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“Feminist Forms and Borderless Landscapes in Ali Smith’s  
Seasonal Quartet”

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### Abstract

Pioneering Scottish novelist Ali Smith experiments with literary form and, in response to the contemporary climate crisis, she plants environmental themes into her poetic prose. Smith's seasonal quartet includes four stand-alone but interconnected novels that capture the critical and cyclical changes that come with an industrial, post-Brexit world. This change includes the ever-growing borders that divide people and places. Smith crosses and removes borders in her four published volumes—*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020)—to reunite Europeans with their fragmented, common land. Her third volume, *Spring*, demands particular attention for its archive of feminist and ecological forms. *Spring* exhibits the work of British visual artist Tacita Dean (1965—), whose 2018 exhibition at the Royal Academy, titled *Landscape*, implores the viewer to consider their place in temporal and geological time scales. Dean's form-breaking style resists modern art's limitations and, like Smith's experimental fiction, refuses to conform to borders or, in this case, genre conventions. A practice well versed in the politics of exclusion, feminist art has the capacity to model a borderless world. Smith's gallery of feminist art further incites us to remediate marginalized subjects and restore our relationship with the wider ecosystem.

**KEYWORDS:** borders, form, Ali Smith, landscape, feminist art

## Feminist Forms and Borderless Landscapes in Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet

**Tove Conway**

Pioneering Scottish novelist Ali Smith experiments with literary form and disrupts long-standing traditions in her genre-bending fiction. She has long been celebrated for playing with the form of the novel as well as its atomic, granular substance—the word itself. Her early writings refuse to conform to genre conventions and, instead, theorize and demonstrate the quicksilver nature of art. Through her meditations on transient realities, Smith reminds us that art and life are ever-changing and never separate. To blend these forms, she breaches literary boundaries and breaks artistic frames in her recent and radically shapeshifting seasonal quartet. Part narrative and part exhibit of modern art, the novels in this series are hybrid in nature: they cross a range of media and, as a result, they open Smith's fiction to a pluralistic identity.

Smith's seasonal quartet consists of four stand-alone but interconnected novels: *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020). Across the quartet, Smith recovers the work of women artists Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti. Like Smith, each of these artists experiments with form and resists its conventions, including frames, flat surfaces, and the properties of pigment.<sup>1</sup> Smith proposes that “the role of the artist is to disrupt and reveal.”<sup>2</sup> The same could be said of the writer, of course, especially since each of Smith's novels does just that. The featured artists perform different modes of border-crossing to unsettle and dismantle our habitual and conventional distinctions. In *Spring*, the focus of this essay, visual artist Tacita Dean removes aesthetic framing, inviting us to transgress the limits and limitations of art.

This essay highlights the borderless ideas and images of Smith's artful fiction. It is important to note that while her boundless novels do not necessarily remove physical borders, her embedded art gallery teaches us to see as closely as we read. While form might seem to invoke order and control, it is also, as she writes in *Artful*, “all about change” (68). In *Spring*, she echoes this theory of protean form in ecological terms: “things can change over time, what looks fixed and pinned and closed in a life can change and open” (248). Playing with form in feminist and environmental ways, she changes how we read modernist and contemporary literary forms and, consequently, how we see the world's forms. The novels, in fact, have been widely praised for

their attention to Britain's controversial reckoning with the European Union; when *Autumn* first arrived, it was dubbed the "The First Great Brexit Novel" in *The New York Times* for its unrelenting examination of British borders and its condemnation of xenophobia. *Spring*, writes Rebecca Makkai in a later review for *The New York Times*, joins a "work-in-progress both as raw as this morning's Twitter rant and as lasting and important as—and I say this neither lightly nor randomly—Ulysses." As Smith demonstrates in her writing, borderless forms can teach us how to step outside traditional and oppressive belief systems and challenge the divisions they uphold. I argue that Smith's museum of feminist art educates her readers on border issues and its marginalizing effect on both women and the environment. Feminist art—a practice well-versed in the politics of exclusion and exile—has the capacity to model a world without fences, borders, and enclosures.

