

Josh Smith BY ELIJAH BURGHER

Skestos Gabriele Gallery, Chicago IL December 1, 2006 - January 6, 2007



Whoever wrote the press release for Josh Smith's recent show must have had a good laugh when explaining the ubiquity of the artist's name in his own paintings (either writ large in sloppy strokes, screen-printed, or just chopped up into abstract elements): "Asserting his name as the representational element in his paintings, Smith explores the practice of painting without having to concentrate on subject matter." A startling claim, when self in all art is typically the preeminent subject, while in another context it seems adroitly aimed at a market driven by celebrity alone. Arch-formalist or not, Smith's "self-reflexivity" ideally explores the market treatment of painterly/conceptual gestures as commercial logos for specific practices, like Stella's stripes or Holzer's LCD displays.

Composed of 13 large and 20 smaller silk-screen collages and paintings, the latter are dedicated to the same clunky branding-iron style assumed by the show's exhibition announcement, as if Smith had herded together prize stock for his Chicago stable. About two-thirds of the former are slapdash oil abstractions, while the remaining five are collaged from old newspapers, concert fliers, and other printed ephemera, looking for all the world like works by Arman or Mimmo Rotella stamped with Josh Smith's name. The artist's rough handling of his materials, however, rubs against the grain of such pat homogeneity. The screen-printed announcement slightly exceeds the dimensions of the small paintings, so that each is cropped somewhat differently. They are also uniquely "botched" by uneven applications of acrylic or multiple, staggered impressions.

Smith's intentionally imperfect printmaking technique recalls

Warhol more than a little, just as the collage paintings bring to mind Andy's aforementioned European contemporaries. The omnipresent announcement, however, summons up the expressively agitated graphic work of early modernists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, but ultimately Smith's clashing mix of Pop and expressionism draws heavily on Martin Kippenberger's and Albert Oehlen's irony-drenched necromancy. What saves Smith from self-pastiche is his name. A perfectly ordinary, anonymous name, he does quadruple duty as signature, formal starting point, self-advertisement, and brand name. The resulting autographs are thus weirdly blank and non-expressive, like a blast of art historical (or in this case, discarded textual) white noise. Smith reverses the normal situation whereby the artist expresses his personality or soul in his brushwork by making that most personal yet arbitrary of attributes—one's given name—into generic building blocks for constructing abstract paintings.

Smith's paintings wouldn't be nearly as compelling, though, if reduced solely to a critique of originality. If the exhibition announcement reads as a critical gesture in the oil paintings, it takes on a more expressive resonance in the mixed media works, which highly resemble the peeling posters and flyers of modern urban nightlife. The byline in this context not only announces Smith's practice as hubristic competitor in the art market, but also resonates as forlorn tagging: "Josh Smith was here." Certainly, Smith has found a sardonic solution to how a young artist can get his name out there. Much as Kippenberger/Oehlen's "bad" paintings possessed great chutzpah in their grand failure at self-expression, Smith's manic circulation of his own name speaks volumes, especially the volume it turns up on the anxiety of the "emerging artist" today—knock, knock, knocking at the art world's door.

