination of shapes, a play of light or shadows ... I make rapid sketches, take photographs ... to capture a moment of ecstasy.”

The angle and intensity of the light, and precise time of day, were always vital for Smart, who preferred morning or afternoon, when the light was “side-on and clear.”

Smart then painstakingly re-worked, revised and re-composed everything in the studio, gradually disclosing a distilled ideal of the scene, its illumination becoming fully apparent, and captured in purely plastic terms of colour, line and pigment: “My paintings are synthetic, in that I move things around relentlessly, change the height of buildings, the colours, to get the composition right.”

Smart was also aware, of course, that his paintings might last for centuries in museums or collections. So there is a double sense of arrested time; of an archive of stillness, with the image subsumed into a larger tradition; which for Smart became his classically informed take on the new industrial fabric of our cities.

In T.S. Eliot’s words, Smart’s method proceeds by a painstaking “purification of the motive” (and considering his wit, along with his devotion to Eliot, it’s not too irreverent here to substitute the word *motif* for “motive”). Eliot also persuaded Smart of the importance of “a simultaneous culture of the present,” a collage of the old and the new, and resulting ambiguity of mood, as in “Four Quartets”: “a grace of sense ... // ... both a new world / And the old made explicit, understood / In the completing of its partial ecstasy, / The resolution of its partial horror.”

It is easy to find evidence of isolation and alienation in Smart’s paintings, but that is only one of his, or perhaps *their*, many moods. Works can also be ironic, or wittily detached, amusing and amused, serene and downright celebratory. Of his moment in history, Smart said: “I like living in the 21st Century—to me the world has never been more beautiful.”

Smart shared with both Eliot and H.G. Wells a pre-occupation, bordering for the former on an *idée fixe*, with the ultimate nature of time: slippery *time*, which is always just the present moment, dilating into one's memories and experiences, while simultaneously erasing them, and yet elusively remaining just a single moment, that of *now*: the slippery endless *nows* of *now*, always engaging our awareness—while simultaneously constructing it.

Like Smart, Wells had read and been swayed by Irish engineer and author J.W. Dunne, who in his 1927 book, *An Experiment with Time*, proposed the concept of temporal simultaneity. Put simply, all moments in time are taking place at once, all at the same time. But human consciousness reduces this simultaneity to familiar sliding clock hands, the perception of a continuous passing moment. Dunne's notions are reminiscent of Eliot's preoccupations in "Four Quartets": "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past ... // Time past and time future ... / Point to one end, which is always present." An uncanny timeless quality pervades many of Smart's paintings, alongside heightened effects of light, perceived as a distillation of stillness and silence.

Unlike the reality of a highway or bus-stop, no sound comes from a painting, there is no constant hum of change, no smell of diesel fuel, no tactile bodily sensations, no passage of time, or new details emerging into, or out of, view. Our human sensory modalities, usually so strongly engaged, have been reduced to the purely visual and spatial. Smart's paintings leave a meditative space, an ultimate "Get Smart" world from which the agents of Chaos have been banished. Everything is now under formal Control, and placed in a larger moment of art history, that of his renovated classicism.

Smart not only found the world of literature, and particularly poetry, a creative source and resource; but shared the common desire of writers to make it new, to commit fully to their cultural and historical moment.



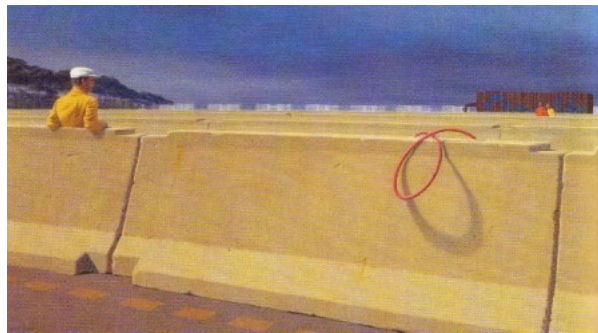
The Oil Drums, 1992

The trumpet playing figure in *The Oil Drums* (1992) seems a re-assertion of the human scale, and of human whimsicality, in the face of the modern industrial landscape, while also celebrating that landscape. Smart worked painstakingly on *The Oil Drums*, after he first noticed them while driving near Arezzo. But he was unhappy with his first attempts at the easel. Then he saw how he could add a trumpet player: “I remembered years ago in Sydney, at 5am one morning, being woken by a man playing the trumpet—and watching him out the window, serenading the dawn.” When he added the man, the painting was resolved.