Third in the seasonal series, *Spring* challenges form through natural forces. Mountainous forms rise at every corner of the novel, emphasizing how mountains typically remain grounded, unwilling to shift. Critically, their geological permanency runs parallel to the increasingly rigid geopolitical borders in *Spring*. Leaving scars on the landscape, the craggy mountains and Brexit borders similarly separate people and places. To push back against such oppressive forces, Smith plays with seemingly rigid natural forms and pushes her characters to confront and climb mountain ranges—elevating them above present-day politics and power.

The unexpected mountainous form is no doubt inspired by pioneering British visual artist Tacita Dean (1965–). Smith references Dean's work throughout *Spring*, specifically her 2018 exhibition in the Royal Academy titled *Landscape*.<sup>3</sup> It was at the RA that Gainsborough, Constable, and Turner championed the genre of landscape painting. Joining this pantheon of male artists, Dean takes up this long-standing legacy through her contemporary artistic practices and broad exploration of the landscape. She focuses on the aspects of landscape that were "most elusive for the painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries working on solid, static canvases," such as the movement of light and air (Dean 13). In her 1995 film, *A Bag of Air*, for instance, she finds a means to measure intangible phenomenon: she sailed upwards in a hot air balloon, suspended above snowy mountain tops, to collect the mist of clouds.<sup>4</sup> Since this film, she has continued to document ephemeral events of the land and sky. Indeed, the mountainous blackboard drawings and series of chalk cloudscapes in her *Landscape* exhibit are works of *now*, imploring the viewer to consider their present place in temporal and geological time scales. "I don't care about the long run," proclaims Dean, "I care about now" (Griffin).

*The Montafon Letter* (2017) is the grandest of Dean's blackboards in scale, comprising nine four-by-eight-foot panels. It moves film director and *Spring*'s first main character, Richard Lease, to his core. When he visits the exhibit, he notes that the erected chalk mountain "became a kind of wall," and there was an avalanche "coming down the mountain picture towards anyone looking at it, an avalanche that had been stilled for just that moment so that whoever saw it had time to comprehend it" (*Spring* 78). Roaring up before the viewer, the mountain momentarily freezes the future. It forces the viewer to acknowledge the urgency of their future, which, as Smith makes clear through the series, includes the impact of Brexit and the enormity of the climate crisis. Dean, in fact, admits that the mountainous form is in some ways about Brexit, which she finds devastating and, at the same time, hopeful; there remains "hope that the last avalanche will uncover us."<sup>5</sup> But given this paralyzing snapshot, it is somewhat surprising that the gallery galvanizes Richard to transform his perspective of London. Stepping out of the exhibition, Richard assumes a vertical mode of thinking rather than a horizontal one; he momentarily perceives London's skyline as signifying what Smith terms "the great connective"

between all that is above and below. By reshaping edges through the medium of landscape, she creates crucial changes in our ways of seeing.

Dean's cutting-edge exhibition, particularly its absence of aesthetic barriers, also blends the viewer and the art. In *Spring* she tells an interviewer that she removes the little wire barriers in front of her chalk drawings because she "doesn't want anything to be between the person and the picture," embracing that "sometimes people and pictures too literally collide" (288).<sup>6</sup> She openly invites the viewer to enter the gallery space and to transgress the enclosures typically associated with pictorial art. It seems, then, that these moves stem from a concern for intimacy—intimacy between people and art, but relatedly, between people and the environment. Without wire barriers, Dean further frees her representational landscapes from the bonds of convention, making her chalk and slate drawings a malleable medium rather than a fixed genre.<sup>7</sup> Dean writes: "I have continually found ways to both confound and confirm this categorisation by genre" (9). Not restricted to the gallery hall, her drawings unfurl across the entirety of the novel, most visible when mountains peak through Smith's literary and artistic references. From the mountain's *trompe l'oeil*, a convention of perceptual trickery, Richard is inclined to see geological formations in three dimensions rather than two. The verisimilitude of Dean's mountains brings him close to *real* mountain ranges outside of the exhibit—and beyond national borders. So imagined by Smith, modern art becomes the landscape and vice versa.

