

Kannenfeldplatz 6  
CH-4056 BASEL  
+41 61 322 10 00

Pasteurvej 8  
DK-1799 COPENHAGEN  
+45 31 66 86 96

**BOB & ROBERTA SMITH –  
THE WORD OBSERVATORY**  
von Bartha, Copenhagen  
October 29 – December 23, 2022

info@vonbartha.com  
vonbartha.com

Von Bartha is pleased to present *The Word Observatory* (29 October – 23 December) a solo exhibition by Bob & Roberta Smith in the gallery's Copenhagen space.

*The Word Observatory* presents 28 'portraits' of words – 27 are in English and one is in French. The portraits are painted on freely-formed, straight-sided wooden panels. The polygonal forms on which the word portraits are presented create a constellation of words that can be read in a near infinite variety of ways. In the mind of the viewer many poems, aphorisms, truisms and slogans can appear.

This is in stark contrast to the source of the English words which come from interviews Bob & Roberta Smith conducted during the making of a television programme 'Bob & Roberta's Excellent Protest Adventure' (which is still available on YouTube). During the presidential election process of Donald Trump, Bob & Roberta Smith traveled to the USA and charted the rise of protest movements in the mid-teens. During the making of this film Bob & Roberta interviewed, among others, political figures from the left, Noam Chomsky, Billy Bragg, Bez from the Happy Mondays and Black Lives Matter activist Blair Imani along with some figures from the political right, Roger Scruton, The Westboro Baptist Church and Tommy Robinson.

The television channel's policy then, as it is now, is to air opinion from both sides in political programming. During the process of creating the programme Bob & Roberta Smith began to understand that this approach to reporting proved to undermine the political centre as well as giving little time to explore possible areas of overlap and perhaps even agreement. The words the people used did overlap – and while Bob & Roberta's view is that, mostly, words are innocent – The Word Observatory allows us to look again at words, consider what they are, figure them out, inspect them and consider how we attribute meaning to them. The Word Observatory then, is a joyous space with the purpose of celebrating the magic of language.

Bob & Roberta Smith has been painting words for over thirty years, or, as others would call it, writing. He has been misspelling words, enlarging words, colouring words and letters in harmonious and discordant ways. He has invented new words, painted other's words and written their own words. Bob & Roberta Smith is interested in how words look and how words sound.

Why is the word 'L'escargot' included in this constellation of otherwise English words? It is because Bob & Roberta Smith wants to summon the spirit of Henri Matisse and the ethos of one of his final works, which shares the title with this panel from *The Word*

VON BARTHA

*Observatory*. 'L'escargot' appeared when Matisse and his assistants threw what seemed like random sheets of paper across a floor and stood back to see a snail.

What will you read when you look into *The Word Observatory*? Will you see a linguistic battlefield or something more beautiful?

### **About Bob & Roberta Smith**

b. 1963 in London, UK / Lives and works London, UK

Central to Bob and Roberta Smith's thinking is the idea that political campaigns are extended art works which include a variety of consciousness raising artifacts. Much of his art takes the form of painted signs. These colourful slogans on banners and placards challenge elitisms and advocate the importance of creativity in politics and education.

In 2013, with this aim in mind, he initiated the Arts' Party Conference – a forum for artists and organisations to debate the role of art and design in schools – and he continues to be an active voice in British politics through a number of outlets.

Smith's works have been exhibited and are in collections in Europe and the United States including Tate and the Royal Academy of Arts. As well as hosting a radio show called *Make Your Own Damn Music* on Resonance FM, Bob and Roberta Smith is a writer and musician, often performing with the Ken Ardley Playboys band.

# VON BARTHA