

Melanie
Smith

11 April - 15 June 2014



About this Pack

This pack has been designed to provide background information about the Melanie Smith exhibition at MK Gallery.

For more information about our schools programme, please contact:

Hannah Gaunt
Formal Learning Manager
T: 01908 558 305
E: hgaunt@mkgallery.org

About the Exhibition

This spring, Milton Keynes Gallery presents the first major survey exhibition in the UK by Melanie Smith, one of Mexico's most celebrated contemporary artists, including the premiere of a new film, *Fordlandia* (2014), commissioned by MK Gallery.

Melanie Smith (born Poole, UK, 1965), has lived and worked in Mexico City for the last 25 years, and represented Mexico at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. She works in a variety of media – painting and photography alongside film, video and installation - and exhibits regularly in the United States, Europe and Mexico, with works held in major museum collections worldwide.

This exhibition focuses on works made since 1994 that relate to the artist's own experience of migration; travel, adventure and utopian aspiration combine with disorientation, dislocation and abstraction in the search for a brave new world. The video *Spiral City* (2002) shot from a helicopter as it circles above the urban sprawl of Mexico City shows an aerial view of the city's streets and buildings slowly fading to white as the camera spirals higher and higher. The film *Xilitla* (2010) features the 'Garden of Eden' in the Mexican jungle populated with architectural follies by the British poet turned Surrealist collector, Edward James, between 1949 and 1984. The new film *Fordlandia* (2014) was shot in the Brazilian Amazon amidst the remains of an aborted city and rubber plantation built in the 1920s by the car manufacturer, Henry Ford.

Alongside these films, a number of large museological vitrines contain hundreds of objects, paintings, photographs, collages and clips that build up an accumulated and evocative material culture, where archaeological remains and personal records mingle with tourist souvenirs as the eager process of excavation and discovery melds into a faded and enigmatic sense of the past.

Explore

This section contains information and questions to help students explore the exhibition.



Above and middle: Melanie Smith, *Installation View*, MK Gallery, 2014.

Left: Melanie Smith, *Bulto 6* (detail), 2010.

Key themes

Adventure
Tourism
Materials
Colour
Collage
Film
Consumerism
Natural
Manmade
Utopia

Introduction

Melanie Smith moved to Mexico City 25 years ago. Mexico City is the capital of Mexico, which is 5,500 miles away from us, across the Atlantic Ocean.

Mexico is very different to England. It is often very hot, and has rainforests, mountains and huge cities.

Long Gallery

This room is designed to look a bit like a museum. Have you visited a museum that looks like this? What things did you see there?

At first glance, what different objects do we see on display in this room?

What different materials are they made from? Are these natural materials or manmade?

Imagine it is 1000 years in the future, and these objects have been found in the earth. Scientists have dug them up and put them on display to learn about what life was like in 2014.

This is like archaeology - when we find objects like old pots, clothes and weapons buried in the ground, and use them to learn about people who lived in the past.

Also in this room are two colourful artworks entitled *Orange Lush*, 1995 and *Green Lush*, 1998-9. These look a bit like giant collages.

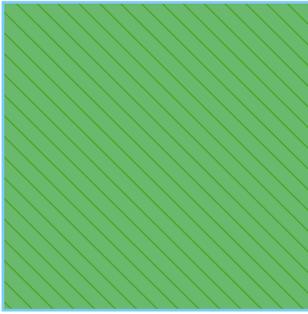
Melanie Smith has collected up lots of objects in the same colour to create these two artworks. What different objects can you find?

Melanie Smith made *Orange Lush* when she first got to Mexico City because the colour orange seemed to be everywhere she looked.

In Mexico orange is used to advertise things, people think the colour is so bright and attractive it will make you want to buy them!



Above: Melanie Smith, *Installation View* showing *Orange Lush*, MK Gallery 2014.



Above, middle and left: Melanie Smith, Installation View, MK Gallery, 2014.

Key influences

Surrealism
Abstraction
Robert Smithson
Edward James
Aldous Huxley
Joseph Conrad

Middle Gallery

What is in the *Spiral City*, 2002, film? What can we see?

The *Spiral City* film shows us Mexico City from above - Melanie Smith filmed it by circling around the city in a helicopter.

