

## “MORE AND MORE COSMIC FUNK” HASSEL SMITH’S LATE PAINTINGS

Petra Giloy-Hirtz

*In an age which exalts not only mediocrity, but outright mindlessness, Hassel Smith's paintings are extraordinary acts of intelligence. Whatever else his protean art may be—and among other things, in both his figurative and non-figurative work, it has also been a widely expressive, almost violent art of tremendous intuitive power—it has always been, first and last, a celebration of rational intellect. These fearless paintings reveal the valor of a mind in direct confrontation with the world as it is, brimming with contradiction and paradox that the artist welcomes as a challenge, just as he summons up, out of the prevailing confusion and sterile formulas of the contemporary art world, the real challenge of timeless problems of painting.*

Allan Temko, 1975<sup>1</sup>

A treasure trove of paintings is carefully lined up in the artist's studio, a building in the yard of the former rectory in southern England that serves as the artist's residence. These are works from the seventies, eighties, and nineties, acrylic on canvas, in two formats—a large square (sixty-eight by sixty-eight inches) and a rectangle (sixty-eight by forty-eight inches). They are full of sparkling energy, painted in an expressive style: dynamic brushstrokes, a flush of colors, gestural and all-over, closely resembling rhythm, dance, and music. In surprising juxtaposition to these are his carefully constructed images with geometric forms in delicate tones: the so-called measured paintings; and a third group, not unlike Abstract Expressionism, consisting of tranquil fields of color or biomorphic configurations, poetical and full of associative power. These are the later works of a man who has been creative for his entire life, paintings that have been seldom seen and scarcely published. They are the output of an artist who at the beginning of the sixties moved with his family from America to England for a year, where he ended up staying from 1966 to the end of his life, almost four decades; a man who worked there obsessively and who was an innovator in the field of painting.

This essay is an attempt to rediscover this late work, to illuminate it and look at it anew, also within the context of statements by art critics, the contemporary art scene, and the artist himself: to place these works within the artist's oeuvre and pay tribute to them as the continuing development of the visual language of the preceding creative periods. It is thus an attempt to increase awareness of an artist, of his spirit, his being, his love of art, history, and literature, his passion for music and dance; an independent, at times unwieldy spirit, “a complex artist and a complex man” —Hassel Smith.

### A WEST COAST UNDERGROUND LEGEND

When he arrived in England, invited to show his work in London, Smith was at home “in the far west,” known as “a leading free spirit of art,” as a “West Coast underground legend,”<sup>2</sup> “one of the freest and wildest,”<sup>3</sup> “one of the most vigorous and imaginative Western pioneers of the modern movement in painting,”<sup>4</sup> mentioned by art critics in the same breath as Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. From the mid-forties to the early fifties he was one of the most influential teachers at the California School of Fine Arts (San Francisco Art Institute), which, under director Douglas MacAgy (1945–52), was a “center of experimental abstraction” and nucleus of Abstract Expressionism in the Bay Area after 1945. Hassel Smith taught there together with Clyfford Still, “one of the greatest innovators of modernist art” (Clement Greenberg), who inspired Smith and with whom he maintained a long friendship, as well as Richard Diebenkorn, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt, who came from the East Coast to teach there as visiting professors.

Smith's most important solo exhibitions were also in California, and his work can be found there in numerous renowned collections such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (twelve works), and the Oakland Museum (forty-eight works!); but they can also be found

in Texas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Dallas Museum of Art, in Buffalo, New York at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, as well as many other collections. He regularly returned to California in later years as a visiting professor at the University of California in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Davis, as well as at the San Francisco Art Institute. His works attracted attention throughout the United States. Critic Alfred Frankenstein, who visited the 1950 exhibition dedicated to Smith and Richard Diebenkorn at the Lucian Labaudt Gallery in San Francisco, enthusiastically noted the “fabulous richness and energy” of the two artists' works, and gushed “that they took one into a new domain of visual expression that could be entered by no road, and that what they had to say was at least important and at best profound.”<sup>6</sup>