The Oil Drums is like a bright, morning fanfare announcing the arrival of the modern industrial world, celebrating its extraordinary geometric shapes and primary colours. The trumpeter is a soloist, leading his orchestra of massed *chromatic* forces, and one can imagine how the hollow round drums sounded as they were rolled and thumped down beside the road. Smart’s “signature” sky here is dramatic and overcast, but the drums are rendered in very clear light. Some critics, however, see something troubling in those looming clouds and distantly advancing tower blocks; portents of environmental collapse, pollution, acid rain. As Auden wrote in his poem, “The Two”: “The sky is darkening like a stain / Something is going to fall like rain / And it won’t be flowers.” The painting, however, has a sunny, upbeat mood; of pleasure and celebration, perhaps more in accordance with Stevens, from “It Must Change”: “There was a will to change ... // a kind / Of volatile world, too constant to be denied ... // The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves”

Smart often said: “I like urban things ... You must remember that a windmill ... for Rembrandt was an agricultural machine and people [at the time] were amazed that he would paint them.”

Light is rendered superbly in *The Oil Drums*, reminding us how Smart became a lighting expert during the pioneering days of Australian television, when he was a regular broadcaster for the ABC, from 1956 to 1964. Such expertise proved handy: “Since those years at Gore Hill I can never look at a film, whether it is television or the cinema, without unconsciously noting where the reflectors must be ... I can’t say it destroys the magic; if anything it is even more interesting.”



The Road Dividers, 1988-89

Of *The Road Dividers* (1988–89) Smart wrote: “I was driving from Rome to Arezzo and became caught in a traffic jam. I started cursing, when I noticed a procession of concrete road dividers with this thrilling line of light and shadows, looking across the tops. I yelled Thank God for the traffic jam, and got down to sketch. I worked on it for a long time in my studio.”

In several of Smart’s paintings, you will find your eye immediately travels to some strategically placed and usually quite ordinary object—such as a dropped scarf, a towel hung from a window, a bouncing ball—which functions as a visual punctuation mark, a crucial pivot on which the whole composition turns. Such objects have a stubborn reality of their own, an indwelling presence, that of “the thing in itself.” I am reminded of that phrase in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: “the ineluctable modality of the visible.”

In this instance, the coil of pipe in the right foreground, remarkably, provides just as strong a focus—or perhaps an even stronger one—than the casually resting man in the yellow jumper, whose classical-bust-like head and shoulders show above a road divider on the left.

Smart’s droll explanation of how this coil of pipe came to be reveals a mind very open to chance and the fortuitous accident: “A lot of studies were made for this work. Even at the final stages, I was still not satisfied. When I put the painting out to dry, a long piece of shaving became lodged on the tacky paint on the top of one of the concrete slabs. It was just what was needed at that very point, and the shaving was substituted by a short length of hose. The shaving floated in like a blessing from on high ... I locked myself in the studio, turned that shaving into a piece of tubing, with a cast shadow, and I knew I had a finished picture.”

Perhaps we can only go so far in apprehending the final *thingness* or *suchness*—the ontological being *qua* being, as it were—of any object, or of the larger world in which we live. But the deeper, philosophical task of pictorial realism—for painters like Smart, Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, Alex Colville, Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi, and in the veridical surrealism of Rene Magritte—is to shine a painterly light on such things. Reflecting on the ultimate nature of any object also summons its essential mystery, provoking that most universal of philosophical (and scientific) questions, one that has long engaged small children and philosophers alike, framed in *Ontology 101* as *why is there something, and not just nothing at all?*

Wallace Stevens also wrote about a certain quality of objects, which he rather confusingly called “imagination,” which has nothing to do with fantasy, but is rather an irreducible, elusive individuality existent in things: an imaginative quality of the actual thing itself. In an essay on this subject, Stevens writes: “The acute intelligence of the imagination ... its power to possess the moment it perceives. If we were speaking of light, no further demonstration would be necessary. Like light (the imagination) adds nothing except itself.” In Smart’s world too, it is the light of the mind that ultimately illuminates things, just as it does in Vermeer, another of his painter heroes.

The colours in *The Road Dividers* are very carefully chosen to direct the eye along a series of implied diagonals; for example, the truck's blue lettering picks up the distant sky, while its black paneling agrees with the dark trees. The human figures appear unremarkable and slightly incidental, yet also have a quiet dignity, as they help construct giant road works, perhaps our modern equivalent of grand pyramid and cathedral building.



Self Portrait at Papinis, 1984–85

Although Smart finished several droll, cheeky and ironic portraits of Australian writers: notably, of Germaine Greer, David Malouf and Clive James, I agree with art critic John McDonald, when he says: “Smart is, at best, an occasional portraitist, and is too prone to treat his subjects like chess pieces ...” The exception I would make to this is his wonderful portrait of still-life painter Margaret Olley and his own *Self Portrait at Papinis* (1984–85). In the latter, Smart is a pug-faced, puckish figure, faintly smiling against a crumbling wall and toppling soft drink crates. He looks out from this canvas very clear-eyed and resigned; coolly surveying the world, smart as a painter.



