

**EXHIBITION**  
**FROM SEPT. 15 TO DEC. 8 2019**

*DIGGING UP THE  
PRESENT*  
**MELANIE SMITH**

PRESS KIT



**PARC**            **SAINT LÉGER**  
**CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN**

The Parc Saint Léger is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in a French institution of work by Melanie Smith, a UK-born artist who has lived primarily in Mexico City since the 1990s. She could be considered a surveyor of territories or even an archaeologist of the current moment. Her projects always engage with a specific place, usually in Latin America, using a multitude of media such as film, photography and installations. Her work also maintains a strong relationship with painting, a practice that provides insight into the way she views the issues on her mind. *Digging up the present* brings together both previously unshown and older pieces that, as an ensemble, interrogate the meaning and methodology of an archaeology of the present, and, by extension, the significance of these objects and the way we see them.

Smith conceives her production as a grand palimpsest constantly renewed by her experiences – of the past, of course, but also the present and perhaps the future. She made a site-specific installation for the Parc Saint Léger's central space deploying the conventions of a museum lab. This installation presents an inventory of finds made during an archaeological excavation, an improbable collection of objects inspired by articles in the collection of the Bibracte archaeological museum but in fact made and assembled by Mexican craftsmen and herself. Fragments play the main role in this work, which interrogates the material reality of what it shows us. Her objects seem more like discarded scraps, with no particular identity or specific origin. They are presented as testament to a line of descent, the results of a process of transmission and transformation, products of a contradictory inheritance. But while fragments are characteristic of all of Smith's work, artifice is no less important. The latter's function is to render visible a process, framework or *mise-en-scène*, and the way these procedures incite or filter our perception.

For *Bulto* (2011), "package", Smith reproduced the shape of an archaeological artefact discovered in Peru, a funerary bundle containing the mummified remains of a human corpse. Her version, wrapped in bright red plastic, is an unabashedly contemporary creation. The videos show this bizarre, inexplicable object perpetually moving in all sorts of vehicles and contexts. Here, too, Smith privileges a fragmentary approach to an environment that she studies while deliberately giving free rein to the indeterminate and the unexplained.

In the same vein, Smith's film *Maria Elena* (2018) is a narrative about modernity highlighting the scars left behind by imperial and economic colonialism. Maria Elena is a mining town located in the Atacama desert in northern Chile. The settlement was founded by the Guggenheim family in the 1920s to house workers in its saltpetre mine, a major source of the nitrates used for making fertilizer and gunpowder. While Smith bears witness to this colonial history and the obsolescence that has overtaken industrial modernism, her treatment of the subject is anything but documentary. On the contrary, this montage is somewhat disorienting. The narrative unfolds through fragmented and relatively heteroclitic images. The film's subject is the permanent environmental destruction caused by the industrial extraction of natural resources, but it proceeds through a meditative contemplation of the landscape and its wounds in the same abstract fashion as the series of Smith's paintings paired with the film. Once again this artist is asking us not so much to understand an issue as to engage with different frameworks of representation and perception.

