

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[Gallery One]

Emily Clayton, *Hydra*

January 21-February 26, 2023

Opening Reception: Sat. January 21, 6-8PM



Emily Clayton, *Piscivorus* (detail), 2022. Dye, silkscreen ink on paper, 83 x 51 inches.

Public Programs:

Artist Led Tour

Sat. February 4, 2pm

Emily Clayton in conversation with Leigh Ledare

Thurs. February 16, 7PM

Emily Clayton, *Hydra*

Smack Mellon is pleased to present Emily Clayton's first major solo exhibition, *Hydra*. In her works, spanning drawing, painting, photography and documentary video, Clayton uses the formal immediacy of painting and the intimacy of autobiography to consider class structures, power dynamics, and formations of subjectivity.

Installed on and around the main gallery's central columns, *Hydra* will feature new, large-scale, double-sided works on paper mounted to steel frames. The paper is dyed red, a color that has remained constant throughout Clayton's practice. Saturated and excitable, Clayton's red evokes violence, erotics, anger, and political standings. The color also reorders the visual hierarchy within the gallery space. At the core of the exhibition are editorial photographs the artist sourced from the archive of her hometown's newspaper in rural West Tennessee, *The Courier*, from the late-1970s through the early-1980s—a subjective time period that spans the years when she and her sister were born. These images appear as heavily half-toned silkscreens on one side of each of the works on paper. Affectively haunting and cinematic, they distill photographic trends intended to communicate the goings-on of the town. The verso displays intuitive and crudely rendered drawings. Together, the two sides enact a doubling that proliferates as a response—both separate from and in direct dialogue with one another. On one side, the externality of societal participation provides an imperfect mirror to the other: the interiority of psychological re-inscription.

The exhibition's title refers doubly to the Hercules-Hydra myth as well as to a central trend of images that the artist uncovered during her research into the archive: town inhabitants holding up dead snakes for the camera. In the Greek myth, Hydra was a snake-like creature defeated by Hercules, owing its resilience to its ability to sprout two heads when one was cut off. As a cultural mythology, this story was reimagined in the 16th century to legitimize the role of a white ruling class over the proletariat in efforts to control the labor force. As an exhibition, *Hydra* invokes this reinterpretation from the artist's subjective standpoint. The subjects depicted affirm the community norms of a type of rural, white, southern identity from that time period, which in turn map onto our current social, psychological, and political conditions. Embedded in these images are the signs and symbols that produce myths around racial hierarchy narratives and the pageantry involved in controlling civic and community life. The works' material qualities provide a quotidian texture to the ideological formation of this milieu. Through her insertion into the archive, Clayton examines how images inform the nuances of a locality's culture by the ways that visual norms are observed, practiced, and replicated.

S m a c k M e l l o n

BIO

Born in Savannah, Tennessee, Emily Clayton received her BFA from University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2004 and her MFA from New York University in 2015. Her recent exhibitions include: a forthcoming solo presentation at Stove Works, Chattanooga, TN (2023); Love, New York, NY (2020); Fiebach, Minninger, Cologne, Germany (2020); Ciccio, New York, NY (2019); Kate Werble, New York, NY (2015); and Susan Inglett, New York, NY (2015). In 2018 she published a drawing book, *How to Write an Erotic Novel*, with A6 Books in London.

This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Lincoln Restler, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Ruth Foundation for the Arts, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.

Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.

Hydra was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

Smack Mellon would like to extend a special thanks to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses who have contributed to the NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund.