

**Annunciation Vivarium  
(disquiet, reflection,  
inquiry, submission, merit)**

Stencil on vinyl  
2023

3 times 98.5 cm x 203.5 cm

**The Chiral Gate**

Plaster, foam, wood, acrylic  
paint, varnish, lino ink print  
trail (dimensions variable)  
2023

370 cm x 260 cm x 120 cm

**Annunciation Vivarium  
(Gastropoda)**

Painted silk, wood, plaster,  
acrylic paint, varnish,  
LEDs and electronics  
2023

390 cm x 102 cm x 102 cm

**Allostichaster Polyplax  
(Giovanni di Paolo)**

Steam fixed painted silk  
stretched on wooden panel  
2022

125 cm x 156 cm

**Marbled Crayfish  
(Fra Angelico)**

Steam fixed painted silk  
stretched on wooden panel  
2022

88 cm x 118 cm

**Tiresias the Ball Python  
(Giotto)**

Steam fixed painted silk  
stretched on wooden panel  
2023

125 cm x 134 cm

**Whiptail Lizard  
(Carpaccio)**

Steam fixed painted silk  
stretched on wooden panel  
2023

88 cm x 105 cm

# Paul DD Smith in conversation with Megan Milks As part of the exhibition **THE CHIRAL GATE**

For more information about this and other projects,  
check our website or scan the QR-code.

**1646.nl**



## Paul DD Smith

Paul engages in hand crafts like ceramics, silk painting, embroidery and printmaking. He approaches his artistic practice in a way that reminds us of the haptic approaches of Jugendstil and the Arts and Crafts movement, in which the ornament often exceeds an object's function. Paul understands the ornament as something that ties erotic forces and by doing so potentially enhances them. Depicting figures which he veils and frames with patterns and ornaments, Paul channels the gaze while also sending it off on detours.

## Megan Milks

Megan Milks is the author of *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body* and *Slug and Other Stories*, both published by Feminist Press in 2021. They were also named a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Fiction. Their personal history of online fandom, *Tori Amos Bootleg Webring*, was released by Instar Books as part of the *Remember the Internet* series. Their books and art criticism has been published in *4Columns*, *Bookforum*, *X-TRA*, *Evergreen Review*, and many other venues. They live in Brooklyn.

Mon, Dec 12 2022

From: Megan

Hi Paul,

I'm pleased to meet you. I'm writing from my Brooklyn apartment as my elder cat Claude presides over the screen, stately and frail.

I thought we could start with the title of your exhibition for 1646. Intrigued by this word "chiral" I looked it up to discover its relationship to chemistry and its etymological roots in the Greek word χείρ (kheir), which translates to "hand" in English. For those who don't know, chirality is a kind of asymmetry of which the hand is a prime example. Given your work's engagement with hand crafts, I'm curious how you think about a/symmetry and process in your work for this show. And what is the gate?

Best,

Megan

PS - Are you aware that your website is down? At least, over here it appears to be so.

Mon, Dec 12 2022

From: Paul

Hi Megan,

I'm pleased to meet you too and the stately Claude! I'm thrilled that you're participating in this exchange. I'm a fan of your writing and loved *Slug and Other Stories*. It's a cold, snow dusted morning in Berlin so, let's get into chirality!

Hands are definitely an important and recurring element in the exhibition and so are shells which are also chiral structures. You are very right that the work of hands (human hands) are all over what's produced for the show and this feeling of a body or bodies behind the processes of the artworks is important to me. I'm so fascinated by this idea of chirality because there is something very strange to me in the idea of an object that physically mirrors another. It's such a fundamental binary but it feels like the objects are also the same, are not opposites. It's a concept that I always want to explain with my hands because I somehow get tripped up when I just think of it linguistically. Left and right are so often defined as polarities, whether it's talking about the political spectrum or which side of the road people drive their cars in a country. For me, I appreciate the instability of these positions, like how the double or the mirror can flip them. I also like it when the opposition collapses poetically. There's a great example of this in how François Truffaut describes Orsen Welles' filmmaking as the films made with his right hand feature snow and the films made with the left hand feature gunshots (at least, I think it's that way around!). Twins feature in your writing, I wonder if you have a take on this?

