



JOHN FIRTH-SMITH

Ashley Crawford

John Buckley Gallery

8 Albert Street

Richmond VIC 3121

www.johnbuckley.com.au

I once met a man in a bar who told me that there were three things in life that he both loved and feared; women, fire and the sea.

"You can love all three," he said. "They can warm you, they can feed you... but all of them can take your soul..."

He was a gnarly old sea-dog and by the looks of him he probably should have added rum to his list, but over the years I have come to respect his triumvirate of hazards. Fire, women and the sea share the trait of unpredictability; they can burn, drown or indeed, devour your soul.

However, unpredictability is in fact what we often seek in art and the evolution of John Firth-Smith's work certainly fits the bill. Rightly famed for his surging sea-scapes over the years, he is an artist who, while remaining faithful to his muse, has never allowed it to drown him. In his most recent paintings his marine forms swell in sinuous and sensual line-work. We are reminded of the wondrous bounty of the ocean, the searing blood-red sunsets, Morse code, navigation by the constellations and the curse of the Black Albatross in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The sea has inspired many stories and here Firth-Smith comes up with his own.

Born in 1943 in Melbourne, it didn't take long for the restless soul in Firth-Smith's temporal form to take over. Before long he was traversing the globe – by boat, by foot, by car – anything that could move him along. He traveled through New Zealand, Europe, the USA, Samoa, Malaysia, West Africa, Easter Island, Mexico, Egypt, the Fiji Islands, Ireland and elsewhere, all the while filling the ship's-hold of his mind with images to translate to canvas.

Flying in the face of fashion in the 1980s and '90s, as the art around him became more and more conceptual, Firth-Smith became more and more visceral. The earth's key elements, most particularly water and air, became the key alchemical ingredients in works that became increasingly epic, both in subject and scale.

Firth-Smith himself is a big man with a rapturous and infectious appetite for life. His physicality is reflected in his canvases, in the gigantic poetic sweep of his wave forms, as though he is building a religious iconography to Poseidon himself, a calligraphic homage to the god of the sea.

In *Seaspawn* the wave becomes a ghost-like wraith or a moment of orgasmic spray. Indeed, this body of work is a clear celebration of life and the frailty of this mortal coil in the face of the epic mood swings of the ocean. At times, such as in the painting *Windswept*, Firth-Smith makes clear the sheer brute harshness of the elements. It is a bleak but beautiful picture capturing the dark mood of the waters, that ominous dark blue that heralds an impending storm – a time that no sailor relishes. In *Seabed* we find we view the constellations from beneath the deep in a heady mix of dread and wonderment.

In such works as *Catch* and *Entwined* we are reminded that all life, even in its most bizarre forms, came from the ocean depths. Even today strange creatures roam the dark netherworld of the waters. Like DNA strands these alien forms twist and curl. The strange bounty of *Catch* is discernible through the dark of squid ink. In his series of works titled *Entwined* the form is soft and flesh-like, delicate ghost-like forms that seem to squirm and twist as they are exposed to the unaccustomed light.

Strange spirits inhabit these waters. In the fiery sunset of *Apparition* bizarre lights hover and dance over the sky in an hallucinogenic opera. Many are the stories of sea dogs awakening to strange Northern lights and ghost-like apparitions... perhaps Firth-Smith awoke one night at sea to be awarded a glimpse of crazed 'natural' phenomena, a vision imprinted on his retina and here exorcised via painting.

Firth-Smith once commented that painting is a "strange and unknown thing, like sailing – you prepare yourself for the worst and the good will look after itself."ⁱ But unlike when he is sailing, in his paintings Firth-Smith takes tsunami-like risks. There are almost anarchistic moments of shape, form and colour in these works, as though the studio canvas is being buffeted by wind and sea spray, the artist struggling against the maverick tendencies of his subject.

But back to our list. The sea we have in plenty and fire stains the sky crimson at sunset. So women? The sensuality of Firth-Smith's line-work could suggest the feminine in its curves and its unpredictability. Ernest Hemingway perhaps captured the soul of this notion in his acclaimed novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*:

"But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favors, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought."ⁱⁱ

Thus we have the third component of beautiful and terrifying things that another old man told me in a dark bar one night before he arose to head to the bathroom. "Have to pump the bilges," Jack said with a wink. But for all his rough ways he was a literate bugger and upon his return told many sea stories and then paraphrased William Congreve:

"Heav'n has no rage like love to hatred turn'd

Nor Hell a fury, like the ocean scorn'd."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Sasha Grishin, John Firth-Smith, *Australian Painting Now*, Craftsman House, (2000). pp. 116.ß

ⁱⁱ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* Scribner (1995) pp. 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride* (1697). The original text reads: "Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorn'd."