

“Smoker and Mirror”

This is an odd picture.

How so?

In the middle where things usually appear there’s a blank wall. The interesting parts – the smoker and the mirror – are off to the sides.

Yes. And all you see of the smoker is a hand holding a cigarette. And the smoker isn’t reflected in the mirror. The mirror is blank.

Also, there’s that narrow corridor to the right leading into darkness.

Yes. I wonder what’s back there?

Something dark and scary?

Maybe the title is a clue to solving this mystery.

Oh?

It calls to mind “smoke and mirrors,” which is what magicians use to create illusions of impossible happenings.

I guess you could call the artist, Mr. Worth, a magician, an illusionist.

Yes. After all, the smoker, the mirror, the blank wall and even the darkness beyond aren’t real; they all exist, if they exist at all, only in our minds.

Sort of like how what you see in a mirror isn’t real but only a reflection of what’s real.

The painting itself, though: that’s certainly real.

Mirrors are real, too.

I wonder why the wall takes up so much of the composition?

Remember those all-white abstract paintings we saw at the museum the other day?

Yes. The wall labels said that the artist wanted to get rid of illusions. I wondered why a painter would want to do that.

One of the labels said it was to “purify” painting, as if illusions were dirty.

So that kind of painting teaches us to live without illusions? To be disillusioned?

Perhaps Mr. Worth’s blank wall is making fun of that idea.

How so?

In his painting, the blank wall hides something. As if to say that pure painting doesn’t get rid of messy illusions and fantasies but only pushes them out of sight.

It’s not easy being pure.

A Zen story occurs to me:

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a young woman also attempting to cross. She asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and continued on his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out "As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman; how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river three hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?"



**Alexi Worth, "Smoker and Mirror" (2012) acrylic on nylon mesh, 36" x 27"**