After riding a train "somewhere in the north of Scotland," Richard finds himself pressed against another mountain range. While the Scottish Highlands cannot be erased or redrawn like *The Montafon Letter*, Richard observes that they, too, look like "a line drawn freehand" (15). Dean's vision continues to shade his perception here and for the rest of the novel. Etched into postcards, featured in songs, and passed by modern literary figures, mountains pop up across a range of mediums in *Spring*. Smith crosses every artistic frontier, it seems, offering Richard what his late friend and collaborator, Paddy—an Irish born screenwriter—described as "everything a mountain can mean" (43). Cultural historian W. J. T. Mitchell has argued that we experience landscapes with both body and mind. We see this duality through Richard as he seamlessly crosses between physical and artistic renderings of mountain ranges. Mitchell adds that when we encounter these landscapes, we "bring to bear all the pictures and poems of landscapes that we have seen and heard, which frame and layer our perceptions" (qtd. in Dean 32). Mountains certainly form a lens for our reading of *Spring* and guide Richard in his transnational traversing. They are, in fact, "why he'd gotten off the train here," (14, 25). They not only shade Richard's vision in Dean's exhibition, then, but also dictate his moves throughout the novel. The mountain form appears as both aesthetic element and active catalyst.

Smith includes an array of edges in *Spring*, going as far as to include modernists that exist on the edges of history. One such figure is writer Katherine Mansfield, who fits faultlessly into Smith's edge-defying fiction. A marginal figure in canonical modernism, she lived in exile and stood on the periphery of the Bloomsbury Group during the early twentieth century (*Artful* 144). An aesthetic adventurer like Smith, Mansfield was one of many revolutionaries to climb over literary conventions before 1922, when Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* were published—the year "when everything that was anything in literature fractured" (*Spring* 42). With her intrepid style, Smith now teeters on the edge of this fractured modernity. *Spring* also features poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who, like Mansfield, lived in Switzerland for a short time. Writing at the "same place, same time," it is uncanny that their lives did not overlap: "Sometimes they walk past each other in the hotel gardens...the mountains above them and them below etc just, you know, living their lives with all that grandeur of the Alps as their backdrop" (34). The

Alps almost forge a cosmic connection and a second of synchronicity between literary giants. While they may not have crossed paths in this shared space, the Swiss scenery surely incited both Mansfield and Rilke to “knock down the walls and roofs of literary convention.”<sup>8</sup> The Alps inspired these modernist figures, in other words, to experiment with the edges of literature and to explore beyond long-established boundaries. Like Smith, they push back against the seemingly permanent nature of mountains.

Beyond their formative styles, Mansfield and Rilke’s lives were fundamentally different: they hailed from different nationalities, wrote in different genres, and assumed different gender identities. It is significant, then, that at the end of the novel we discover in Paddy’s final letter that the two writers’ lives did most likely intersect.<sup>9</sup> The Swiss Alps pulled the two into geographical proximity, connecting their separate lives in some form. Smith alters our assumptions about mountains, typically viewed as a dividing landmark, when she associates them, instead, with interconnectedness. This is one of many instances from her seasonal series where “Nature is adaptable” and “changes all the time” (*Winter* 66). In *Spring* specifically, Smith reveals how mountain imagery gradually shifted in the cultural register. It transformed from a source of the sublime in painted panorama to a modern medium that breaks free from the canvas. Further, it is a source of inspiration for the viewer to climb and cross over contemporary borders, as Dean encourages. It seems that Smith intentionally contrasts Romantic and modern landscapes throughout *Spring*. At one point she calls the Cairngorms “sublime,” and Richard wonders if they are “too mountainous for people”—the observation of a Romantic poet. Through a modernist angle, however, Mansfield sees the Swiss Alps from her window and craves their violent geometry and aesthetic of rupture; she is disappointed that she has not climbed them yet (91). By including these opposing viewpoints, Smith troubles the long held assumption that power is analogous to terror, as Edmund Burke had proposed in the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> She refuses to aestheticize the mountains and place borders around them; instead, she encourages us to embrace confrontation, proximity, and intimacy.