Hassel Smith was the painter protagonist in the history of the “San Francisco avant-garde,” of the Beat movement, as this period would later be called: a movement against “the gray, chill silence, the intellectual void, the spiritual drabness and the oppressiveness of the times, McCarthyism a palpable force against dissent.”<sup>7</sup> Agreement remains unanimous today as well; in the text to their 2011 exhibition *Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction, 1946–1963* in New York, curators Tim Nye and Jacqueline Miró see Hassel Smith as the most influential figure: “It can be said that out of all these artists' professors and mentors, Hassel Smith had the most influence over this group, as they were outgoing, gregarious and playful, with strong ties to jazz and a new poetry that was like jazz.”<sup>8</sup> Chris Bratton, director of the San Francisco Art Institute, paid tribute to Hassel Smith in 2009 in his memorial speech as “an essential part of that heroic postwar generation of artists who came to define a truly ‘American’ art, one which was autonomous and home-grown.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1964, the renowned photographer John Coplans praised “Hassel Smith's early, unique and important contributions; the extreme manner, for example, in which he develops the tension at the edge of the canvas ... none of the Eastern painters, and that goes for Gorky, de Kooning and even Kline, developed it to quite the same extent.”<sup>10</sup> And Thomas Albright wrote, “Hassel Smith was probably the most important exponent of Abstract Expressionism that the Bay Region has ever produced.”<sup>11</sup> Architecture critic (Pulitzer prizewinner in 1990) and San Francisco author Allan Temko, one of the protagonists of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (“my dear friend Allan Temko”), considered him “the most powerful Abstract Expressionist in the West.”<sup>12</sup> Along with artists such as John Altoon and Richard Diebenkorn, Smith was one of the “key people”<sup>13</sup> of Abstract Expressionism in the legendary Ferus Gallery. “I really began to show in California with Walter Hopps, Irving Blum and Ed Kienholz in Los Angeles. So I got pretty much associated with a group of L.A. artists and with the Ferus Gallery long before I had any real (gallery) contacts in the Bay Area. Professionally I really found myself associated with L.A. much more closely ... I've had, always, very close contact with the Los Angeles artists.”<sup>14</sup> One of these artists was Robert Irwin, whose statement shows just how much Smith was a role model for the younger generation: “San Francisco artists—Jay DeFeo, Hassel Smith, Frank Lobdell—were better artists than we were. They were older and more mature, and a lot of Ferus' early shows were primarily focused on the San Francisco artists.”<sup>15</sup> The photographs taken by William Claxton at the opening of Hassel Smith's first solo show at Ferus in 1958 document this vivid art community, elsewhere so revealingly portrayed by Dennis Hopper's photographs of the sixties.

### IN ENGLAND

In 1959, Charles and Kay Gimpel traveled from London to see Smith's show in Houston and were impressed. They purchased a large group of works in his studio and invited him to exhibit in their gallery one year later. In the summer of 1962, accompanied by his wife Donna and their four sons, Hassel arrived in Southampton in southern England from San Francisco, after a sea journey of three weeks. For a year, they lived in a house in the small fishing village of Mousehole in Cornwall. Hassel Smith soon felt at home there, and he encountered a lively cultural scene, populated by artists such as Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, influential writers, and art critics. In 1963 his second solo exhibition at Gimpel Pils in London was attended by the celebrated art historian Herbert Read, and the reviews were positive: “Mr. Hassel Smith's new paintings ... are a striking combination of toughness and elegance... The show is a fascinating example of a late stage of American Expressionism, when the original urgency is transmuted into a less demanding ease of manner and a frankly gay and sensuous confidence in display.”<sup>16</sup> A large work of this group was purchased and given to the Tate Modern for its permanent collection.<sup>17</sup> In 1966 Smith was invited to Great Britain once again, this time by the Royal West of England Academy

of Fine Art in Bristol. For Smith the situation on the West Coast had changed almost overnight. In retrospect, the period around 1960 seems to have represented the pinnacle of his career. The retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum and his first exhibition with André Emmerich in New York (1961), as well as in Houston at the New Arts Gallery (1959), accompanied by beautiful, small publications, together with his international reputation as a result of the exhibition in London (1960) and the acquisition of his works by important museums were testimonies of a recognized, successful artist. But it was not only the political situation that had changed with the escalation of the Vietnam War; “In the meantime, Pop Art had sort of wrecked the Abstract Expressionist market, you might say.”<sup>18</sup> As an act of rebellion, Robert Rauschenberg had erased a drawing by de Kooning.

The offer came at the ideal moment, and, happy to have a secure position, Smith accepted willingly without suspecting that this would represent a profound transition in his work and life and that—with the exception of continued excursions to California to exhibit, teach, or paint in temporary studios—from now on he would belong to England. He purchased a house in Bristol, transforming it into a place of lively cultural exchange, and enjoyed the admiration of his colleagues and the respect and esteem of his students. As had been the case in California previously, “Classes were conducted as talks, energetic discussions, impromptu exercises.”<sup>19</sup> “I am glad to hear that you are digging in successfully and have passed the period of drudgery that you mentioned,” wrote Clyfford Still in a 1970 letter to Smith; and in 1977, “I salute your courage in carrying on. Obviously your spirits are high.”<sup>20</sup> But strangely, there were almost no exhibitions in his new homeland. The public ignored him and there was no response whatsoever to his work. Yet he nonetheless continued to develop his style there with great virtuosity, creating an outstanding body of work.