Autobahn in the Black Forest II, 1979–80.

Around the 1960s Smart began exploring the outskirts of Rome, just as Italy was undergoing a massive economic transformation. He found a quickly changing *mélange* of light industry, radio towers, antennae, satellite dishes; his signature content. Smart was even invited on a private tour as part of the opening of a new *autostrada* between Rome and Florence. He recalls it as one of the most exhilarating experiences of his life, traveling at great speed and captivated by the signs and scenery.

Road signs are more than eye-catching: when driving, they can't be ignored; and we are conditioned to obey them. In Germaine Greer's words: "the world Jeffrey Smart has created belongs to us ... We read its arcane symbols effortlessly and just as swiftly translate them into sensation." In *Autobahn in the Black Forest II* (1979–80) there are waves of signs in succession, generating a relentless staccato rhythm, and our gaze is propelled into the pictorial space at high speed.

But this is all illusion. The canvas is still, with the effect of speed ironically frozen, and time fragmenting into a rush of overlapping planes. The image also projects backwards, towards you, the viewer, pulling up sharply at the iron pole in the right-hand foreground, which jumps out of the picture, very starkly asserting its obdurate material existence, and the danger of sudden impact!

As speed dissolves distance, the relentless op-art flicker of the markers, and long curve of broken yellow lines on the right, all sweep up the eye into a giddy spatial adventure. The repeated marker planes and rhomboid parallelograms establish musical rhythms, which remind me of the German electronic band Kraftwerk's marvelous 1974 album, *Autobahn*. The sense of freedom is euphoric, as the world becomes pure spectacle, perpetually unfolding through a windscreen.

This image is also reminiscent of some arcade games, or flight and driving simulators, all seen through a sort of speed-tunnel vision. It might suggest "the cinematic theory of time," which posits that moments are like separate frames: as in a film reel, which only join in apparent seamless motion when passed in front of a light projector.

The painting has a slightly delirious quality; the realised dream of earlier Italian futurist artists. It is also reminiscent of Duchamp's 1912 painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which shows a figure broken into motion lines and overlapping planes all rushing on in a sort of staccato forward blur.

But freeways are also banal, an *in-between* space, in a new *no-place* world that is *any place*. Freeways (and "fee-ways"!) *must* be consistently designed if we are to drive on them safely. Here, Smart has come a long way from when he first read Eliot's "Preludes," and could at last truly capture: "a vision of the street / As the street hardly understands."



Near Ponticino, 1978

A few years prior to completing a signature 1978 work, Smart noticed several men carrying arrow-like signs while he was driving near Ponticino. It was: “Quite a surreal sight” but too dangerous to stop and make immediate sketches. Instead, the scene “had to be drawn as soon as possible on reaching home.”

In *Near Ponticino* (1978), a lone *autostrada* worker is carrying a sign on his back, like a hermit crab within his own little carapace of private meanings. Nature is figured by the very carefully rendered grasses on the left: all contained and ruled off, yet nature will eventually re-colonise the bitumen, with its cracked paint and pebbles. The man is a walking enigma, not only carrying his meanings around with him, but imposing them on nature, and literally “signing” the landscape: this might appear foolish, odd, heroic; and the road is very long, as it swerves rapidly out of sight to who knows where.

In the distance a large, pink, truncated sign must be read backwards. Like other signs in Smart’s paintings, it is huge and imposing, dwarfing the human scale and often forcing an odd disengagement of his human subjects with their surroundings.

In a world where everywhere is becoming like everywhere else, signs catch attention, and also regulate and perhaps partly determine perception; they introduce a new way of seeing the world, as one gigantic text. The signs in Smart’s landscapes literally inscribe

them with human meaning, and we must learn to read them accurately if we are to make sense of our world, and navigate our way through.

There's a pointed coda to this perception. In 1930 Smart's father was helping to develop Adelaide's Moana beach resort, and crucial for the venture's success was proximity to a new rail station. Smart and his father drove to the site, dismayed to find the authorities had placed the sign "Moana Station" far from the beach. Smart says: "I helped my father dig up the sign and we moved it nearer the road. The railway station is still where we put it." This was instructive: far from being "empty signifiers," signs were already shaping Smart's future.



Corrugated Gioconda, 1975–76

In Smart's witty *Corrugated Gioconda* (1975–76), we see the juxtaposition of the banal with the revered. A couple of green palm tree "heads" look over a corrugated fence covered with peeling posters and graffiti, where the Mona Lisa smiles out from the vertical intersection of "the golden mean," a classical division of the rectangle thought by Renaissance artists to be the most pleasing to the eye. It seems *La Gioconda* is being promoted in a new publication by Fabbri Editori. There is graffiti of a heart with an arrow through it, "JS (loves) ED," affirming Smart's commitment to his new partner, Ermes De Zan, and perhaps lines of Stevens in "My Uncle's Monocle": "Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love / An ancient aspect touching a new mind."