As far as the gate goes, in one sense, as the idea for the exhibition developed I started to think of the viewer's journey through the exhibition as an initiation. One of the key references I've been working with are Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation, a genre of paintings that depict the virgin Mary receiving news from the angel Gabriel that she will bear the son of god. It's a huge topic to just drop in, there's all kinds of scholarship done into the gestures of the two figures and how they relate to the various states that Mary goes through (disquiet, reflection, inquiry, submission, merit) often signalled by the hands of Mary and Gabriel. The moment marks Mary's initiation into a supernatural family with a heady mix of fear, ambivalence and religious ecstasy. I'm really interested in the architecture of these paintings and how they dramatise the separate spheres of the angel and the virgin and how the holy spirit (god ray laser beam..) penetrates these spheres heading for Mary's womb. This architecture is appearing in a number of paintings that I'm making as miniaturised ornaments in aquariums and vivariums for various fish, crayfish, snails and reptiles that reproduce either in a hermaphroditical or asexual fashion.

The gate is a metaphor of transformation and initiation but it's also an actual gate that I'm making; an arch made of ten huge snails that a viewer has to pass through to get into the final space of the exhibition. The snails on the left have shells that spiral clockwise, the ones on the right spiral counterclockwise and the two top snails are mating. Passing through a gate is also a kind of a/ symmetrical action. Depending on what kind of gate it is, you may walk back out of it transformed, or somewhat the same or you may never walk back out of it. I feel there's lots more I could write on a/ symmetry, how it appears as a literal motif in the art works and how there are themes around the power balances of sexual relationships that I'm attempting to explore, but I'd love to know what you make of all this so far.

Best,

Paul

PS - I was not aware that my website is down, thank you for alerting me to this! Something strange has happened with the database, still trying to figure it out. Let me know if you need a PDF of past works or other information that would be up on the site.

Wed, Dec 21 2022

From: Megan

Hi Paul,

So much to get into here - thanks for the richness of your response.

I'm enthralled by your description of this gate installation and wish I could experience it, and the show as a whole. I feel some kinship with snails as someone relegated to using the snail emoji as a substitute for the not-yet-here slug emoji. (A note for the general reader: the title story of my book *Slug* is about a woman who has a sexual encounter with a giant slug, and becomes a slug herself.) I have a tattoo of slugs mating on my forearm and I've not thought about them in terms of symmetry but I guess the double helix they form when mating is arguably symmetrical, mirror images entwined. Snails make a different, more symmetrical shape, I suppose, though the symmetry must also highlight distinctions between the two shell-bodies.

I love how you're thinking about this snail-adorned gate as a site of potential transformation. (I'd be excited to see a photo if there is one available.) The erotic snail energy sounds quite powerful and inviting! Please tell me more about the importance of hermaphroditic and asexual reproduction to this installation. How are you thinking about power balances in sexual relationships, and how do you see these animal friends fitting in? I'm curious, too, about how the more closed structures like aquariums and vivariums you mention may interact with the openness of the gate.

I have worked with portals in my work, particularly my novel *Margaret Is the Mystery of the Missing Body*, where an unlocked door opens up new narrative

possibilities including a portal to a mutant bodyworld. But not gates or arches - which seem more rooted in architectural history. Are there specific existing structures that influenced the shape of your Chiral Gate?

My own obsessions with twins have to do with a kind of anxiety around sameness and difference in romantic and sexual relationships that I felt intensely as someone whose first experiences in that realm were queer relationships in my late 20s. At that time I found myself defining myself against partners based on sameness/difference in a way that didn't give anyone much room to be fluid or changeable. I've approached twinning in a campy and/or grotesque/horror register to explore boundary issues and interrelational struggles. Sianne Ngai's chapter on envy and the film *Single White Female* (from *Ugly Feelings*) was formative when I was working on the two pieces called *Twins*.

To return to hands - like many others in the US I recently tore through Tim Burton's new-ish show *Wednesday*, an Addams Family reboot in which Thing (the sentient disembodied hand) plays a prominent role. Played by a Romanian magician's right hand, Thing is remarkably nonverbally expressive. And maybe his initial frightfulness may come from not having the mirror - nah, probably just the sentient disembodiment. I wondered if the creative team borrowed from ASL (American Sign Language) to build Thing's gestural vocabulary, but it sounds like they just made it up on the spot. In any case there's no code matching the complexity of Mary's and Gabriel's gestures in the Annunciation paintings you reference. But I'm imagining unholy Thing scurrying from painting to painting and deflecting the holy light.