England was surely not an easy environment for an artist who had rejected figural art. There was at the time a group of quite well-known abstract painters that included artists such as Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, and Paul Feiler, who had asked Smith to come to Bristol, as well as Albert Irving, John Hoyland, and William Scott, some of whom were friends of Hassel Smith, but with whom he had little in common stylistically.<sup>21</sup> The British admired the works of Francis Bacon and, later, Lucian Freud, who, starting in the seventies, were being exhibited and sold along with Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff as the School of London. The British never truly understood abstraction.<sup>22</sup> Whereas on the Continent it was gestural painting and the Informel that flourished following the war, the island was closed off to abstraction, which had risen to the status of a universal language. London didn’t even represent the periphery at the time. Until, that is, Pop Art was also invented there, embodied by artists such as Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake, David Hockney, Eduardo Paolozzi with his homage to modern technology and machines in his popular graphic works of the sixties and seventies, and Bridget Riley with the geometric patterns in her Op Art images. Hassel Smith remained a foreigner to this development, without any true access to the British art scene. Exhibitions, awards, and honorary doctorates: these existed for him almost exclusively in America.

Following his retirement in 1980 after fifteen years in Bristol, Smith purchased an eighteenth-century rectory in Rode, between Somerset and Wiltshire. He loved the beauty of the southern English landscape. In the words of his wife Donna, he is a “countryman” who “loves the country life.” Just as he had retreated to an apple orchard north of San Francisco following his controversial resignation from the California School of Fine Arts, in England he sought tranquility in order to devote himself to painting and the exploration of new expressive forms of abstraction.

#### ICONOCLASTIC SPIRIT: FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE END OF THE SIXTIES (pp. 100–66)

According to the San Francisco Art Institute Alumni Association, “Hassel Smith is primarily known for his California-style abstract expressionist work done during the fifties.”<sup>23</sup> Yet MacAgy, in the 1960 exhibition catalogue for the André Emmerich Gallery in New York, wrote that “Smith was a brilliant representational painter.”<sup>24</sup> How may such contrasts correspond: representational and abstract art? These were the poles between which Smith moved. From the beginning he was drawn to representational painting, especially under the influence of his teacher Maurice Stern. From the thirties until roughly

1949 his paintings exhibited “a distinctly colorful and rugged expressionistic approach to landscape, ‘casual’ scenes of figures, and portrait heads,” in the words of Walter Hopps, one of the groundbreaking figures who set up a retrospective for Smith at the Pasadena Museum of Art, where two years later Hopps organized the landmark exhibition of Marcel Duchamps’ first retrospective in the United States.<sup>25</sup> But then came something new. “I stopped painting in a representational manner and had begun [painting abstractly] ... directly as an influence of Clyfford Still’s 1947 show at the Legion of Honor. I was absolutely knocked out by that.”<sup>26</sup>

Smith devoted himself to abstraction. “He ventured into non-representational painting with works known as the ‘beast paintings’ that combined wild brushstrokes with animalistic imagery. During this period, Smith’s work incorporated muddy colors and heavy smudges of paint with unappealing effects that challenged what he saw as consumerism and commodification of art.... Throughout the 1950s and 1960s his work became more formal but continued to exhibit a kinetic energy and exuberant sense of humor that ran contrary to the seriousness and moodiness of the New York School.”<sup>27</sup> “Savage but brilliant,” the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote in 1961, in “its daring, its sensuousness and its symbolism.”<sup>28</sup> Sublime images resulted, “iconic paintings,” which were “to a large degree characterized by big, blocky shapes that seem to erupt into curvilinear forms, and by what would become known as Smith’s calligraphic mark—a witty, swash-buckling gesture.”<sup>29</sup> These are paintings of great compositional and poetic power, comparable to those of the great masters of the time. Today these works are scattered, lost, or virtually inaccessible in the museums’ depositories. In the absence of a retrospective exhibition, the paintings must be visited, for example at Palm Springs Art Museum, which houses *North to Montana*, 1961 (p. 143)—oil on canvas, over three meters wide—a breathtakingly powerful image, which, brought up from the depths of storage, also astonished the curator there. “Rarely, if at all, did a painter seize the fire, the thunderbolt of Zeus, and *create* something,” wrote Hassel Smith in 1957, familiar with antique mythology from his childhood.<sup>30</sup> He, however, was able to do so. It was not without reason that Allan Temko named the works produced in Smith’s studio at the orchard in Sebastopol north of San Francisco the “thunderbolt” paintings.