Edmund Capon has written in appreciative terms of this work, describing it as: “a classic Smart composition: the foreground dominated by the corrugated fence, rattling and disheveled, plastered with torn and ragged posters ... Yet here [*La Gioconda*] still manages to smile serenely and enigmatically through the debris of time ...” In the distance are “a glistening new apartment block and stately palm trees set against a brilliant blue sky. The contrast, both psychologically and compositionally, is startling.” There also seems a sly doubting of the idea of progress. In Eliot’s highly ironical words in “Four Quartets,” it is: “a future that is not liable / Like the past, to have no destination.”

In his memoir, Smart recalls a prose poem by W.B. Yeats, “The Golden Age,” where Yeats describes how we have been left: “imperfect, incomplete, and no more like a beautiful woven web, but like a bundle of cords knotted together and flung into a corner ... the world was once all perfect ... (but now) the best of our moments are marred by a little vulgarity, or by a needle-prick out of sad recollection ... if only they who live in the Golden Age could die, we might be happy, for the sad voices would be still; but they must sing and we must weep.” Smart, however, was always alert to those haunting voices from the past, and threw his own golden web of geometry across scenes of modern life, capturing moments of light, stillness and silence. He continued to employ a compositional grid of traditionally proportioned lines and planes, of balanced volumes and colours; such that the arbitrary moment was subsumed into a timeless classical repose.



The Traveller, 1973

In *The Traveller* (1973), a balding man stands in a slightly claustrophobic space between two buses. One of his arms has been cropped by a bus door. He waits in a traveller's "no place," presumably just passing through. There is sunlight and shadow, while reflections play across the sides of the right hand bus. A truncated graphic in the background reads "lat ...," and one is tempted to add an *e*, completing "late." A sense of resigned waiting fills the canvas.

As Eliot wrote in "Four Quartets": "Fare forward, travelers! Not escaping from the past / Into different lives, or into any future; / You are not the same people who left that station / Or who will arrive at any terminus ... You shall not think 'the past is finished' / Or 'the future is before us.'" Such words also bring that famous saying of Heraclites to mind, that you can't step twice into the same stream, because by then it will be an entirely new stream, and you a different you.

Some critics have seen this pudgy traveller as one of many similar figures in Smart's paintings: as a Hitchcock-style, walk-on cameo, who stands in for the painter, and reappears in a variety of predicaments, roles and moods. In several canvasses Smart referred to him as "Mr. T.S. Eugenides."

Although he eventually settled in Tuscany, Smart was essentially placeless: a traveller, and citizen of the world, who belonged anywhere and nowhere. But he resolved this problem brilliantly, by making his true heartland a purely conceptual one; it became his place within art history. His contemporary take on Renaissance classicism was his true country, one for which he always felt a yearning. It is the *art*, surely, in Smart that leads him back to himself and home. But recapturing that sense of belonging always depended on the next painting, and its painstaking execution. Smart worked towards an unrealisable Classical ideal of perfection; while imbuing his work with a specific quality, which Wallace Stevens describes, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," as: "Of things as they are ... / Perceived in a final atmosphere."

Essentially, Classicism has a sense of immanence (as apposed to transcendence) and values rationality; it has a static equilibrium, and subscribes to a credo of aesthetic formalism. Yet, there are also lively touches of the Baroque in Smart, which inclines to

the theatrical and dynamic; whereas Smart's vestigial Romanticism, which values the emotions above all, or may be symbolic, is somewhat distrusted by him, and put in the background, as it were, usually in the form of sun-shot clouds and turbulent skies.



Factory and Staff, Erehwyna, 1972

In *Factory and Staff, Erehwyna* (1972) the small group in front of the factory are hard to make out as individuals, but the central figure of the “foreman” was modeled after one of Smart’s Tuscan neighbors; another after Smart’s one-time boyfriend, Ian Bent, and yet another is a Smart self-portrait. There is a dramatic, stormy sky, but the factory stands in serene, bright sunshine. The group seems almost comic; slightly pathetic squiggles of flesh composed into an oddly tight rectangle, as if posing for a photograph; or indeed, for a painter. In Smart’s paintings, the fleshy impermanence of human figures contrasts against steel, glass and concrete, underlining their human vulnerability, an existential pathos. The tiny figures, and their human egos, seem out of scale; they are slightly abject, comical and absurd, dramatically reduced in scale by their own aspirations made concrete as built form. The work’s sardonic, or perhaps *parodic*, mood is obliquely echoed by a reverse order in the painting. Rather than having a dominant natural horizon, the scene is subservient to one formed by the building’s roof line, with bits of nature appearing over a manufactured horizon. This reversal is also mirrored by the painting’s title, “Erehwyna,” which is “anywhere” spelt backwards. The painting’s ruled-off foreground, its repeated horizontals, create a sense of static calm, and of waiting. The figures are dwarfed beneath a massive, creamy yellow, vertically modular wall, foregrounded by a candy pole

chimney. Cramped structures to the left look amusingly shunted out of the frame, while a diagonal hillside leads to a small hat-like structure, which stands out on the summit like “the proverbial.”



