



Above: Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2008, mixed media on panel, 60 x 48". Following spread: Photos of the interior of Josh Smith's studio, New York, 2009. Photos: Josh Smith.

**PAPER MIGHT RIP**, paint might spill, or the game might be on television, but Josh Smith doesn't stop. The artist's fulgent pictures withstand all diversions and relentlessly multiply—their motifs, in his best-known series, traversing the loping letters of his own name and the gaudy facture of "expressionist" brushstrokes. If Smith previously took up the argot of abstraction, over the past year he has increasingly focused on the trappings of representation: renderings and photographs of things. But, as always, interruptions and deflections occur along the way. He often paints a leaf—a dried specimen that he picked up on a rural walk—faithfully registering its particular notches and fissures. Any number of things might happen next, but frequently he digitally photographs the painting and then enlarges and prints the image onto a grid of letter-size paper. These sheets might in turn be pasted into a collage and overlaid with posters or book covers he has made, or with newspapers or screenprints or new painterly marks. Each work at once depicts and replays his signature devices with an eidetic memory. They become a peculiar type of still life, with all the covert aggression of the genre—wresting objects, as it does, from the natural world into the pictorial one.

Smith, in fact, expands this mode of seizure into all manner of transference. He shows not only flora but his own gestural flourishes. He not only paints but

presses, blots, laser-prints, glues, scans, photographs. Many of his new collage works are processed onto stacks and stacks of plywood boards. He rotates through these supports as if they were spools of data, amending them with his adhesions and inscriptions (he even inserts blank boards to enforce a mental pause). Sometimes the boards stick to one another, victims of their acquired residues; peeling them apart, the artist occasionally tears holes in the collage's surface layers, which he will simply leave and smooth down with the next round of glue. Such visual subtractions echo his iconic leaf's own gaps. They remind us of the loss entailed in every reproduction, even in every glance—and of the way in which, now, the camera-eye is our eye, and to figure is to capture. As Smith says, "Rather than take a picture . . . , I just take it." This is why his images can collapse different resolutions and levels of sharpness, a collapse enacted each time the jagged contours of digitized blowups abut the comparatively high-res print of appropriated newspapers or the actual edges of torn paper. Or why they often present an insistently central shape, centrifugally contained by the framing edge, as if resisting dispersal by the lattice of pages it rests on. Within these tableaux, the serrated, pixelated perimeter or the gridded brushstroke looks normal and coherent. You take what you can get.

—MICHELLE KUO

1000 WORDS

## Josh Smith

TALKS ABOUT *CURRENTS*, 2008—

**THE OPPOSITE OF ABSTRACTION**—or, to say it another way, its complementary color—is realism. And realistic paintings are not that good. I respect them, but from my point of view, they're pictures. You look at a picture and you recognize what's in it, and then more than 50 percent of the joy is over—you're pretty much going downhill from there. Picasso, I know, said he abhorred abstraction—to him, it represented the absolute stupidity of art—but I think he seemed confused and a little jealous in saying so. Of course, I try not to think so harshly about realism. The fact is, though, that it is conservative to be a strictly realist painter: You do not have to be an exhibitionist the way you do with

abstraction. Particularly with figurative painting, it is different. It is more of a personal, private thing. Just paint it and it is done.

I can just look at anything and paint it. Maybe not perfectly, but I can do it. I can make a really good painting. Last year, I started making paintings of fish that way. I thought it would be nice to have a big painting on the wall of a fish jumping. That is exciting. It makes you wonder why it is there. It makes you proud of seeing it. There's a stupidity to it—and then again, it's nature. Courbet made a career out of that.

I thought it would be easy, and it was easy. Easy in an uncomfortable way.

**RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS** of these kinds of paintings and of other works of mine—just quick snapshots—and printing them out. I convert each photo into a PDF and, using a regular laser printer, print it out large, so the image has to be divided among different sheets and becomes clear only when I arrange them together in a grid. I prefer this to running back and forth to a big, professional printer, because I would never want to deal with Photography. With large-scale digital photography, there are a lot of production costs, which turn mistakes into a stressful distraction, whereas I'm actually interested in mistakes, controlling mistakes, and thinking about mistakes.

Some of these images are printed from my website. I just press Print. But this is where photographs are going: quick, low quality, and cheap. For example, when I print on green paper, it saves ink. If I print in green, I will have to replace the yellow printer cartridge, whereas if I use green paper, I just need purple and white. And then it looks different, and it absorbs the ink differently. The laser-print pigment is composed of plastic powder; you can melt it with a lighter or a torch, and a heated cylinder melts it quickly into the paper. It's like acrylic paint.