In 1962–63, during his first year in England, Smith painted surprising “cartoon-like” images that narrated stories, and that were playful and filled with humor, jokes, and sometimes sarcasm. He adapted motifs from Greek and Roman mythology, motifs that had occupied the old masters through all the centuries of Western painting. In variations produced over many years arose *Tarquin and Lucretia* (1962–64), *Leda and the Swan* (1964), and *Cupid and Venus* (1965). The mythological was replaced by the contemporary while he lived in Hollywood with his family (1965–66). Hassel Smith painted *Pop-singer* (1965), *The Beehive Hairdo* (1965), bikini girls (*Untitled [Pool Scene]*, 1965), street scenes with palm trees (*Untitled [Hollywood Street Scene]*, 1965–72; *Untitled [Woman with Palm]*, 1964), couples in restaurants (*Supper Club*, 1965), typical Los Angeles scenes with the red streaks of moving cars (*L.A. Underpass*, 1965), *Blue Hard Top* (1964), and women in the subway (*Untitled [Two Women in Subway]*, 1965). Inspired by the peculiar lifestyle of Los Angeles, Smith distanced himself from Northern California in terms of painterly imagery.

Again and again he also returned to the “figure,” to the woman (*Donna*, 1966; *Untitled [Female Figure]*, 1967), to the dog (*The Queen of Suburbia [The Blue Dog]*, 1961–93), and then once again devoted himself to the non-representational as in *Up Mousehole* (1962), or drew figures in surface abstraction as in *Mousehole, Cornwall* (1962). As documented in the March 1963 exhibition list from Gimpel Fils, London, Smith’s just completed works exhibited both representational images such as *Cupid and Venus*, *Leda and the Swan*, and *The Girl and the Bubble Car*, and abstract works like *A Penny for the Guy*.

For Smith, it was not a question of a “representational” or “abstract” worldview. He changed, and he had his reasons for doing so. “Hassel Smith was a visual person, free, alive.”<sup>31</sup> He submitted neither to stylistic movements nor to the market. In this respect, incidentally, he was not alone. There were important artists of the time whose development moved from the representational to the abstract and—temporarily—back again to representational painting. After his “drip paintings,” Jackson Pollock returned to figurative painting in *Portrait and a Dream* of 1953,<sup>32</sup> as did de Kooning and Philip Guston. The discussion of the

transformation from representational to abstract art and of “hybrid forms” today seems obsolete. Hassel Smith himself emphasized that “realism” is the “truest form of abstraction.” “Representation might be more accurate, without actually intending to be: ‘abstraction’ is what occurs when the artist sets out to ‘re-present’ in another form, like painting, something previously observed or experienced.”<sup>93</sup>

#### MEASURED PAINTINGS, 1970–1986 (pp. 168–87)

Around 1970 something surprisingly different began. With a protractor and adhesive tape, Hassel Smith started dividing the canvas into fields, constructing a grid, and placing simple geometric forms within it: circles, squares, rectangles, spirals—modules fit into the invisible system of the grid. He placed them in relation to one other, allowing them to overlap, ignoring the edge of the image. Like globes, spheres, or solar systems, orbiting around a center. Order. Placed deliberately, through a process of reflection and careful preparation by means of precise preparatory drawings, punched-out forms attached to the canvas. As if clever calculation and construction had replaced the spontaneous and the intuitive as well as the narrative. Pointed hats and triangles appear, “cut off at the edge,” crossing over the edge of the image, completing themselves in the eye of the beholder. They float, as in some cosmic space, in shades of rose, pink, light green, purple, yellow, orange. There are always new variations: balls, like eyeballs; double circles; dots; the fusion of circle and square into a single body; suggested lines; rounded forms in geometric fields, rhombuses, and crosses; half moons, stacked up, lined up, or placed against one another; floating bodies, fields of energy (*The World is Waiting for the Sunrise*, 1983–84); circles within circles like the pupil of an eye (*Cyclopes*, 1978), an opaque circle in an opaque square. Like labyrinths from a bird’s-eye view (*I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls*, 1975–76), or reminiscent of architectural structures (*Arezzo Revisited*, 1982), maps of countries or cities (*From A to B*, 1976; #9 *Rameses Road*, 1979–80; *Bob City*, 1978; *The Portuguese Navigator* or *Twinkle Twinkle*, 1978 [p. 181]), or landscapes (*In the Valley of the Kings*, 1982). The titles, frequently ironic and richly allusive, at times enrich the images with an almost narrative component. The compositions are highly complex, filled with movement and events, in the communication between the elements and in the tension between center and periphery.