Housing Project no. 84, 1970

The high-rise apartment block in *Housing Project* (1970) has a modular, Lego-like façade. Its highly articulated and detailed fabric already looks like modern computer circuitry—even way back in 1970, anticipating the chip, the pixel and the byte, or digital-age scenarios of a de-natured future, one perhaps in which we can live exclusively through our mobile phones, after downloading an app. called “life.” The building’s texture also summons more ancient things, such as Etruscan mosaics, embroidery design, an abiding human love for *pattern*.

Visual variation here is provided by deeper perspectives into the background, and in the foreground by finer details of curtains and blinds, or a cloth hanging from one window. The essential human element is asserted by a tiny couple, at top right, enjoying an animated conversation between balconies.



Control Tower, 1969

A modern airport control tower is a very contemporary structure, part of a world that did not exist before the 20th Century, thus providing new subject matter for art. In *Control Tower* (1969) there is a thrusting tower topped by an observation room; a voluminous red-brick circular building, and tiny roof of a pink high-rise very low in the background. Everything has an intense focus, with the front of the tower in sunlight.

Our eyes are led to the arrow sign with the letter C, which seems a stark injunction to *see!* More obviously, given the painting's title, C might stand for Control. Or is it the conventional symbol for *male*, reversed from right to left? It also looks like a huge ear, listening for invisible electronic signals, recalling the years Smart was an ABC broadcaster. C might also stand for Composition, or Circulation of attention. More generally, it is just one of many the markers which “sign” the modern landscape, and help us navigate and negotiate its complex circuitry. The picture is composed to lead the eye in a clockwise direction, and it feels much harder to read it anti-clockwise, *against* the direction of the arrow.

The dark, unsettled sky imparts a sense of drama. In Smart's paintings, skies are never just neutral pictorial space, but fully integrated into the picture plane. This was something he learned early on, when he visited Dorrit Black's studio in Adelaide, and studied early

cubism with her. Smart's skies seem to attract adjectives as much as clouds—adjectives such as “menacing,” “moody,” “brooding,” “portentous.” Such atmospheric seem a nod to Smart's vestigial romanticism, as he explores an entirely modern viewpoint, contemplating our “new sublime,” looking out from, and across the vastness of, a purely manufactured landscape.

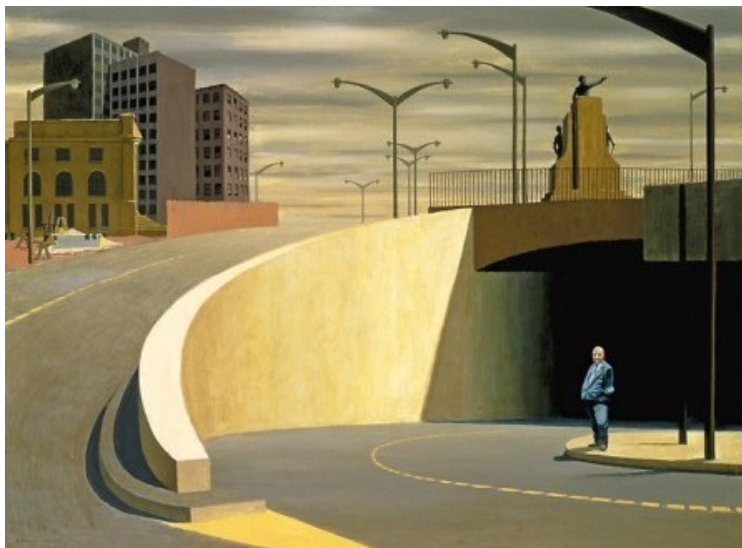
Our point of view is very low in *Control Tower*, perhaps looking up from a bottom gantry, where Smart has positioned us. The tiny figures on the walkway help us measure monumental structures against a human scale. But Smart's chatting onlookers don't seem intimidated or fussed: they could be enjoying some casual tour of inspection, disposing themselves to gain a better view and generally savoring the moment. They really seem at home in this landscape, because it *is* a sort of home, so recognisably of their, and of our, collective making.



Morning Practice Baia, 1969

The general mood of *Morning Practice Baia* (1969) is decidedly upbeat, even triumphant. We see an acrobat, perhaps from a nearby circus, expertly juggling a large yellow cube with his feet. Smart, who was usually quick to point out defects in his work, called *Morning Practice*: “one of the best paintings I have done.”

