Roy Lichtenstein, René Magritte, Joe Brainard, Walt Disney. Many canonical names come to mind when looking at the paintings of Emily Mae Smith. But which bit makes us think: Emily Mae Smith? It’s a question the young female painter puts in the frame with her fantastic references to modernism. And she answers it in part, too, by muscling her way into a heavily male art history with her androgynous alter-ego broom and piercing stiletto heel.

How do you see your work as sitting between abstraction and figuration? I see people using the term ‘figurative’ to mean a few different things. Besides referring to an actual body being depicted, the term is also used to describe artwork that is representational and or pictorial. I work with images, signs and representations. My paintings are self-reflexive; they are about the world and they are also about the institution of painting itself. I dislike any notion of dividing figurative and abstract. Paintings are always both things at all times.

How do you set about a new painting? The initial idea for the painting almost always comes fully formed as an image in my mind. I draw a lot of thumbnail sketches to retain that vision and work out the composition.

Sometimes I do more elaborate renderings to expand on the idea. The image is honed because I try to eliminate anything that is not necessary. Sometimes I do some research on topics connected to the painting idea and I look for additional source material images. I have to plan a lot because there are many technical issues with oil painting that must be considered. I draw the composition on the painting following my sketches. Then I start painting in sections and layers. Some parts have to be done before others; some colours are going to determine how other colours look. I spend a lot of time mixing my specific colours. No matter how much I plan there is still a great unknown part of making the painting that only happens in the moment of creating it. There are inevitable revisions to the composition and plan. The mechanics of the painting are part technical process, part discovery.

A feminist stance or underlying handling of gender politics has been mentioned in reference to your works. How important is this to you when you go about making your work? It is important to me. I have my subjective and analytic perspective that I create from, like any other human in the world. I feel like a feminist perspective is still sort of
alien to painting and therefore necessary to it. One never fully knows what transmits; any discovery is good. All I can really know is some (not all) of what I put into it—there is a certain amount that is mysterious to me as well.

When and how did you develop motifs such as your sausageway broom and the teeth that frame some of your images? Both of those started in 2014. They were in my solo show at Junior Projects that year. The first broom I put in a painting was a riff on the broom character in The Sorceror’s Apprentice. It was a way for me to paint an object, figure, female and phallic all at the same time. I thought it was funny and an ideal vehicle. It doesn’t refer to any other broom at this point: it’s my own thing now. The ideas for my broom figure have changed and expanded since then; it has been moulded to my painting needs. You can say more difficult things with a character. The broom is my little Tom Thumb, traipsing through ‘Painting’, getting into trouble.

The mouth frame also started at the same time. I was studying Art Nouveau illustrations, and noticed how a frame device was often used to contextualize a narrative in those designs. I came up with the mouth teeth with moustache frame as a way to engender my paintings as ‘male’. It was kind of a joke. But then, as jokes go, there was a truth to it that resonated. These motifs opened doors and allowed me to paint ideas that otherwise I could not get out.

You’ve got quite a few shows happening in 2016. Would you mind sharing a few of the concepts you’ll be looking at in these shows? Increasingly I am making close-up paintings of my broom’s face—psychological existential portraits. They embody a crisis of seeing and being. My solo show at Mary Mary, Glasgow, will be called Honest Espionage.
Simone Subal Gallery