Every turning toward geometric forms initially takes place in the midst of the representational image. In the large-format works of the late sixties, globes represent trees and lamps in rooms or in the street. In *Topless #2* and *#1*, 1969–70 (pp. 108, 109), yellow circles appear as a foundation, like wallpaper behind the female form. *Top of the Pops* (1968–69) reduces the space in which the two persons move to rectangular yellow-orange fields. In the subsequent paintings the figures have disappeared, forever.

Interpreters have always defended their artists against the label of “geometry.” Piet Mondrian was supposedly “anything but geometrical.” To the contrary, his images were said to have originated “out of an extraordinarily intuitive disposition and a hand that progressed incrementally, which created carefully modulated compositional solutions beyond measure.”<sup>94</sup> Hans Albers as well (in *Homage to the Square!*) is interested “not in geometry. One could at most speak of a geometric surrealism.”<sup>95</sup> Order, proportion, stability, balance: in the twentieth century these were loaded with transcendental meaning. In his essay “The Crisis in Geometry” (1984), an abstract painter of the younger generation, the New York artist Peter Halley (born in 1953), referred to the “geometric mystification” of Malevich, Mondrian, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman.<sup>96</sup> But neither the “geometric transcendentalists” nor the earlier Constructivists in their exploration of form as form, nor the Minimalists in their desire for neutrality and the emptying out of meaning from form and its connection to industrial production appear to have been the sources of inspiration for Hassel Smith. Rather his images seem to arise more from his profound conviction “that painting, MY painting, could be closely related to the arts of music and dance as well as to forms not commonly considered to be ART: game boards, flags, maps, rugs, quilts, and so forth. Some of these paintings either tend to be or are about games, rules of games and the strategies required to win without cheating. ALL of the paintings are about building, being in or getting out of cages, whether gilded or not.... The question of SYSTEMS arises, their visual accessibility and recoverability from finished work. Also involved are considerations like events and intervals, greater or lesser degrees of discursiveness, patterns and predictability.”<sup>97</sup>

Smith’s reflections at the end of the seventies on geometric forms in the image—space, cage, system—are explained by Peter Halley in a manner that allows us to see Smith’s images in a new light. Halley draws a connection between his own geometric painting and the geometrizing of the social space in the world in which we live. In his 1984 essay “The Deployment of the Geometric”—inspired by the French structuralists, especially Foucault—he describes the transformation of the landscape, of society, and of thought as regimentation by means of geometry. He speaks of a correspondence between the “geometrization of the landscape” and the “geometrization of thought.” “Space is divided into discrete, isolated cells ... reached through complex networks of corridors and roadways that must be traveled at prescribed speeds and prescribed times.”<sup>98</sup> He thus understands his geometric painting as “antithetical to that of previous geometric art.... These are paintings of prisons, cells, and walls.... The idealist square becomes the prison.”<sup>99</sup>

When Smith uses a pencil to mark the horizontals and verticals on the canvas as in a technical drawing, or when he scratches them into the surface, this “reductivism” and “intellectualism” does not correspond for him with a cold and “impersonal” mode of painting. To the contrary, the surface is painterly, it is in movement by means of dynamic strokes of the brush; only occasionally do purely opaque areas rest within them like islands. Loose, light brushstrokes and lucid colors make a circle float as in *For Clyfford #2*, 1984, or *Alone with the Killer #2*, 1983 (p. 171). This has nothing in common with the geometric abstraction of the Op Art movement. In the sensitive, finely balanced, and often transparent application of delicate colors arises the impression of an exciting connection between the constructed and the free, between chance and control, calculation and spontaneity, a dialogue between fixed order and dynamism. One can almost hear and feel the rhythm of the works, like the language of a poem, the movement of a dance, like music.<sup>40</sup> “Smith, still concerned with the bridge between visual art and music, was now working—rather in the manner of John Cage, for example, or the language poets, who were emerging as a movement during the same period—to elementalize the experience of perception.”<sup>41</sup> “Circles go off center. Sudden breaks in symmetry intensify the color, which is not at all systematic, but close to ecstasy, especially in the serpentine form flowing upward in a succession of eccentric orange curves—the sensual snake in the Garden—whose seemingly regular, but ultimately unregulated shape sets the whole composition in motion.”<sup>42</sup>

