



## Josh Smith BY DOMENICK AMMIRATI

Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York NY April 25 · May 24, 2004

There's something funny going on at 371 Grand Street. It starts on the marquee: the words "Josh Smith" are stenciled over "Robert Smithson." Inside, you find that Smith's show comprises 13 abstract oil paintings in two sizes, one big and one small, that feature his name as pretty much their only recognizable elements. Given the moniker's alias-like quality—and this New York solo debut's unorthodox setting in a half-improved former dress shop—you could imagine the whole show as a wry installation: visitors have asked who the "real" artist is. But Smith is the real artist, bent on exploiting his generic-sounding name to the greatest degree possible. Its letters waggle and droop, emerge from (or is it recede into?) miasmic matte backgrounds in brown, gray, black undertones with more chromatic hues—violet, orange, green, blue. Occasionally patterns emerge—the red and green checkerboard anchoring *New Swamp Thing*, or the light blue and green patches around the border in *Untitled* (both 2004)—and, in a couple, quasi-representational forms appear. That *Untitled*, for example, features something like a telephone pole and a ladder-cum-"H" behind a wobbly red-orange "Josh Smith" to conjure, of all people, Stuart Davis. With this nod goes the inescapable references to AbEx and graffiti, all highlighting the paintings' fundamental urbanity and self-consciousness and serving as points of contrast. But tagging proclaims one's identity on the architecture of an archetypally ruthless society: it's a celebration of the self, and a "Fuck you" along with it. Smith's paintings, on the other hand, use their ugly facture, depressive tones, and repetition ad nauseum of that Everyman/no-man name to imply self-depletion and disappearance. Two black-and-white canvases resembling chalkboards or smoke against a black sky underscore that anything committed to writing can, even will, be erased.

The paintings' gambit with selfhood makes them perfect for this first official show at Reena Spaulings, which itself plays games with identity. First, it's not exactly a gallery: it represents no artists and, with frequent events and mini-shows, is closer to a project space. Since its January opening, it's gone by a few different names (they include, logically, the Dress Shop and 371 Grand). An inquiry about the current one reveals that Spaulings herself is in fact a fiction, the protagonist of a novel being written by the collective Bernadette Corporation, and that Emily Sundblad runs the place with BC member John Kelsey. Finally, Reena Spaulings has been located, next to an excellent bagel bakery, in the Lower East Side's last Jewish bastion; the interior preserves the seamstress's floor-to-ceiling railing and patches of her paint job (and, serendipitously for the Smith show, her handwriting, in the form of wall-scrawled telephone numbers). In a recent essay in *Texte zur Kunst*, Gareth James deftly links the establishment's ambiguities to a project of evading gentrification, the art market, and the "instrumentalizing" trends of late capitalism ("[I]t is the possibility of expanding an intensity of 'non-functionalized' time, rather than entertainment and leisure time, to which [Sunblad and Kelsey's] tactics are organized"). In this context, Smith's paintings appear a symptom of the current moment, whereas they might equally well be seen as embodying classic—and classically male—anxieties about art and identity. In a white cube or broken apart from presentation as a suite, it's hard to say how Josh Smith's paintings would come across. But at Reena Spaulings they look pretty good.