All best and happy holidays,

Megan

Sat, Dec 31 2022

From: Paul

Hi Megan,

I very much enjoyed reading your last email. I hope you've had a pleasant and relaxing holiday season so far.

Regarding your question about the importance of hermaphroditic and asexual reproduction in the exhibition, I'd like to introduce a bit of snail anatomy into the discussion, or at least what I have gleaned from the internet. Snails have both male and female sex organs with the ability to both impregnate their partner and to bear their children. The act of mating seems to be a balanced one of giving and receiving but there are also some breeds of snails that possess a so-called 'love dart', a sharp calcareous dart with which the snails stab each other prior to intercourse. The purpose of this dart is to deliver a pheromone-like compound into the partner's body in order to increase the chances of sperm preservation. In my online research I have read that this can be harmful to the snail that receives the wound, that it increases the chance of pregnancy but can limit the lifespan of the mother or decrease the chances of further pregnancy. In this sense the act of mating can seem less egalitarian and more of a struggle over preservation of 'the selfish gene' of the father. Perhaps an emergent patriarchal impulse that in this case both partners possess.

I'm really interested in how Octavia E. Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin tackle themes around pregnancy and gender in their science fiction. Le Guin writes in *The Left Hand of Darkness* of a species of humanoids whose sexuality for the majority of the month remains latent and then when in 'kemmer' can take a masculine or feminine role in intercourse and reproduction. In Butler's short story *Blood Child* and her *Xenogenesis Trilogy* she explores a mixture of abject horror and ambivalent attraction provoked by sexual relationships with aliens. I like how in these writings Butler and Le Guin explore these dynamics without what I feel is explicit judgement but an acknowledgement of difficulty.

The paintings in the front space will all feature animals that have the potential to reproduce asexually. In answer to your question about how the closed structures of the vivariums and aquariums differ from the openness of the gate, I guess the intention is for the hermeticism of these spaces to reflect the enclosed bodies that can reproduce themselves without a partner. In this sense they are meant to reflect on the Christian annunciation myth, with the body of Mary described as virgin and yet mysteriously pregnant. Vivariums and aquariums are also designed to give a privileged and god-like view of their inhabitants, it's my blasphemous intention to put the viewer in this position. In this sense, it's an asymmetrical relationship or not a relationship at all with the partners remaining separate in their two spheres. Unless you believe there is a metaphysical connection (holy ghost god ray or loving gaze) that can cross the spheres.

As the viewer gets deeper into the exhibition and approaches the gate, this hermeticism starts to break down, there is more of an entanglement of multiple partners and there will also be a shift in scale. The idea is that the final room in a sense gives an idea of stepping into a vivarium but also one of the compositions in the paintings. The back space of 1646 has a line of windows that I will mask with black vinyl stickers. A strong light will shine in through the windows to cast shadows. The idea is to create a kind of shadow version of a scaled-up vivarium interior in which the viewer's own shadow participates.

Just to throw in another wild thing, the arch itself is a mobile structure with rollers on the base of each pillar. These rollers will print hand images on the carpet of the central space of the exhibition. The left arch: left hands, the right arch: right hands and the composite of the two hands will make a snail silhouette. The shadow casting in the back room is another form of imprinting. It's an effect that I have employed before in previous artworks. There are also some readings of the immaculate conception of Mary as the shadow of god passing across the womb and there are sources that link shadows with fertility.

There's not a pre-existing architectural reference for the gate. It kind of emerged from previous sculptures that can make prints on the floor, thinking about one that made a composite print but was still a singular structure. I think this led down the hermaphroditic rabbit hole (horrible mixed metaphors!), so to speak, and the topic keeps expanding.

I also got through all of that Netflix series *Wednesday* during two days spent mostly in bed with a cold! I'm a fan of the Barry Sonnenfeld movies, love the opening sequence of *Addams Family Values* where Thing rides a roller skate (hands and rollers...). Hands are unbelievably expressive. Another movie reference is the wicked preacher from Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* with "Love" and "Hate" tattooed on the knuckles of each hand. He performs the battle between good and evil with his fingers entwined.