Allan Temko called these “the magnificent liberated ‘geometric’ paintings of the 1970s.” “a geometric art of high intellectual purity,” “triumphant paintings ... the happiest of his life, named for their fundamental compositional patterns—‘2-1-3-2-1’ and ‘1-2-3-4-1’—as a sign of aesthetic truth.”<sup>43</sup> Smith himself did not entirely agree that intellect triumphs over intuition in these paintings: “I am not over the dam for intuition, improvisation and spontaneity, certainly not in the sense that these aspects of human sensibility are exalted in many contemporary practices. The shapes, mostly simple geometric ones, are manageable and anonymous and provide for color as having ‘personality’ characteristics, protagonists of the drama which is emerging on the canvas,” Hassel Smith said in an interview with Kevin Power at the end of the seventies in the English magazine *Arts Review*. With reference to the dynamic between intuition and reason expressed by both Allan Temko and Hassel Smith, it is clear that Hassel himself identified strongly with Gregory Bateson’s description of the stochastic process. In *Mind and Nature* (1979), Bateson wrote, “If a sequence of events combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure, that sequence is said to be stochastic.” He said to his wife Donna Smith, “That’s what I do.”

*Measured Paintings* were exhibited several times, for example in 1975 at the San Francisco Museum of Art. “In 1970, at the age of fifty-five, Smith took up a compass and ruler and began laying out geometric patterns on canvases ... Though hard edge, these paintings carry a suggestion of indiscipline charged with restless energies which give a semi-surreal illusion of three-dimensionality.”<sup>44</sup> And Temko once again in 1979: “Organized in concentric patterns as intricate as clockwork, its colors deceptively bland—but in fact biting—café-au-lait, muted blues and green, pink and reddish orange. This is an altogether different search, this time with the artist’s other self—intellectually fearless and finally calm—at odds with what now seems too easy a victory over the forces of history.”<sup>45</sup> “Congratulations on your exhibition in Los Angeles,” Clyfford Still wrote to Smith approvingly in 1978, “I wish you every success in its reception. It is time Los Angeles saw a recent body of your work.”<sup>46</sup>

### DYNAMIC ALL-OVER, 1987–1992 (pp. 189–203)

After a period of roughly seventeen years the forms in the “measured paintings” dissolve, their edges becoming overwhelmed by brushstrokes. Once again the moment arrives for Hassel Smith to push the grammar of his images further. This step too takes place not accidentally but intentionally. In a transitional phase the brushstrokes are given increasing freedom. They then definitively overcome the lines and disseminate themselves with irrepressible force, powerfully, exuberantly, breaking the boundaries of the space and flooding across and beyond the edges of the image. Flying lines, flickering fireworks from the depths of the space, cascades, maelstroms of plumed brushstrokes. An impulsive style of painting, vehement, expressive. The improvisations of a painter in love with jazz! Hassel Smith is a master of color: the entire palette, luminous, wonderful contrasts. The application of paint to the canvas as it lies upon on the floor is light, loose, glazed, at times as transparent as a watercolor, and in between there are impasto nests of paint. He places islands of pigment within the liquid and flowing surface. Surfaces with haptic crosshatching alternate with flat “watercolor.” Here and there the raw canvas remains visible.

### NEW ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM, 1992–1997 (pp. 204–13)

One final transition in the visual form of expression takes place. Elements of earlier Abstract Expressionist painting are revitalized three decades later. The agitated sea of colors comes to rest. The images possess a quiet balance between expansive fields of color and sharp flashes of brushwork that cut into them as if from outside. Biomorphous forms press from the corners and edges of the image into the interior, as if something ingenious from beyond the painting’s edge is trying to find its way to the center. Although painted in acrylic, the buildup of color makes them look like oil. Smith’s paintings of the nineties, the last ones he made before his delicate health made him turn exclusively to drawing, build upon his earlier ideas of surface and depth, center and periphery of the image. The relationship of these works to paintings from the fifties—such as *Tiptoe Down to Art*, 1950 (p. 125) is clear.

“I find I still believe in my reasons for painting in the non-objective way in the first place,” Smith had said at the end of the fifties—and defended abstraction against every ignorant comment: “To the guy who asks me ‘What is that? What is THAT supposed to be?’ ... I can only say in the deathless words of King Louis the First, ‘Man if you have to ask, you will never know.’”<sup>47</sup> No references to reality, no narrative, no symbols; rather, these images open up an abundance of associations to each viewer. “Again, there is Smith’s reminder that his paintings are not *about* something, they *are* the something which waits to meet and involve us.”<sup>48</sup> Smith’s statements at the beginning of the sixties about abstraction are also a commentary upon his final images: “I wish to feel free to appreciate *life* without relating it, either its beauties or its ugliness in any necessary way to my painting. My paintings are intended to be additions to rather than reflections of or upon *life*.”<sup>49</sup>

