

Interview by Joe Bradley

Josh Smith

Photographs by Tim Barber

I had the pleasure of meeting with Josh Smith one Saturday morning in December at his studio in New York City to discuss his work and whatever else happened to come up. Unfortunately, the tape recorder wasn't on our side, and that conversation is gone forever.





Where were you born?

In Okinawa, Japan. My dad was in the military service.

What do your parents do?

My mom is a first grade teacher and my dad is a physical therapist.

Was there any art around the house you grew up in? What was your first exposure to fine art?

No, we had a lot of Japanese art, prints and little objects that my parents brought back from Japan. There was no real art until I went to college. In Tennessee, where I grew up, there were a lot of arts and crafts. I saw a lot of people making nice things, but it was not called art in that situation. In college I began to learn how art could be magic and have possibilities beyond just its appearance.

When did you start painting the name paintings? And why?

I have always been aware of my name and how it sounds. In printmaking classes I started using it to see it reversed. It is embarrassing to see a painting of my name and it humbles me as I work. I have to paint around that feeling and continually compensate for it. The name paintings are like pre-fab buildings. You can build the painting around it. As an abstract painting, it serves as a vehicle and obstacle to prod the paintings forward.

I came across one of your name paintings in someone's apartment recently, and it occurred to me that it was like the painting was marking territory. Do you have any interest in graffiti or tagging or whatever it's called these days? Do you pay attention to that stuff when you walk around town?

Really, I pay attention to other things more. In New York, and more and more in other places too, it all seems like a big collage. But sure, graffiti is something I think about and relate to. There is not so much anymore and it has been innocuous for a while.

How long do you typically work on a painting? Do you have more than one going at once?

Sometimes I work on one for months and sometimes just for one day. Typically, the work comes in groups. So I would say in six months I might finish 10 to 20 paintings. Plus I make a lot of palettes and collages.

In regards to the palette paintings, are you conscious of the fact that the palette will end up as a work of art at the end of the day? Do you ever fuss with them? Are there any bad palette paintings or is every one successful?

For the last couple of years, I have been more aware of that. I will leave a palette around for a longer time to see what happens. Or I will use a smaller name painting that I do not need or like as a palette. I hope there are bad palettes. If I think one is particularly bad I will keep it and bring it home to look at, but I don't micro-manage them, it's one part of my art, I just let it go. I don't control the way the palettes look.

Even if you waste a whole day painting and you don't have anything to show for it, at least you have a couple of nice, beautiful palettes. They freeze, like water freezes into ice. And then you stand them up. I don't do that for the paintings, I make them on an easel, because I want it to be a fair fight. Although the palettes and collages are made in the same spirit as the paintings and I have mashed the look and feel of the palettes into my other work and vice versa, they are by-products. I feel like the painting as the white stretched canvas already looks good. I would hang it up just like that and I feel I can only make it worse. That is why I paint. It's a challenge.

What are you reading these days? Do you read art criticism? Artforum?

Nothing really, mostly art books. I just read Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*, which was good. Now I am reading a big compilation of crime stories, *Sports Illustrated* articles, *The New York Times*, whatever's around, but I love looking at art books and I make a lot of artist books, too.

I met this girl Veronica—she was a student at the University of Tennessee a few years ago when I was a guest artist there—she is a good artist and she made this book, a handmade object. She gave it to me as a gift and asked me to make a copy of it for her. I guess she meant a photocopy. I had it offset printed and made it into a real artist book. It's a really cool book and people like it a lot. I didn't know how to contact her or anything.

So she has no idea that this exists?

I don't have her phone number or e-mail address, but actually she just contacted me this week.

She contacted you after several years?

Well, I put a note on my website that said "Veronica, if you see this please contact me," and I guess someone must have told her that they had seen it and she contacted me. Now she is going to medical school.

That's quite a romantic story.

Yeah, everything about art in my life is romantic. Everything about my actual life is not romantic. I don't know, it just always goes like that for me. It's just... I am just naturally fluid in it, other people are fluid in other things.

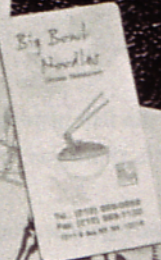
What do you think of painting in 2010? Will anyone be painting in 100 years?

I think my painting is good. It is a challenging time to be an artist because everyone is so well-read and intelligent, when the best painting has really nothing to do with that. There are a lot of people who need to take a break from trying to be a painter, they need time to reevaluate what they are doing. I do not know, but often paintings that I see look forced, which is so sad. But there is also good stuff, the problem is finding and seeing it. If there are people in 100 years, they will paint.

I've noticed the fish in your paintings are developing thick,

When will
you be
satisfied





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