I think of art in my studio as completely malleable. Sometimes, as the photos of my paintings or drawings are laser-printed, I'll push or modulate the colors, and this might make me go back and change the colors in some of the original works as well. I reserve the right to revisit and revise anything I still have here. That's largely why I started duplicating my works—because it takes a certain pressure off myself when it comes to thinking and moving forward.

I also work on stacks of plywood collage boards, pasting the printed photographs or posters or other images onto them, and painting or drawing on them as well. I'll flip from one board to another, shifting them; it's like having a big stack of paper. But each "sheet" is four by five feet, twenty square feet in all. The size of the surfaces is programmed into my arms and body. I also chose the size because of how small my building's elevator is; and at four by five feet, you can just throw it into a car-service minivan (whereas if it's forty-nine inches, it won't fit). And I had a back operation last year, so I can't lift that much. That's also why I made this series of collages—I ordered these collage surfaces unmounted, so they're not as heavy. And now, of course, I like it: I like that you can carry them around like a deck of cards, that you can hide one hundred pieces underneath a single one. Because art has become too delicate. Art is something that used to get moved; there were no art-handling companies. I want my art to last; I make sure that it's tough. But people have to understand, too, that while my work is going to be fine for their lifetime, it's going to change a little. Just as a photograph will change or even a steel Jeff Koons will change. We just don't know how.

The boards lying here in my studio, already with painting or collage or drawing on them, are not paintings yet. They're just sheets of paper right now. They become art as they sit. Most of the work is done while the board is horizontal. You can't see enough to judge it when it's flat on a table. You can see enough to know what you're doing, but you can't objectify it and look at it like a square floating on the wall; you just see a mess on a surface. So

when I'm making these, I don't really think about how they look.

**IN COLLEGE**, I focused on printmaking. A lot of my work is actually a kind of reaction to printmakers. They're territorial and they don't understand art the same way I do. They look at it pictorially and miss the essence of what they do, which lies in the technical process—using specific chemicals and materials and pressing them together. You can control that in certain ways; you can do things graphically and physically that are worth doing as an artist. Printmaking is an easy way to get going. It's

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procedural. It's like the process of a singer warming up, preparing, thinking; that's how Keith Richards writes songs, in the process of tuning his guitar. I'll sit here and paint any number of silk screens. They change as I print. The ink falls out and some more comes through and so on, as I use it again.

Back in school, I would always draw the same thing. For a year, it was ladders. Then I did a face. I have continued to pick stereotypical things, like my name or a beef heart or a fish or a leaf, and have simply focused on how I could change this image technically. There's too much in the world to learn everything, so I have to learn through something; it's a way to justify and to control the intake. Everything

I do is logical in this way. I recently found a leaf, which I've been working with. I was in Pennsylvania, and I picked up this leaf and thought, "This will be easy to paint." I always try to paint things that are easy to paint. I never want to get hung up on trying to render something.

This is part of a running conversation between realism and abstraction. It's not going to end anytime soon. It's always been brackish water, from my "name paintings" to the collages. I feel like I've made the name paintings my whole life. Using my name was like a joke; my name is an exaggerated American name. It's like a pseudonym. Europeans say it with a smile—it doesn't sound real. So I just plugged it in instantly.

The "palette paintings" began after years of throwing away palettes—they were ephemeral, disposable by-products of painting. I was always aware that they looked good, but I had not yet arrived there in my head. I did not believe in art enough yet. I compare it to the way you end up falling in love with a person you've known for a long time. You see something, and finally you admit you want it. Then you begin to mentally process the possibilities, and that's it. That's generally what I would like to do: click off for a second, make something, let it dry, let it cool off, then objectify it. The palettes were that perfect formula. I've always played with that. Usually, in my head, I call them "brush-cleaning paintings." I'll have an empty canvas, and if I have a brush that's loaded, I'll just put it on there and use it. Of course I'm not going to waste it. If a quarterback has a chance to throw the ball down the field, he should throw it.

**AS MUCH AS SOME MIGHT SAY** I'm using and re-using everything, I still think I'm wasting so much. I'm anorexic about art. Others might think I'm fat with conservation. But in my mind, I use a very small percentage of what's in my life. I don't apply this table to art, or these beer bottles to art, or the sink. I wish I could, but it would look terrible and I would be a terrible artist. Here at work, everything just strikes me somehow as two-dimensional. That's just how I see. It's like photography, like taking a picture—but rather than take a picture of it, I just take it. Not an image of it. I take *it*. It is what it is.

Seeing my work, too, there isn't so much visual pressure. Each work implies that there are others. There was a painting before and there will be one after. I try to strip out as much of the content as possible, so the viewer does not have to reach for a meaning. You don't have to look at one thing and try to get it. The one in front of me is the one I am looking at now. □