### THE RECEPTION OF THE LATE WORK

The “measured paintings” were received with disconcertment, also in California. “It is easy to see the continuation here of the loose, energetic, informal kind of California Abstract Expressionism, even in the most recent paintings, which have caused some consternation by going much more formal in their composition,” wrote the *Oakland Tribune* about the exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1975.<sup>50</sup> Four years later, in 1979, at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco, the public again reacted with irritation, to Hassel Smith’s great astonishment.<sup>51</sup> There were no sales. Only Allan Temko, who had followed Smith’s creative work through the years, was enthusiastic: “Hassel Smith’s brilliant abstract expressionist paintings of the 1960s at Gallery Paule Anglim, 710 Montgomery Street, will delight his old fans who are either put off or totally baffled by his geometric work of the 1970s. That doesn’t include me, for I admire both periods and, in some ways, prefer the new to the old.”<sup>52</sup> The fact that these images were not successful on the market did not prevent Smith from determinedly continuing to paint in his own style. “If you feel the necessity for change, as I have felt, you just have to go ahead and do it.”<sup>53</sup> His London gallery Gimpel Fils did not follow him. And he had to wrangle with John Natsoulas in Davis, California, to have his new work included: “I do not want this show to be another mini-retrospective. This show MUST include a preponderance of the most recent work (1986–88).”<sup>54</sup>

In fact, Hassel does place demands on his viewers by not giving them the expected and familiar. He is driven by the task of developing a pictorial language. What the critics have described as “Smith’s radical stylistic shifts,”<sup>55</sup> as a “zigzag,”<sup>56</sup> is nothing other than the expression of this quest: “He wished to find a different way of ‘doing’ a painting, one that defied traditional critical analysis, and one that refused references to recollected experience.”<sup>57</sup> Hassel Smith was not an eclectic; he pursued a conception. And, as Clement Greenberg has said with regards to Newman, Rothko, and Still, it is in “conception alone” where lies “the ultimate source of value or quality in art.” “Culture or taste may be a necessary condition of conception, but conception is alone decisive. Conception can also be called invention, inspiration, or even intuition.”<sup>58</sup>

John Coplans’s essay in the May 1964 edition of *Artforum* was titled “Re-Discovering Hassel Smith,” a plea against the neglect of that oeuvre for which he held the “the largely indifferent cultural milieu on the West Coast” responsible: “It was simply too provincial and self-absorbed to recognize the master in its midst.”<sup>59</sup> Irving Blum (2002) finds a cause in Smith’s aesthetic: “There was a type of humor and a particular kind of attitude you didn’t find so often in New York at the time and that’s one of the things that sets apart the West Coast from the East.”<sup>60</sup> In its 2003 discussion of the impressive—but with a mere twenty-eight works, modest—retrospective at the Sonoma County Museum in Santa Rosa, *Art in America* asked, “Where is the major survey this fascinating artist deserves?”<sup>61</sup>

The Hassel Smith retrospective has yet to be curated. But public perception is experiencing a transformation. In the late nineties Susan Landauer’s comprehensive study of the San Francisco Art Institute appeared, in which Hassel Smith occupies a prominent place.<sup>62</sup> Gagosian Gallery in New York mounted a retrospective of Ferus Gallery in 2002 with a group exhibition including Ed Ruscha, Edward Kienholz, and Andy Warhol, in which three works by Hassel Smith were also shown: *The Triumph of Gargoylism* (1957), *The Indian Love Call* (1961), and *Untitled* (1961).<sup>63</sup> *Artforum* judged *The Triumph of Gargoylism* as looking “strikingly prescient” and included only this one painting to accompany the review.<sup>64</sup> The famous art critic Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Smith’s dispersed, almost comic episodes of line and color feel especially contemporary” (in comparison with other San Francisco artists like Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Richard Diebenkorn).<sup>65</sup> In its cover story on the exhibition, *Los Angeles Times* quotes Irving Blum on Hassel Smith: “The work’s at least as interesting as Motherwell. He would have had the most extraordinary run had he lived in New York. But he lived in Sebastopol.”<sup>66</sup> In the publication by Kristine McKenna *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (2009), the chronology starts with the year 1915: “Hassel Smith born on April 27 in Sturgis, Michigan.”<sup>67</sup> *West Coast Painting*, an exhibition in the Galerie Biedermann in Munich in 2005, showed works by Hassel Smith from the eighties and nineties alongside Lawrence Carroll, Marcia Haff, Mark Harrington, and Lucas Reiner.<sup>68</sup> *Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction, 1946–1963*, in four New York galleries in 2011, presented six works by Smith from the sixties.<sup>69</sup>

In an era overflowing with images, a time of countless artists and an overabundance of exhibitions, what is it that remains memorable, what is worthy of being retained for art history? Let’s take a look at the paintings of Hassel Smith.

