



**Palo Gallery Presents Wood and Water by David Smalling**

**November 8, 2023 – January 31, 2024**



*Fort Haldane*, 2023, oil on canvas, 34 x 54 in. Photo of artwork by Daniel Greer

**Palo Gallery** is pleased to present **David Smalling's** debut solo exhibition *Wood and Water*, a major new body of work in which the artist returns to his early experience of life growing up on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. The show's title is derived from the Arawakan word *Xaymaca* meaning 'land of wood and water', a phrase used to describe Jamaica due to its rich vegetation, majestic rivers, and beautiful coastal waters.

In *Wood and Water*, Smalling introduces a new series of paintings that recognize and act as a commentary on his reinterpretations of Caribbean high and low culture. Visually rich canvases consider stories ranging from his intimate childhood moments to the colonial history of his homeland. Smalling takes inspiration from diverse sources, including Old Master portraiture, Jamaican folklore, and twentieth-century cinema, to produce investigative compositions of a nuanced and challenging aesthetic rooted in the artifice and extravagance of Rococo and Northern Mannerism. Several canvases in the series utilize novel compositional devices that simultaneously reconsider the art historical traditions of portraiture, still-life & landscape painting.

Through the close study and interpretation of the stylistic practices and compositional structures of sixteenth-century European painting, Smalling tackles contemporary issues of race, gender, and agency through scenes of Jamaican folklore. The 'River Mumma' is a recurring part of the artist's iconography and a cornerstone of his visual vocabulary. A term from Jamaican

mythology, *River Mumma* refers to a mystical and oftentimes female water spirit or mermaid-like being associated with rivers, waterfalls, and other bodies of water in Jamaican folklore. Depicted as an enchanting and seductive woman with long flowing hair, River Mummies are often half-human and half-fish, acting as guardians of the Caribbean waterways.

The striking red and maroon hues in several paintings are a reference to the complex and violent history of Jamaica's Bauxite mining industry. An exploitative industry, with revenues that could support the country's entire economy, has instead been responsible for the destruction of natural ecosystems, with meager financial gain to local communities. Smalling's investigation of the Bauxite industry is just one example of the interweaving of socio-political history with his personal insecurities and relationships. Scenes in the series interrogate associations between friendship and betrayal, sex and luck, money and class, against a backdrop of Jamaican folklore, history, and neo-colonial issues.

### **About the Artist**

David Smalling (b. 1987, Jamaica) primarily practices painting; his visual lexicon often draws parallels with the portrayals of traditionally lauded European artists – ranging from Van Eyck to Caravaggio transposing their figures with an afro-centric individuality. Smalling completed his undergraduate studies at Yale University in Mathematics, with extensive training at Yale School of Art. He also received a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He currently lives and works in New York, NY.

### **About Palo Gallery**

Established in 2018 in New York City by third-generation art collector and dealer Paul Henkel, Palo Gallery brings to bear a tradition of art scholarship and patronage, working as a true thought partner with artists to realize their visions and create dynamic presentations. Extensive research by the Palo curatorial team ensures that each exhibition is advised by the art historical canon and contemporary cultural touchpoints. In 2022, Palo Gallery opened its new 3,400-square-foot flagship space designed by Selldorf Architects in the NoHo district of Manhattan as the only dedicated partner showcasing Vica by Annabelle Selldorf. A destination of discovery, Palo Gallery's multifaceted program ranges from tightly curated, thematic group exhibitions to insightful art historically informed solo exhibitions spanning a breadth of artistic endeavors.

Since its inception, Palo Gallery has sought to incorporate thematic elements into its curatorial practice – whether it be group shows or solo presentations. Early exhibitions marked the gallery's foray into concept-driven presentations focusing on themes of memory and our most primitive instincts. *Memories Manifest* (2021) saw seven artists working in response to each other and the theme of memory, while *Primordial* (2021) investigated the ways that thoughts, emotions, reactions, and experiences speak to our most primitive instincts. The large-scale *Real Wild* (2022) presented an array of representations and interpretations of iconography from the American Wild West, a setting of which many of us have a collective archetype that the exhibition sought to re-contextualize. Building on the success of these conceptual group exhibitions, Palo has continued navigating contemporary cultural topics via art historical narratives with a number of solo exhibitions. Today, the gallery continues to showcase thematic presentations that offer Palo Gallery and its artists a unique opportunity to explore pivotal cultural and historical topics at a level that transcends those achieved via a standard solo exhibition. Palo Gallery is located at 30 Bond St., New York, NY.

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