

Art in Review

Joshua Smith

Reena Spaulings
371 Grand Street, SoHo
Through April 29

Taxter & Spengemann
504 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

The conflicting notions of the artist as protean creator and Warholian machine meet in the art of Joshua Smith, who works by hand in rote-like, almost obsessive ways and likes to highlight the conventions of the

gallery setting. His concurrent second and third New York gallery shows consist of environments that are at once offhand and oceanic.

The most noticeable aspect of "Make It Plain," Mr. Smith's show of "Mirror" paintings at Reena Spaulings, is the sea of wood bar stools filling the tiny space, creating a porous, hip-level plane that one must wade through. The stools are also artworks, bestowed with passing glances of brushwork — an eye there, a flurry of dots or calligraphic squiggles there.

They send up solitary (seated) contemplation and hold up several paintings: chunky rectangles in which colorful motifs, veering among Op, Minimalism and Pattern and Decoration, have been painted over with slabs of subtle, Brice Mardenesque grays. Except at the edges: here broad borders of color and nonchalant brushwork remain as evidence of effort and serve as frames. A batch of smaller canvases, reminiscent of Joan Mitchell, were cooked up by being used as palettes to make other paintings.

In "Faces," a weeklong show at Taxter & Spengemann, Mr. Smith turns to drawing with his usual automatist abandon. Over the course of 800 5-by-8-inch file cards, he depicts the mirror's most frequent motif — the human face — in a bristling Expressionist profusion of bulging features and frazzled hair. Some are warm-ups; many are terrific. Unframed, they paper the walls and are also featured in the show's announcements, which, strewn about the floor, exaggerate the gallery's promotional function. These are bigger than the drawings, which might almost be handmade announcements.

ROBERTA SMITH

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