**Catherine Pavlovic**

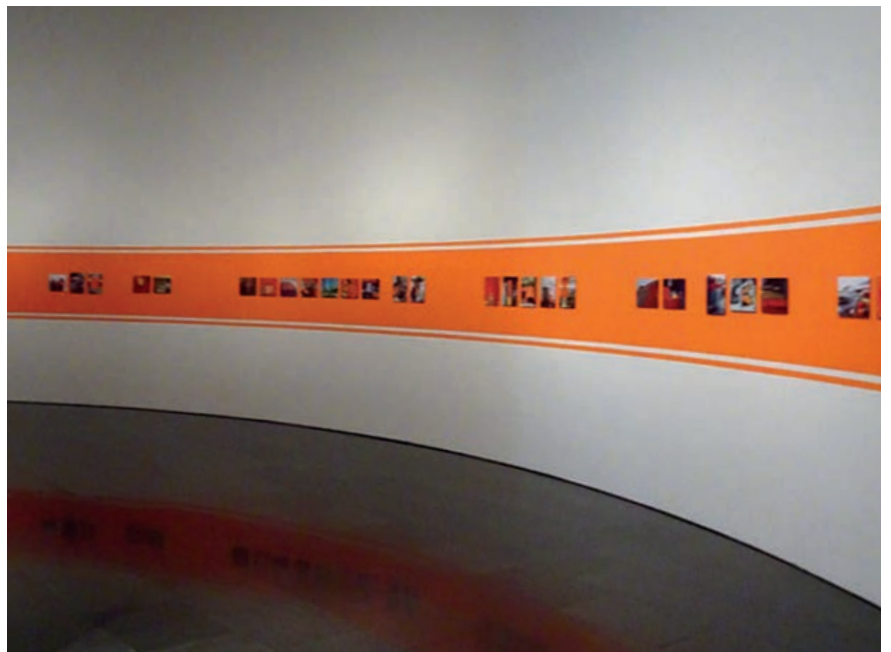
# MY WORLD

1995 - 2018

Inkjet printing

15 items, 25 x 20 cm each

53 items, 20 x 25 cm each



Exhibition view, *Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice*, 2018, MACBA, Barcelona  
Courtesy de l'artiste

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# BULTO

PACKAGE

2011

Co-author: Rafael Ortega

Color video, sound

36 min 46 s

This video will be show on 6 screens.



Image taken from the video  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich



# MAPS, MUD AND MUNDO(S)

2014

Black & white video, sound

14 min 4 s



Image taken from the video  
Courtesy of the artist and Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City

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# MARÍA ELENA

2018

Color video, sound

24 min

This film will be show with a series of 15 paintings:



Image taken from the video  
Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich and Plataforma Atacama

# ORANGE LUSH

1995 - 2019

Plastic and wooden objects  
Variable dimensions

This work created in 1995 has had several versions, a new version will be created for the exhibition in Parc Saint Léger. The photography represents the version of 1995.



Picture of the 1995's version  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

## PART 2: MORE THOUGHTS ON INSUBSTANTIAL MATTER AND AMALGAMATIONS

2019

Polyester resin, raw clay, terracotta and  
polychrome expanded polystyrene  
Variable dimensions

This work will be a specific creation for Parc  
Saint Léger exhibition. It will be a new version of  
*Irreversible/Illegible/Unstable* presented at the  
exhibition: *Melanie Smith. Farsa y Artificio*,  
2019, Museo Amparo, Mexico City.



Exhibition view, *Melanie Smith. Farsa y Artificio*, 2019, Museo Amparo, Mexico  
Courtesy of the artist

The following text is the first part of the interview:

## PRODUCING THE FLAW: A CONVERSATION WITH MELANIE SMITH - CUAUHTÉMÁC MEDINA

Published in *Face and Artifice*, Mélanie smith, 2018

Ed. Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

CUAUHTÉMÁC MEDINA: It seems clear that around 2010, or slightly before then, there was a logical shift in your work. For one thing, you started a series of pieces that were far denser in their allegorical content, and I'd also say more 'distant,' with respect to social documentation: your research moved away from its object-driven photographic foundation, from the urban setting, and from the question of artificiality, shifting instead toward an interrogation of historical/symbolic spaces as signifiers of modernisation on multiple planes. For another thing, it seems to me, these works sought a kind of oblique gaze that resulted in pieces like *Farce and Artifice* (2006), which question a type of unplaceable taste, a political/ visual enigma.

MELANIE SMITH: What interests me isn't necessarily the sum of the parts; I think that's what you mean when you say that *Farce and Artifice* was a kind of conundrum, where the parts don't add up, like a story that doesn't have a beginning or an end... the pictorial touches the image as if 'behind the scenes'. That has always happened in my work: creating something is represented in the 'making of', like in *Six Steps to Reality* (2002). That oblique gaze appears in *Xilitla* (2010) and the idea of the mirror as a representation of how biased perception really is. After I left Spain and returned to Mexico in 2008, I decided I wanted to work on the idea of the gaze – not just in one direction or another, but slanted, through different perspectives and points of view, if you like. I think that was quite a conscious decision on my part.