Smart makes a direct reference here to a well-known “blue period” Picasso, titled *Young Acrobat on a ball* (1905) in which a lithe acrobat balances on a ball, while a seated strongman looks on. Art historical references may not end here, however, because the yellow cube’s shadow, thrown against the wall in Smart’s painting, looks very similar to a “philosopher’s stone” in a famous allegorical etching by Durer, *Melencolia*, which shows the despondent Angel of Genius, in a moment of introspective self-doubt, surrounded by sadly discarded tools of geometry and architecture. In the Durer, a medieval magic square gives the date of the work as 1514, when Durer was 43, and also illustrates the Fibonacci series of compositional ratios, sometimes referred to as “the golden mean,” and which Smart habitually employed in his work. Smart was five years older than Durer when he painted *Morning Practice*. In contrast to the earlier etching, Smart’s painting dispels dejection and doubt. Formal geometry is now his plaything, his technique firmly under control, allowing a new freedom.



Cahill Expressway, 1962

Smart’s iconic *Cahill Expressway* (1962) is one of his most popular works, and also widely appreciated by readers of Australian fiction. An anonymous and seemingly unknowable, blue-suited, rather pudgy man stands marooned in a shock of light, on a swerve of road in Sydney’s Cahill Expressway. The balding man, with his sleeve tucked

in, is missing an arm. He looks with jaundiced eye at the viewer, as if we are somehow responsible for his situation. The expressway entrance is dark and forbidding. It may lead down to the bowels of the earth: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here”) you might think, particularly if he takes a wrong turn into oncoming traffic!

Art writer Christopher Allen has suggested that *Expressway* might be an updating of Annibal Carracci’s 1596 painting *The Choice of Hercules*, in which “the young hero has to choose between virtue and pleasure.” According to Allen, the blue-suited man can go down into “the doom-dark tunnel,” or climb higher to “ascend the road of achievement.”

Cahill Expressway was painted in a very down time in Smart’s life. He relates in his memoir: “By 1963, I was feeling like throwing it all in before I cracked up. My emotional life was in a mess.” Smart later experienced a sort of breakdown, in which he felt so dissociated from himself, it seemed “an out of body experience.” Shortly after this low ebb, he gave “self-therapeutic” painting classes at Sydney’s Callen Park, for “those poor people who were convalescing from mental illness.”

Smart usually dismissed all biographical interpretations of his works, however, by emphasising their purely compositional aspects. He wrote: “The fat man in the dark suit, in various guises, is in many of my paintings, because a strong vertical rectangle with a bald head is a lovely shape.”

In all his interviews, Smart was consistent. He did not like to conjecture upon, nor certainly “explain,” the meaning of his works, while remaining happy to discuss their formal and technical details. He simply believed his paintings should speak for themselves. It was his job, just like that of any good artisan, to make them beautiful and striking. After that, the viewer had endless licence to interpret. As Desmond O’Grady put it in a 1995 interview, Smart was taciturn about such things because: “for him, it seems, significance springs from form and is a mystery.” A mystery, one might add, that he seemed wary of disturbing, in case it evaporated away, purely from being over-considered.

Edmund Capon has also commented on Smart’s: “lonely figure of the mysteriously one-armed Mr. Eugenides standing marooned in *The Cahill Expressway*.” Capon says:

“Smart’s human figures are usually isolated, solitary in spirit and in place ... [and thus there arises] the temptation to read them as assuming some crucial psychological position or meaning.” In doing this, Smart might be, in Capon’s words “teasing us into a content that is only form.”

Barry Pierce notes, however, that when he was once pressed further on the point, Smart: “made a concession. ‘Who is he?’ answered Smart. ‘He is you and he is me ... Long past the threshold of life, he still feels he is not yet there. My old boy finds himself in a nightmare situation of responsibility and failure at the same time.’”

The bald man establishes a strong vertical line, extended by the triumphant statue above him; which looks, at first glance, to belong to a 19th century explorer, a triumphant figure for colonising optimism, its raised arm an injunction to discover and conquer. The statue’s gesture is both repeated and parodied by the arms of the streetlights, which resemble huge scythes, and we recall the suited man’s missing arm; which suggests incision of possibility, and mortality and failure; *quel dommage*.

Capon mentions “Mr. Eugenides” because Smart once identified his one-armed man as the same figure inhabiting Eliot’s “The Waste Land”: “the Smyrna merchant / unshaven with a pocket full of currents.” Eliot’s poem implies this mercantile wanderer is homosexual; while the desiccated fruit in his pocket suggests seeds of possibility that might never grow.

