

BROOKLYN RAIL

ROXA SMITH: NO VACANCY

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Roxa Smith, *Refuge*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 44 x 56 inches.

No Vacancy, the current exhibition at C24 gallery, takes some time to appreciate since there are no visible inhabitants in the colorful interiors depicted, aside from the occasional cat. What we do get are distinct inklings of persons suggested in all of the painterly roomscape touched off by the magnetic perspectives, dazzling color, and lofty eye levels.

Roxa Smith, the artist and perpetrator of this word/image puzzle, hits on some very specific experiences that the entire world has had: those lengthy losses of carefree, personal contact during the height of COVID. There are works included in this exhibition that predate 2019, so Smith's representations of uninhabited interiors are not solely due to the pandemic; however, there is a very noticeable uptick in the longing for human contact in the more recent works. Despite this, Smith's oeuvre moves past the negative connotations of the recent past to a joyful celebration of the twists and turns we all go through in these consistently engaging works.



Left: Roxa Smith, *Respite*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 36 inches
Right: Roxa Smith, *Consequences*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

With origins in Venezuela, combined with her many years spent in upstate New York, Smith was previously known as a plein air painter. Indications of that past approach come into play in a number of works such as *Refuge* (2023), where the artist leads the eye, with playfully designed pillows, up and out of the glass-enclosed space to an outdoor path that promises a sunny midday stroll. One of the most striking aspects of Smith's works is the consistency of style and vision throughout, regardless of the slight variations of aesthetics and methods from genre to genre. In *Refuge*, as with all of the acrylic paintings here, Smith meticulously paints the side edges of the canvas, thus allowing the imagery to fully and precisely wrap around the thick sides. This continuation of the clearly described elements on the painted surface adds gravity to the overall compositions, making the entirety seem more profound.

In *Respite* (2022), Smith charms the viewer with boldly patterned rugs and thriving plants, inviting us to wander through successive spaces to an area enveloped by lightly flowered walls. This is an important detail, as viewers can see in this instance how purposeful the artist is with her consistent approach to style and detail. Any seasoned painter can tell you the flexibility of acrylic paint is quite different from slower drying oils. What Smith does with her chosen medium is achieve a remarkable luminosity in her colors, and a technical prowess that looks very much like oils, adding an extra touch of naturalism.

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Left: Roxa Smith, *Intertwined*, 2022, Acrylic and embroidery on canvas, 12 x 12 inches
Right: Roxa Smith, *Juncture*, 2021, Map of Manhattan and paper on board, 18 x 24 inches

Intertwined (2022) is one of Smith's embroidered pieces, which have their own particular aesthetic and approach whereby the artist paints the canvas first, then stitches in the lines and shapes to add an expressive tactile quality. Clearly a challenging process physically since the thickly painted cotton is much less agreeable to pinning and pulling threads than the type of fabric one would usually use in embroidery. As a result, there is a slight lack of finesse in her technique; however, this somewhat less delicate look adds more arbitrariness, making the work more inviting, even organic looking. I also see these works as distinctly intimate due to those very challenges.

On one wall toward the far side of the exhibition space, Smith focuses on the fluidity of shadows created by inanimate objects. *Juncture* (2021), a collage of cut and patterned paper in the shapes of elongated—to suggest shadows—bicycle wheels sits atop a map of Manhattan. That reaching feeling goes right to the heart of our past need to get out and freely move about during quarantine. Another wall near the front entrance of the gallery holds a series of mostly earlier works. The most unique of the bunch is *One of a kind* (2012), which depicts a galley-style kitchen. Unique, because it presents a more serviceable and less comfortable place; inviting, because there are still soothing touches like potted plants, tribal art, teapots, and a throw rug adding coziness and warmth.

The three chair paintings, *Topsy Turvy World* (2022), *Consequences* (2022), and *Ripples of reality* (2023), feature the elements of fire and water. These works remind me of how many of our dreams changed during isolation, how they became more mundane in some instances, and at other times more weirdly symbolic and focused. There is no doubt that the world has drastically changed once again and Smith, like many other mindful artists of today, is helping us to look at our lives differently, to live and not just exist, and to never lose our connection to our past or our culture because things can turn on a dime.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/artseen/Roxa-Smith-No-Vacancy>