I very much appreciate your thoughts on twinning. I will seek out Sianne Ngai's book after the installation. I'm curious what you can make of what I'm describing. It will be a show with many elements and it is quite a soup of references. I'm attaching a picture of the two snail stacks that make up the arch and the rough initial drawing. The whole thing has become too tall to assemble in its entirety in my studio.

All the best and wishing you a wonderful transition into 2023!

Paul



Wed, Jan 11 2023

From: Megan

Hi Paul,

Sorry for the delay here - my elder cat, who you may remember had been with us when I composed my first message to you, passed shortly after my last message. Oh Claude! I've been missing him.

Thanks for sharing these images - this snail arch is extraordinary. We've been talking about the expressivity of hands, and now I want to appreciate the expressivity of snails' necks and tentacles, especially as you've composed them here - reaching, sensing, searching. They seem to long for contact.

I can see Octavia Butler's influence here - there is something a bit alien about snails and other gastropods, is there not? I'm curious if you've read Patricia Highsmith's *The Snail Watcher*? I just learned of it skipping through my copy of Susanne Wedlich's *Slime: A Natural History*, which I haven't yet had the pleasure of really reading - I was looking for some quote to bring into the conversation, and instead caught onto her discussion of *The Snail Watcher*, which I read through quickly online. Highsmith, who was a great snail lover, references Darwin on snails: as paraphrased in her story, Darwin wrote that "snails manifested a sensualité in their mating that was not to be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom."

You've captured that sensuality wonderfully. The ways in which hands and snails get commingled in this installation are inventive and exciting. Now I'm thinking about hands as instruments of sensuality, as explored often in lesbian/queer media, e.g., the time travel film *The Sticky Fingers of Time*, for example. I could go on.

But I'm realizing our correspondence time is dwindling as the show opening approaches, and I want to get this last email out in hopes that you might have an opportunity to respond before the window closes. How has the installation been coming together? Have you discovered anything new as you've brought it into being? Is there more that you'd like to share by way of closing this out?

I'll close by offering my congratulations on this remarkable work. I've been thrilled by our conversation and have loved learning about your practice and all of the rich ideas and references informing it. Congratulations, and thank you!

Best,

Megan

Sun, Jan 15 2023

From: Paul

Hi Megan,

I'm sorry to hear about Claude, it was a vivid image of him you created at the beginning of this correspondence, watching over the proceedings. Very sad that he is no longer with us.

It makes me happy to read about the expressivity that you sense in the snails. I think that gastropods must have been an inspiration to Octavia Butler in her invention of the *Oankali*, the race of aliens that wish to merge their DNA with humans. The way their skin can go from smooth (in the books, often a sign of modesty or embarrassment) to a profusion of tentacles is very similar to what I have observed in snails. As the sculptures progressed, it was very curious how quickly each snail developed a kind of personality as soon as the tentacles were added.

I have read Highsmith's *The Snail Watcher*. I think it's great. My first thoughts on the final room of the exhibition were to echo the conclusion of this story. For those who have not read it, the eponymous protagonist succumbs to the fervent reproduction of the snails he keeps in his study. In the narrative, he returns to the room after a break to find that the snails have taken over every surface and he is physically overwhelmed to the point of collapse and probably death. There is a mixture of Eros and Thanatos (sex and death) in the man's surrender. The snails come out on top and it's clear that Highsmith relishes the victory.

I'm writing this final missive on route to The Hague, the snails and all the other elements for the show are also on their way but we travel separately. The scale of this exhibition has definitely been a challenge, I've never put together a show of these physical dimensions before. There will no doubt be challenges with the install in the coming days. I'm anticipating some repairs and adjustments to get everything to fit together.

Thank you so much for your time and insights into the project as it's developed. I've really enjoyed sharing it with you and hearing your thoughts. I feel like there is still a lot more to discuss. I'm hoping that more things will be revealed in the install and perhaps some unanticipated things that reveal themselves over time.

Sending warm tentacular greetings across the Atlantic!

Paul