The actual Cahill Expressway was named after a former premier of NSW, and the statue in the background, by sculptor Bertram Mackennal, is of Shakespeare surrounded by various characters from his plays. A familiar quote from *The Tempest* is set in its masonry: “Our revels now are ended ... / We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.” The statue was repositioned in 1959 to make way for expressway works, and Smart modified it again for his painting, considerably changing the bronze figures and plinth. Smart was fretfully dreaming of Europe and artistic independence at the time, keen to move on before the years slipped irrevocably away and his own life was indeed “rounded.”

The Flagellation (circa 1457) by the Renaissance mathematician and artist Piero della Francesca was Smart’s favorite painting, and there is probably a subtle reference to it in

Cahill Expressway. The raised arm of the Shakespeare statue is in exactly the same relative position to that of a Roman-style, golden statue in Piero's painting, significantly positioned directly above a scourged Christ figure.

Cahill Expressway suggests many possible narratives, as to who the one-armed man is, what he is doing there on the expressway, and precisely why. Smart's paintings—with their carparks, motorways, flyovers, high-rise blocks and diminutive human denizens—contain cues and clues that almost always suggest stories, as many as individual viewers might care to invent. Smart called this “a door left ajar,” and I think it arises from an ingrained, democratic and egalitarian impulse. Smart seems always subtly inviting the viewer to contribute to his imaginative project, as a way of sharing in his “ecstatic” discovery and depiction of the post-modern world.

Cahill Expressway was printed on the cover of Peter Carey's 1974 short story collection, *The Fat Man in History*; and while not directly inspired by Smart's painting, Carey later lauded Smart for his bold, imaginative, modernising intent. Another remarkable collection was compiled by the late Helen Daniel in 1989: *Expressway*, which was subtitled “twenty-nine Australian writers respond to Helen Daniel's invitation: stories based on Jeffrey Smart's painting *Cahill Expressway*.”

Daniel committed herself to accept in advance every story she had commissioned, allowing authors complete freedom as to style and length. Her bet paid off handsomely, as most contributions to this landmark collection are good to very good, and the best memorable.

Expressway is organised in a unique and elaborate way—as a printed labyrinth—with Daniel supplying multiple choices as to which story to read next. At the end of each section, she provides possible thematic pathways to follow. You can even detour outside the book altogether, into other works by the same author. This allows almost infinite detours through the book and beyond, if you care to explore them and are sufficiently time-rich. The alternative is to ignore her plan, and just read sequentially, which may have been the route for many readers.

Some authors in *Expressway* use Smart's painting as an almost arbitrary starting point, very much constructing their own fictional logic—for example, stories by Kate

Grenville, Grant Caldwell, Barry Dickins and Brian Mathews. Some of Daniel's invitees, however, and often just as successfully, located their stories *within* the scenario of the painting, or directly referenced the painting; for example, those by Louis Nowra and Bill Reed. By contrast, still others picked up on the bland surface banality of Smart's work; notably, those written by Michael Wilding and Amanda Lohrey. Several stories involved mazes, minotaurs and labyrinths, particularly Rod Jones's dark and disturbing "The Ulcer." Rodney Hall's story, "Bart," also makes mention of a labyrinth; while Janette Turner Hospital's "Eggshell Expressway" is a sort of elaborate psychological maze; while Marion Campbell's stylistically dense and difficult "My Flat Companions" is an endlessly self-referential puzzle (Borges in a blue suit?).

Janette Turner Hospital's tale is doubly remarkable for seeming prescient, when one of her characters has a vision of a blood-spattered Princess Diana in a black limousine, in some unspecified dark underpass. Remember, this was written around 1989, almost a decade before Diana's death in 1997!

Reading *Expressway* again today, it is remarkable that Smart's disarming figure, in his oddly non-committal setting, could have inspired such an array of amusing, disturbing, grittily realistic and experimental fictions.

A decade after reading *Expressway*, my own interest in Smart was re-awakened, in the year 2000, when I gave a floor talk, titled *Seen for the First Time, Again*, as part of a Smart retrospective exhibition at Melbourne's Heide gallery. I wrote a slightly facetious flyer which invited viewers to: "Take a fresh view of Jeffrey Smart. Don your hard hat and industrial goggles, and join the floor talk with the road crew, out on the expressways of Jeffrey Smart's unique visionary world." I followed up my talk with some creative writing workshops using Smart's paintings as stimulus material, and those taking part produced some terrific work. This may have been the very first, but certainly not the last, time Smart's artworks have been drawn on in this way. I have since learned that writing teachers in various settings, and at all levels, now routinely use Smart images as fiction inducing images, in exactly the same way Helen Daniel first did with her seasoned professional writers.