CM: *Xilitla* is an essay you made in collaboration with Rafael Ortega that explores the cinematographic possibilities of this place. The video includes moments in which we see a distorting mirror pass by, as if trying to capture something that somehow turns out to be trapped inside itself. It has the advantage of placing the viewer in very direct engagement with a subject I'll try to present right away as 'the appreciation of tropical entropy', a line Robert Smithson explored in a type of inversion of the chronology of monument and ruin. Your film insists on the idea of a time that tries to flow in many directions at once: on the one hand, it's the circular time of the jungle, buildings wearing down, the mix of historical moments experienced by the buildings themselves and their moulds, Edward James's dream. But it's also the time of fantasies in this ghostly jungle. I get the sense that this experience also set forth a kind of temporality in which your work began to inhabit a very strange space neither the present nor the future nor the past in general, but rather a type of compressed time.

MS: Yes, I've thought about that. *Xilitla* is called *Xilitla: Dismantled*; it's like dismantling time. From *Xilitla* onward, my videos have something dreamlike about them. They don't have a beginning or an end, and they don't offer answers; they raise questions, but nothing is resolved. Things are inserted from other perspectives. It was unconscious at first, and I'm growing more aware of it: whenever I make a video or a film, it's like suspending time and thinking about the present, too. I think it's a space in which the past and the present – maybe the future, too; I'm not sure – are somehow superimposed. The fact of dismantling and using jump cuts in such a surprising way, the idea of suspending time and space in the present, is something that leads me to this 'other' space that I'm always searching for somehow. I think it's connected to the state of being a foreigner.

CM: I think it's very much present in the sort of 'death made eternal' that appears in your reconstruction pieces. That is, your pieces that centre on restoring a work of art that doesn't exist, as if you were painting it backwards.

MS: I call it – along with the person I work with, a restore – 'counterrestoration'. It means creating something new out of a past that runs in the opposite direction, as the 'restoration' itself does. It means making a new surface – of the copy, you could say; of something that did exist, but which creates serious gaps in the story. In having a restorer work live on one or several fragments of a wall, my goal has been to slow down cinematographic time and make it coexist with pictorial time.

CM: I'd like to think that these tactics emerge from a studied, wellunderstood observation of our strange relationship with that archaeological/ touristic/emotional space, the relationship that leads us through our experience of history – but which connects, in parallel, with a certain skepticism on your part when it comes to thinking that such a relationship could be productive.

MS: On my part? In the end, it isn't productive. I feel that what I'm saying about the act of erasing, adding in, taking out, and putting back in, is ultimately redundant, which prevents it from being a productive time. Yes, as you say, the story never ends; at the same time, it never began, either.

CM: In much of your work, it seems to me that there's an attempt to capture a very fragile state of almost arriving at the moment of the flaw...

MS: Or even producing the flaw, right?

CM: Yes, in dialogue with precarious social and cultural forms, amid an incomplete modernity, a tragicomic modernisation, or an unfulfilled sphere of desire. How do you understand that place?

MS: I think it's also a very dangerous place. The words 'precariousness', 'Mexico', 'Latin America'... they're like recurrences or occurrences that mean the work can be viewed with a certain touch of exoticism, which leads to an understanding of irrationality and precariousness as Latin traits. I'm very conscious of that. I don't understand precariousness or 'the flaw' as something negative, as an essentially failed modernity: these conditions we're forced to experience, produce, and understand can, I think, be positive circumstances, and I don't see them as defects or negative things in any sense.



CM: Your work doesn't generally indicate, much less express, that 'incompleteness' or erosion; what it does is explore the aesthetic that emerges from this particular state. It's hard to find a useful term, but it seems that you understand the 'beauty' or the 'seduction' of this context.

MS: Or, better put, the surface. The texture and surface... Yes: I think my work is to constantly deconstruct questions about the 'front side/back side' of politics, the surface, or the painting, so that I can explore what exists around the political and, let's say, physical 'framework'. Naturally, these questions contain the 'B side' of a society's construction, or of how a piece is physically made. I often show what's behind the construction of a project, a culture, or a society. And those questions, curiously, come from my training as a Minimalist, of understanding that 'B side' in industrial or synthetic production... When I came to Mexico, I realised I couldn't restrict myself to talking about that neat, whole, cleanly defined surface. And I think this has gradually spread, little by little, from the limits of industrial production toward nature. I think I'm looking for the absence of the sign on the surface, instead of looking for it in the concept. That's why I shatter any rational meaning of production, planting a bomb on it, right? All of this is normal for me; it's my world and it's normal. I think any artist, if you ask them the same question, will respond that we see all these worlds we create as perfectly normal. And that precisely is our strength and our failure. We stumble in the way that we produce, and we go forward. That's the very strength of the work.