Geography literally means “a land written on,” so by grounding her exhibit in geographic forms, Dean is able to rewrite our expectations of the landscape (Schuster 74). She disrupts the rigidity of rugged mountains, drawing attention to their edgeless forms. Smith displays Dean’s ecological models to create parallels between her artful edges and the cracks in a politically fractured world. Both art and politics, as she suggests, can exist without borders. In *Spring*, Smith employs her characters to redefine British borders and restore the post-Brexit landscape. Florence, an enigmatic 12-year-old girl in search of her detained mother, breaches Immigration Removal Center (I.R.C.) security and skewers the inner workings of the bureaucracy that detains asylum seekers indefinitely. With her penchant for subversion, she refigures the world through her rhetoric: “Given that I am twelve years old, and there are just twelve years left to stop the world being ruined by climate change, I’d say there’s an urgency the age of me to do something to stop it” (233-234). Here, she echoes the young environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, calling attention to global issues of the refugee crises and ecological decline. In examples like this, young women lead the movements. They speak on behalf of the disenfranchised and, together, comprise a feminist chorus through Smith’s polyphonic narratives.

While traveling to Scotland, Florence critically alters our perception of borders and offers another fragile possibility of human connection. These unexpected connections, as we have seen, open thresholds to new places and new possibilities:

What if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border unites these places. This border holds together these two really interesting places. What if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible (196).

Smith asks us these same questions here and, less directly, through the entirety of the series. Punctuating her prose with more periods than necessary, she urges us to pause—to slow down in an accelerated, politically-run world. Like Dean and her formless elements, Florence urges us to rewrite our ideas of conventional boundaries and, by crossing British borders, she campaigns for a reunited European landscape.

Unrestrained by conventions of genre, Smith's seasonal quartet demonstrates how literary form, like nature, can "change all the time" (*Winter* 66). Her early theories on form, as it seems, pushed her series to the outermost limits of literature where she willingly risks "falling off one side...or the other while undoing, redoing, and modifying [the] limit" (Minh-ha 218). Seeking these peripheral narrative spaces, Smith balances on the borderlines and expands the margins of modernism as she intersects feminist and environmental forms through her archive of modern art. She includes both women and nature—subjects exiled from literary and artistic traditions—to form a more inclusive ecology in her novels.

In penning the world's "first Brexit novels" as these geopolitical tensions unfolded, Smith increasingly focused on border politics. Her progressive border-breaking is in fact part of her ecofeminist agenda, which promotes seeing human activity as part of an ecosystem. In Smith's writerly imagination, ecofeminist activism is the antidote to geopolitical division. And in *Spring* specifically, Smith denounces the division and alienation of humanity through political borders. As she shows, families, not only places, become divided: "[Florence and her mom] just stand there hugging as if they're one person, not two. The people in the uniforms separate the woman and the child" (333). Unlike Brexit politics, the human is integral to art forms. This distinction suggests that art itself models, even stages, a solution—a way of restoring the bonds broken by geographical strife. By creating porosity between the four narratives, Smith shows us how political activism and a modernist aesthetic are not only inseparable but also mutually constitutive.

At stake in Smith's series is the potential to cross over literary and, ideally, literal borders. By exhibiting form-defying feminist art, *Spring* transforms our notions of the permanency of frames and fences. While refraining from pinning Smith to a specific genre, it is nonetheless fitting to identify the seasonal novels as "borderless books" filled with feminist and ecological forms. This borderless genre is especially fitting for *Spring* considering its post-Brexit context and form-defying mountainscapes. In *Spring*, Smith goes as far as to remind us that the English word for April stems from the Latin *aperire*—meaning to open and uncover. From boundless modern art to borderless landscapes, she opens her narratives to new forms and points of view, including those of human and nonhuman subjects. As a writer, theorist, and human, Smith offers her readers a place of refuge. And like the season of spring, her novels are rooted in a promise of renewal.