Finally, in the latter half of the twentieth century, Smart experienced the usual contradictory and confusing ups and downs of public, critical and art market re-appraisal. For a time he felt excluded by art movements such as abstract expressionism, which developed in New York in the 1940s, then, in succession, by post-object art, minimalism, colour field and neo-expressionism, all of which seemed to leave him in a backwater of realism. Things improved for him with “pop art,” which emerged in the 1950s; then with “installation art” in the 1970s and 1980s; in which both figures and figuration returned to some degree, along with actual objects and other media, including paintings and film, all incorporated into larger assemblages. The arrival in the 1960s and 1970s of “photographic realism” really swung things Smart’s way; a movement which began as an off-shoot from “pop,” in which the modern world was painted in crisp, photograph-like images. Photorealism then morphed, during the 1990s, into “hyper-realism,” with its disturbingly lifelike and often gigantic sculptures of body parts; a trend that still remains current.

In recent decades there has been great theoretical interest in the nature, significance and circulation of cultural signs, and the whole field of semiotics. The idea of modernism as an ever more revolutionary succession of bold, disruptive and unique moments was already ringing hollow by the 1980s, as culture obviously continued to feed on itself. The end of “the grand narratives” of heroic modernism has since been proclaimed. Post-structuralism and notions of inter-textuality now place all works in an inter-dependent web of highly contested cultural and historical discourses, a situation in which meaning is inevitably shared and no purist or a-historical, aesthetically insulated position is possible.

Practices of “quotation,” “appropriation” and “re-cycling,” which artists like Smart had been pursuing for decades, have increasingly come to the fore. In more recent times, a postcolonial perspective celebrates former peripheries of culture. A painter like Smart has connections with the world’s cultural centres, both past and present, along with its former fringes; as well as with “the new everywhere” of the placeless traveller and tourist.

Ever more as the twenty-first century flies on, air travel, the smart phone, satellite connections, and real-time internet conferencing quickly bring everywhere to everywhere

else, and former urban centers of culture have been re-distributed; or decentralised into an “everyplace.”

Ironically, however, the very ubiquity of our contemporary world of homogenous built form had always connected Smart to his inspiration. The practical engineering and architectural constructions around us, and their streamlined, well-designed and often modular elements, would not function unless subjected to an engineer’s calculus of shaping and refinement. Our built world owes much to ancient Greek, and particularly to Roman, technological innovation, and favours a certain look, a refined and essentially geometric and minimalist aesthetic, perhaps more recently mediated by way of the Bauhaus or related design styles. No wonder Smart found joy in such things—they were his aqueducts of inspiration, grand highways to the spiritual home he still shares with the ancient mosaic makers of Pompeii; and with Phidias, who decorated the Parthenon with timeless friezes, and whose name Smart assumed for his early ABC art broadcasts in the 1950s; and with his idols Piera della Francesca and Poussin, as well linking him with painters closer to his own era, such as Cezanne, Mondrian, Leger, de Chirico and Morandi.

Increasingly, painting is the province of retrospectives, rather than centre stage in exhibitions of contemporary art. But it remains one of its many constituents, within large-scale interactive installations which might also include hybrid and techno arts, including works of digital or pre-recorded images and sounds, or live and pre-recorded performance. The art currently holding sway is a form of interactive spectacle, and the old ethnographic or science museum and formal art gallery have merged; hi-tech simulations from the world of science now contribute to aesthetic and hands-on experiences once reminiscent of fun fairs and amusement parlours. All the above are elements of a new, interactive and digitally enhanced art Disneyland. As part of this eclectic mix, exhibitions also showcase the periphery—Africa, Asia and the Pacific—alongside art from traditional world centres. Interestingly, even in this new artistic climate, *Master of Stillness* was very well attended, and audiences were only too happy to find or lose themselves in Smart’s crystal-clear and wryly de-centred maze.

Note

Where not directly attributed in the text, all quotes are from: Jeffrey Smart, *Not Quite Straight: A Memoir* (Heinemann, 1996); Jeffrey Smart, Edmund Capon and Germaine Greer, *Jeffrey Smart: Drawings and Studies 1942–2001* (Australian Galleries, 2001); Barry Pearce, *Master of Stillness: Jeffrey Smart Paintings 1940–2011* (Wakefield Press, 2012); Edmund Capon, Barry Pearce, Peter Quartermaine, *Jeffrey Smart Retrospective* (Art Gallery of NSW, 1999); Barry Pearce, *Jeffrey Smart* (The Beagle Press, Sydney, 2005); Helen Daniels, ed., *Expressway* (Penguin, 1989); Peter Carey, *The Fat Man in History* (UQP, 1974); T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (Faber, 1954); T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943); Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems* (Faber, 1953); Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (Random House, 1965); W.H. Auden, *Selected Poems* (Faber, 1968). For posted newspaper and journal articles; and online archives and references, Google under author names quoted in text above, combined with “Jeffrey Smart.”