



DOMENICK AMMIRATI ON JOSH SMITH

IN FALL 2005, when Josh Smith was invited to fill a sliver of the basement gallery at New York's SculptureCenter as part of that institution's In Practice series, he responded by moving more or less the entire contents of his Harlem studio into the space. This installation strategy, Smith told me, was less a choice than a capitulation to sheer necessity—his studio was so crowded he could barely squeeze in one more tube of paint. The claim seems entirely believable, given the artist's reputation for hyperproductivity; on the other hand, Smith may have been drily joking about that very reputation (people constantly tell him he makes too much work, he says). Whatever the case, the SculptureCenter installation—curiously titled *Schmerzhoehle*, which is German for “pain cave”—gave both artist and artwork a little breathing room and afforded perhaps the most complete overview to date of Smith's diverse output. The first piece to greet visitors was a big gray and white canvas emblazoned with the artist's name, JOSH SMITH, in waggling, childish letters against a chalkboardlike ground. The same motif, the artist's name, appeared again and again in the works on view, in dozens of other crude, vigorous paintings and collages, some hung conventionally but most leaning against the walls one in front of the other, flea-market style. Crammed into niches were makeshift tables that displayed handmade books, also bearing the words JOSH SMITH on their covers. Smith typically makes a flyer or a poster for each of his exhibitions; here they were flyers—lime green and scattered across the floor, to tread upon or take home.

In addition to all this, Smith presented some thirty wooden bar stools, daubed with black paint, that seemed to offer an entreaty—“Sit, ponder with chin in hand”—even as they made it difficult to navigate the long, narrow space. The stools had also been on hand at Smith's show the previous spring at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York, where you could hardly move without bumping into one. Achieving an appropriate distance from which to regard the paintings on view required taking an uncomfortable (if not embarrassing) perch. On both of these occasions the vaguely anthropomorphized stools seemed to satirize art appreciation. Not quite furniture, not quite sculpture, they were some third thing altogether: para-art objects, material witnesses inviting you to identify with their air of stooped incomprehension. Just looking at them, you felt yourself moving one step toward objecthood yourself—and mass-produced objecthood at that, since the stools, blandly generic in design, looked as if they had come from Crate and Barrel. There was more than a bit of humor to this “pain cave” arrangement. As philosopher Henri Bergson noted, “Gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine”—an observation that lends a self-conscious air to the industriousness with which Smith produces great quantities of paintings, drawings, collages, prints of all sorts (from photocopies to lithographs to silk screens), books, miscellaneous objects, and even experiments in electronic music. As a governing principle, rate of production extends from the psychological to the aesthetic: Smith's collages, for example, are barely composed quasi-archival

repositories of random printed matter, from hip-hop street-team posters to his own leftover exhibition announcements. Similarly, while the phrase *handmade book* often connotes diaristic preciousness, many of Smith's own works in this genre take the form of uninflected, off-the-cuff appropriation, as with *TN Fish*, 2004, a compilation of photocopies of Smith's sketches after plates from a book on the aquatic life of Tennessee, or a number of volumes made of copies of newspapers.

All of this activity results in what should be understood not so much as a body of work as a flow—or better, ebb and flow. A significant portion of Smith's work on canvas evinces a kind of "I can't go on, I'll go on" attitude toward the medium: Take, for example, his palette paintings, which are exactly what they sound like—small canvases on which he mixes paint and rests his brush. (When I asked to see one on a visit to his real-life studio, he pointed out a wet canvas placed flat on a table. "I'm still using this one," he said. A palette knife lay in a half-congealed puddle of lemon yellow swirled into swampy green.) Then there are his "mirrors," in which he paints a grayish black field, not unlike a tombstone, over all but a narrow margin of a painting he has deemed unsuccessful. Though Smith keeps his distance from that depressive cousin of the quotidian, the abject, he does say that he wants viewers to experience the immanent possibility of failure that he feels as he works. The stakes are dramatized by the fact that Smith's recent abstractions and his name paintings display a level of ambition and skill belying the apparent offhandedness of his technique. The sprawling, energetic abstractions feature bold patterns and engage in a struggle, playful or violent, against the bounds and depths of the canvas. The name paintings cite the brushwork of de Kooning, Picasso, and even, playfully, van Gogh, as the letters *J-O-S-H-S-M-I-T-H* squiggle or slash across the canvas, bulge in awkward loops against the stretchers' frames, fade out into ghostly grisaille, or embed themselves in fields of richly variegated and often frankly ugly color.

These latter paintings occupy a key place in Smith's practice; they are literally his signature works, at once self-involved and self-effacing, produced by the artist since his days at the University of Tennessee studying, significantly enough, print-making. For some, the works may summon Tom Wolfe's phrase "the painted word," with which the author tried to sum up all that he felt was wrong with modern art, circa 1975: the infiltration of the realm of subjectivity and aesthetics by cogitation,

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Opposite page, all works: Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on canvas, 59 1/4 x 48". This page, above, both works: Josh Smith, *Untitled* (palette painting), 2006, oil on canvas, 14 x 18". Below: Josh Smith, *Schmerzhoehle* (Pain Cave), 2005. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2005.



critique, "discourse"—by language, in short. Indeed, Smith's own painted words, like the 1960s word paintings of Ed Ruscha, reenact this process of adulteration, making the word a picture and the picture a word, the page a canvas and the canvas a page, and, like all hybrids, inducing anxiety in the beholder. But whereas Ruscha created unique word paintings that, in their commercial-signage slickness, look mass-produced, Smith does the opposite. Aping the logic of printing rather than its aesthetics, he churns out JOSH SMITH paintings that are "mass-

produced" but that look, in their expressive intensity, unique. His endless repetition of his own name may suggest egomania, until one considers how it undercuts the implications of his expressionistic brushwork: Yes, Smith is "putting

himself on canvas," per the romantic cliché, but he's doing so in the most evacuated way imaginable. His inscriptions of the ultimately arbitrary symbols that, on forms and documents, stand in for the person—*J-O-S-H-S-M-I-T-H*—signify dissociation: They are the rote, automatic gestures of a reproducing machine.

As sinister as the "mechanical" aspect of Smith's practice may sound in such a formulation, this quality of the work also opens up productive possibilities. There's the comedy, à la Bergson. But more dynamic here are this comedy's attendant philosophical implications (which may

make the work more humorous, and more painful, in turn). In this regard, consider the machine according not to Ford but Deleuze, for whom *machine* is one of a series of interrelated terms—most famously, *rhizome*—that attempts to lay out the possibilities of a human identity that is not unitary but multiple. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari write, "The fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and . . . and . . . and . . .'" So too does Smith operate according to the logic of the *and*. A palette rises to the same order as the painting it helped make, as the posters that helped advertise the shows in which they each appeared, as the stools that helped you (or didn't help you) view them. Smith's emblems in this respect are his mirror paintings. As failures, they invoke incoherence. But as mirrors, they invoke reflection, that is, a dependence on their viewers and on their surroundings: an identity that is not discrete. They also invoke constant change. If you look into a mirror, turn away, and then look back, what you see will always be a little bit different from what you saw before. □

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