As the camera moves up and up, the city gets smaller. The buildings start to look like a pattern because a lot of them are the same shape and size.

Close your eyes and listen to the sound in this room. What does the sound remind you of?

On the other wall are some paintings, what do these pictures look like to you?

Are they detailed or simple, realistic or abstract?

Abstract means an artwork that doesn't look that much like the object in real life, but uses simple shapes, lines and colours instead.

Cube Gallery

When Melanie Smith visits a place, she films everything that she can see. She films the people, the animals, the plants, the buildings, the floor, and the sky.

She films some things close up, and some things far away.

Sometimes she films one thing for a long time; sometimes you only see it for few seconds.

Fordlandia, 2014, is Melanie Smith's new film. It shows us a place in the Amazon rainforest that a rich man called Henry Ford built. Henry Ford owned the very famous Ford car manufacturers.

He built the town of Fordlandia in the middle of the rainforest because the tree sap there could be used to make rubber for his car wheels. Did you know that rubber comes from trees?

The problem was that the Amazon rainforest is a really dangerous place for humans; there are wild animals and diseases. So even though Henry Ford spent billions of dollars trying to build a town where he could make rubber, in the end it was too dangerous and everyone left.

Would you like to visit Fordlandia? What different things would you expect to see there?

Xilitla, 2010 shows us another place hidden away in the forest. This time a British poet called Edward James decided to make his own special garden in a forest in Mexico. Artists from all over the world used to visit to get inspired about making artwork.

Some parts of the film show some workmen carrying something, what is it?

Close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the film, do they make you think of the jungle?

Sometimes the sounds don't match what you are looking at - why do you think that is?

Create

In the classroom activity ideas



Above: Melanie Smith, film stills from *Fordlandia*, 2014.

Left: Melanie Smith, Installation View, MK Gallery, 2014.

Materials

A5 Card
Coloured paper
Tissue Paper
Tracing paper
Old magazines/print outs.
Glue
Scissors
Felt-tip pens
Rulers

Postcard from an Unknown Land

For students at Key Stage 1 - 3

Take inspiration from *Collages for Fordlandia 13-22*, 2014, and create a textured postcard for an imaginary holiday to a mysterious hidden town in the middle of the jungle!

Instructions:

1. Create a background for your scene first using the coloured paper, and then add in features to create a landscape.
2. Cut out the shapes of people, animals or buildings from old magazines and add them to your collage.
2. Add a layer of tracing paper to your collage, and draw on top of it with felt tip pens to create an unusual effect.
3. Once finished, use felt-tip pens and a ruler to draw a postcard design onto the reverse of the card. You can add a message here to tell your family and friends about your trip to an Unknown Land!

Materials

Printed copy of Edward James' poem
Blank A4 paper
Scissors
Glue

Las Pozas - Jungle Poems

For students at Key Stage 3 - 4

Create a surrealist poem, inspired by the poetry of Edward James. Edward James spent a great deal of time in his secret 'Las Pozas' garden, depicted in Melanie Smith's film *Xilitla*, 2010. This activity uses the surrealist exercise of cutting up words in a text and rearranging them to create a new piece of writing.

Edward James wrote a poem about the garden, which he claimed was like a 'Garden of Eden':

*I have seen such beauty as one man has seldom seen;
therefore will I be grateful to die in this little room,
surrounded by the forests, the great green gloom
of trees my only gloom – and the sound, the sound of green.
Here amid the warmth of the rain, what might have been
is resolved into the tenderness of a tall doom
who says: 'You did your best, rest' – and after you the bloom
of what you loved and planted still will whisper what you mean.
And the ghosts of the birds I loved, will attend me each a friend;
like them shall I have flown beyond the realm of words.
You, through the trees, shall hear them, long after the end
calling me beyond the river. For the cries of birds
continue, as – defended by the cortege of their wings -
my soul among strange silences yet sings.*

Instructions:

1. Carefully cut the poem into lines, and then individual words.
2. Arrange the words on the table at random.
3. Play with the words, moving them around to try and make new sentences.
4. Try to create a new poem, story or paragraph that uses all, or almost all of the words from Edward James' poem.