CM: There are two or three moments where the work seems to suggest a state of over-fullness and nausea: you look saturated, fed up, your mouth full of plastic. You're fascinated with an emetic moment, when it's impossible for a person to eat her own soup.

MS: And what about the piece for La Tallera? How do you see that piece, then? The work with the remnants.

CM: But everything has to do with a saturation.

MS: Yes, that's it. I constantly create collisions in historical time, between certain formal instances... I don't see the piece for La Tallera as a performance, or a painting, or theatre, or music: it's a kind of sum of what it isn't. It's like a residue, all stuck together, somehow, where I finally feel that I'm composing in space and time. I'd been cooking up this piece for a long time, ever since *Estadio Azteca*, with all the pleasure it brings me to work in circumstances that overwhelm me, when people don't always do what you want them to do. My work always plays with the idea of accident, that something could happen at any moment when you're not working with professionals, but at the same time you're guiding the whole process. I draw from a totally different sense of history, forging this bond between the European past, Bosch, medieval times, and I bring it into a contemporary situation, to Mexico, with living bodies, producing a kind of cheap mimesis of those original paintings. And going back to your question, yes, there's something emetic, unconscious, that I don't exactly understand as I'm producing it. I hope it creates some kind of tension or... what was it you said? Fascination, when I'm unable to gather all the threads.

CM: Sometimes I look at your work and I find myself thinking about something I don't want to describe as courage, but rather as a kind of negative condition: with some pieces, you have to forget about what's absurd and shocking, to suspend your common sense. It's a state you have to...

MS: To get into... yes, it's like I'm challenging myself to something that I'm not sure can be solved. I set up the premise, I ask myself questions, but I don't set out any answers, and... yes, it means moving around like a dog. With that innate sense that the questions I'm asking myself are the right ones, and which emerge from the very beginning when I work.

CM: Could you tell us what those questions are?

MS: The pictorial framework, now situated in a geopolitical framework, in a relationship between what is 'behind' and what is 'ahead'; and what is it that happens beyond the illusion of the pictorial framework... I don't know if these questions are clear to everyone, but they're clear to me, and they've been clear since *Spiral City* (2002), with the grid. They're questions about the Minimalist framework, about what happens when you shift the piece's physical framework into a different context. *Estadio Azteca* (2010), *Red Square* (2011), Bosch, the mirror in *Xilitla*. I constantly reference art history and present a peculiar condition about what I've experienced here.

CM: I think it's quite apparent that these questions aren't about painting, but about... what would you say? The framework of representation? Because Melanie Smith sometimes paints, it's true, but she isn't a painter.

MS: No, I don't think I'm a painter. I think that representation breaks with certain ideas about the context of my work and its development in the nineties: the periphery, the centre, and their understanding as two different modernities. What has happened in my work, I think, is that it broke with a sense of the gaze between 'here' and 'there'. That gaze doesn't exist for me anymore. It's a hybrid of representations: a modernity that was or is constructed in this different way. Which leads to all these complex questions about my relationship with art history.

CM: What I'm understanding here is that you feel strongly about stressing that this modernity isn't a copy of European or American modernity, but rather a very paradoxical construction, dense, difficult to capture, because the reference point was never European and Western artistic authority.

MS: What I'm getting at is that I think this flaw, as we've always perceived it, isn't in itself a flaw; it's a possibility... I hate the word 'potential' because it's repeated all the time in the language of the art world, and it's over-interpreted, but I can't come up with another word to describe it. I think in my work I always draw from the resource of the flaw as something I'd like people not to view as such; I'd like them to understand that the backstage is the stage. Or that this extra, who isn't an actor, is just a person onstage. It's a way of building everything that deconstructs: the note, the music, the performance, the painting... I work with all of these elements as 'discordant narrative.'



CM : It's like you're demanding that the viewer position herself before this difficult ensemble of things – which isn't a whole, which lacks the absoluteness of a whole – as the possibility of feeling entirely able to use it, travel through it, think about it, absorb it, register it, laugh at it, implement it. A person doesn't look at it and say, 'What a great piece!' Because what you end up saying is, 'What a strange and special moment!'