## Notes

1. In “Modernist Painting,” an essay from the 1960s, Clement Greenberg argues that modernist art calls attention to its own medium. In his essay, Greenberg lays out the limitations of paintings, which, according to the “Old Masters,” include the flat surface, the shape of the support (i.e. framing), and the properties of the pigment. Modernism, as he points out, indefinitely pushes back against these limitations.
2. See Elkin’s interview with Smith for more context on Smith’s artistic layers. Amy E. Elkins, “Has Art Anything to Do with Life?: A Conversation with Ali Smith on ‘Spring,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 3 Sept. 2019.
3. Dean’s *Landscape* exhibition is one of three unprecedented collaborations from 2018, where she explores the classical genres. Her exhibitions are shaped by the individual character of each institution: landscape at the Royal Academy of Arts, portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery, and still life at the National Gallery. See Dean’s *Landscape, Portrait, Still Life* to get a closer look at her exhibition pieces and peer through the contemporary prism of her practice.
4. Dean’s short film, *A Bag of Air*, recalls a pair of sonnets written in 1812 by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley had printed two revolutionary tracts of propaganda, but since seditious material like this could not be publicly distributed, he devised his own methods: using bottles and balloons, he sent his messages out into the world via air and water, entrusting his words to the whims of time and nature. He left the political centres of London to put his pamphlet-filled bottles out to sea, employing the waves in his campaign for freedom. His “Sonnet: On Launching some Bottles Filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel” marked the occasion. He imagined “Liberty herself as the wind driving ‘the emerald group’ along over the waves” (qtd. in Dean 26). Since this bottle and the encased *Declaration of Rights* floated straight into the arms of the law (a revenue officer found it), Shelley tried again. This time, he tied his pamphlets to hand-sewn hot air balloons. In another sonnet, he writes that, even though the balloon fire might fade, the flame of Liberty would glow on, “a beacon in the darkness of the Earth.” Through forms of flight, Dean, like Shelley, performed a kind of writing on the air.
5. See Jonathon Griffin’s Royal Academy article (2018) for more of Dean’s perspectives on her *Landscape* exhibitions. In the article, Griffin describes one of Dean’s inspirations for the *The Montafon Letter*: “a sequence of avalanches in 17th-century Austria that buried some people, then buried the priest who went to officiate at the site of the burial, then—finally—unburied the priest, still alive.”
6. In *Spring*, Smith writes about a physical collision between a small child—two or three years old—and Dean’s mountain. Without the low wire barriers, the child was able to throw herself at one of the pictures in the exhibition, smudging its chalk. Richard recalls reading this story in an article called “A Postcard to Tacita,” which Smith includes to show a direct result of having no distance between the art and the viewer.



7. Cultural historian W. J. T. Mitchell points out that landscape tropes are typically categorized in the following genres: topographic, pastoral, georgic, heroic, romantic, exotic, sublime, and picturesque. In *Landscape and Power*, he argues that landscape is not a genre, but a practice found in all cultures.
8. For more on the revolutionary conventions of modernist literature, particularly in regards to ecocritical studies, see Greg Garrard, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford Handbooks, 2014), 98.
9. Smith rewrites portions of Rilke and Mansfield's history through her fiction. When Richard is flipping through the *Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, he finds a note from Paddy describing—in afterlife form—the connection between Mansfield and Rilke. She explains that, uncannily, the day after Mansfield died in Fontainebleau, France, Rilke wrote a letter to his friend about how much he loved reading about the characters in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. One of these characters was directly inspired by the erotic stories that Mansfield told Lawrence. She concludes that they did, in fact, meet each other through fictional form (*Spring* 281-82).
10. Edmund Burke put forward the theory of sublime art in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757. In this aesthetic treatise, he writes that “whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (Section VII). Smith adds in *Artful* that “in the eighteenth century people found that standing on the edge of a cliff of a sheer drop was a very good way to view what became known as the sublime” (132).

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