MS: But don't you think that this lack of definition is important? That if something is powerful, then to some extent it's inexplicable? Because these are the very circles we turn around that lack of definition, which produces another series of questions. When I look at a work of art I can't define, a piece I don't entirely understand, it leaves a mark on me; it leaves me with something. That's one of the problems I have with some contemporary art: it adheres too closely to predictable canons, or black-and-white political canons. That doesn't prompt me to ask any more questions; it leads me somewhere I've already been.

CM: I think another question is necessary here: what does one do with the piece? In the sense of an 'empirical benefit' established by a certain tradition.

MS: Yes, well, I don't think there's any benefit to my work. Of course, the utility of a 'lack of utility' is very valuable to me, but I don't know... I think that, on the contrary, the feeling I have when I observe people's reactions to my art is sort of the opposite: people interpret a thousand different things about what I do, and maybe the path taken by my work hasn't been exactly...

CM: Practical...

MS: Going back to *Spiral City*, it's been a kind of spiral that moves like a vortex, travelling outward from the nucleus, which in my case has been Mexico City, toward the limits of the Amazon, of Chile – in the project I did in the Atacama Desert. It collects a series of substrates along the way, but it always returns to the same essential questions. My questions have never been linear; they're always spiral-shaped.

CM: Is it possible that some of your viewers might succumb to that fascination and somehow ask themselves, 'Does this have an affect on my culture?' Forget about social utility; the question is: where does Melanie Smith's work lead culture?

MS: Let's go back to the trace. These traces that appear in my work: the luxury of being able to look inside and outside the 'here'. The work leaves certain signs behind, and they're inevitable: going into the Palacio Nacional, the Estadio Azteca, Xilitla... bringing in Diego Rivera, Henry Ford, these figures... there has to be a certain echo.

CM: Let me take a step back. I understand that you're exasperated with most contemporary art, not because you'd rather go back to a prior art, or an essential art – that doesn't even cross your mind – but because you feel it's resulting in literal work, work that's trapped by its own concepts.

MS: I struggle with the capital-P Political we can see in lots of art, and I wonder about the motives beyond that 'P'. I'd like to understand politics from a different perspective than the one assigned to it by contemporary art. I feel that politics is now in everyone's full view, and I think contemporary art often becomes a kind of pretext to tell the audience what we already know. We artists have a propagandist way of manipulating what's clear to everyone else and is already understood as politics. In my opinion, that reduces its power; I think politics is elsewhere. I feel that this is what I always come back to, to the place of 'nonmeaning,' or to losing the sign. If we can accept that everything about politics has been a failure, that nothing can be saved, and if we think of the sign as another place altogether, then maybe we'll be able to think differently. And that's why I come back to the idea of the trace, to this 'something' that's left behind, that overflows.

CM: This state of indeterminacy, this un-concreteness, this illegible aesthetics... doesn't it merely serve to justify work that's poorly executed and can nonetheless be over-interpreted? Does your technique serve to obscure?

MS: No. Because if you take the time to understand my work a little, I think there are very clear questions, a series of thoughts unfolding over the years. I don't want to cause confusion; I don't want these things to be mere fluff, you know? I just want to show that these lateral questions can be the decisive ones. [...]

# MELANIE SMITH

Born in England in 1965. Lives and works in Mexico City.

Wielding a broad array of media – painting, video, drawing, photography, installation and performance – her practice always attests to a very close attention to the socio-economic contexts in which she works. Whether exploring the exorbitant impact of heedless industrialization or the profligacy of consumer society, revisiting local traditions or interrogating archaeological artefacts and museums, she produces fascinating worlds where artifice and tragicomedy often jointly reign. As if relying on her own perception of given realities enabled her to reveal their formal, chromatic, imaginative and effective powers.

She deploys montage, palimpsest and sparing but potent references to art history (especially modernist abstraction) to produce art that can be disconcerting, stunning or disturbing. The result is a unique experience irreducible to any unambiguous apprehension.

Her work has been shown in numerous venues, notably PS1 (2002) and MOMA (2005), New York; Hammer Museum (2004), Los Angeles; Tate Britain (2006), Tate Liverpool (2009) and Tate Modern (2006), UK; Hamburger Bahnhof (2016, 2017, 2018), Berlin; Museo Tamayo (2004) and MUCA Campus UNAM (2006), Mexico City; The Modern (2013), Fort Worth; and SITE Santa Fe Biennial (2014), Santa Fe. In 2011 she represented Mexico at the fifty-fourth Venice Biennale.

## Solo exhibitions (selection):

### 2019

– *Melanie Smith. Farsa y artificio*, MUAC, Mexico City, Museo Amparo, Puebla, Mexico

### 2018

– *Fake and Farce: Backdrops for Seven Scenes*, Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City, Mexico

– *Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice*, MACBA, Barcelona, Spain

– Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich, Switzerland

### 2017

– Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico City, Mexico

### 2016

– *Abandoned Bodies and Uncertain Futures*, Sicardi Gallery, Houston, USA

## Publications (selection):

### 2018

– Barson, Tanya, Greeley Robin, Medina Cuauhtémoc, Melanie, Smith, *Melanie Smith: Farsa y Artificio*, MACBA, Spain

### 2016

– Greeley, Robin, Nuñez, Ana, Contreras, Jorge, Tlacoahuaya, *EN DOS LUGARES AC*, Mexico

### 2014

– Fordlandia, RM + Periferia Taller Gráfico, Mexico

– Arning, Bill. *Melanie Smith*. Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

## Press (selection) :

### 2018

– Jasper, Adam, *Art Forum*, New York, november

– *El Mundo*, Madrid, june 7

### 2017

– Martínez, Teresa. 'Siempre extranjera', *El Norte*, november.

– Torres Sifón, Sara. 'Atlas de ausencias. Melanie Smith en La Caja Negra', *Plataforma de Arte Contemporáneo*, september

– 'Melanie Smith en la Galería La Caja Negra de Madrid', *Wall Street International Magazine*, october.

### 2016

– Herrick, Debra. 'Beyond 2º', *Artillery*, june.

Website:

<http://www.melaniesmith.net/>

# RELATED

SEPT. –  
DEC. 2019

# PROGRAM

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## TOURS

**sundays september 22, october 20,  
november 24 and december 8, 4pm**  
GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION

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## CONCERT

**wednesday, september 22, 5pm**  
CLOCHES SOUS PRESSION (BELLS UNDER  
PRESSURE)

A musical instrument with water, created by François Dufeil (artist) will be activated by Charles Dubois (percussionist) in the Pavilion of the sources of the thermal park of Pougues-les-Eaux. Connected to the water supply, the device causes a derivation of the initial course and the water molecules memorize the vibrations, through the instrument before joining the network.

As part of the *Journées du Patrimoine 2019*

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## WORKSHOPS

**saturday, october 19th, 10am - 5pm**  
WRITING WORKSHOP  
WITH PIERRE BASTIDE  
Free, on registration

**sunday 27 october, 3 - 5pm**  
GUIDED TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION  
FOLLOWED BY A WORKSHOP AND A  
SNACK  
From 5 years old  
Free, on registration

## PRACTICAL WORKSHOPS

These practice workshops for adults will deepen the themes or practices discussed in the exhibition.  
Free, on registration

**saturday, october 26, 4 – 6pm**  
Exploring the representation of the  
landscape

**saturday november 16th 4 – 6pm**  
Reflection on the issues of urbanism

**saturday december 7th 4 – 6pm**  
Research around the status of objects

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## DISCOVERY TRAINING

**from the 21st to the 25th of october, 2 - 4pm**  
WITH VIOLETTE TOURNILHAC  
For one week, participants will be invited to browse the park of Pougues-les-Eaux to interpret it and thus better understand the place of the human in its environment. This week will provide an introduction to architectural and landscape observation drawing. An evolutionary model of the territory will also be realized and exposed at the end of the week with other productions in the Pavillon des Sources.  
From 6 years old  
Free, on registration

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## READING

**sunday november 17th, 3 - 5pm**  
FAMILY READING  
Reading in collaboration with the  
association Lire et faire lire.  
From 5 years old  
Free, on registration

Opening september 14, 5pm  
Exhibition from september 15 to december 8, 2019  
Opened Wednesday to Sunday, 2pm to 6pm and on appointment  
Free entrance

Cover image: Melanie Smith, *María Elena*, 2018.

Press : Clément Guignard  
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N I È V R E



The exhibition is supported by:



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