My warmest thanks to Donna Smith, whom I was graciously permitted to visit during July 2011 at her home at Ebenezer Chapel near Frone. Together with her and Mark Harrington, her son and the stepson of Hassel Smith, I was able to look at almost two hundred late works by Hassel Smith. Preceding this was a first visit in 2004 to the "Old Rectory." At that time I made the acquaintance of Hassel Smith, physically frail but mentally sharp, at the Nursing Home at Sutton Very near Warmminster in the West Country.

The title of this essay is a reference to Hassel Smith's painting of the same name (*More and More Cosmic Funk*) of 1976, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm). "Cosmic Funk" is an expression Smith borrowed from jazz musician Lonnie Liston Smith.

- 1) Allan Temko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1954–1975*, exh. cat. San Francisco Museum of Art (San Francisco, 1975).
- 2) Donna Smith, in an unpublished letter of January 15, 2005, to the writer David Beasley.
- 3) Michael Duncan, "Hassel Smith at the Sonoma County Museum," *Art in America* 91, no. 7 (2002), p. 103.
- 4) Alfred Frankenstein, "The World of Music," review of Hassel Smith exhibition at Dilksi Gallery, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1958, Hassel Smith papers, Archive of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (AAA).
- 5) Ray Duncan, "Wildness Under Control," review of Hassel Smith exhibition at Pasadena Art Museum, *Scene Independent*, March 19, 1961.
- 6) Alfred Frankenstein, "The Art Galleries," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 12, 1950.
- 7) Tim Nye and Jacqueline Miró, *Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction, 1946–1963*, curated by Tim Nye and Jacqueline Miró, Nyehaus, David Nolan Gallery, Franklin Parrasch Gallery, and Leslie Feely Fine Art (New York, 2011).
- 8) Ibid. Rhythmic improvisation and the virtuosity of jazz inspired many Abstract Expressionists. As Lee Krasser recounts about Jackson Pollock, "[He] would get into grooves of interesting to his jazz records . . . day and night for three days running. . . He thought this was the only other really creative thing that was happening in this country." Quoted in Maurice Berger, "Abstract Expressionism: A Cultural Timeline," in *Action/Abstraction*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt, exh. cat. The Jewish Museum (New York, 2006), p. 22.
- 9) Chris Branton, unpublished speech script, San Francisco Art Institute, 2009.
- 10) John Coplans, "Re-Discovering Hassel Smith," *Artforum* 3, no. 11 (May 1964).
- 11) Thomas Albright, "Abstract Expressionist: A Rare Showing of Hassel Smith," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 1, 1970, p. 41.
- 12) Allan Temko, "A Lesson in History: Review of Hassel Smith Exhibition at Gallery Paule Anglin, San Francisco," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 1979.
- 13) Irving Blum, interviewed by Roberta Bernstein, in *Ferus*, exh. cat. Gagosian Gallery (New York, 2002), p. 25.
- 14) Hassel Smith, unpublished interview with Jan Butterfield, ca. 1976, quoted in Bruce Nixon, *Hassel Smith* (Davis, Calif., 1997), p. 21.
- 15) Robert Irvin, quoted in Kristine McKenna, *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (Göttingen, 2008), p. 156.
- 16) "Mr. Hassel Smith's New Paintings (from our art critic)," *The Times*, April 4, 1963.
- 17) Hassel Smith, *Untitled*, 1959, oil and enamel on canvas, 71 x 49 in. (180.3 x 124.5 cm).
- 18) Oral history interview with Hassel Smith (by Paul J. Karlstrom), 1978 Sept. 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 19) Nye and Miró, *Bella Pacifica*.
- 20) Clifford Still to Hassel Smith, October 11, 1970, Hassel Smith papers, AAA. Hassel Smith donated most of his papers to the Archives of American Art in several increments between 1980 and 1998.
- 21) Mark Harrington, "Hassel Smith in the West Country," in *Hassel Smith*, exh. cat. Silk Mill Studios (Frone, 2011).
- 22) See Catrin Lorch's obituary of Lucian Freud, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 168, July 23–24, 2011, p. 13.
- 23) San Francisco Art Institute Alumni Association, *Alumni Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (August 1978).
- 24) Douglas MacAgy, *Hassel Smith*, exh. cat. André Emmerich Gallery (New York, 1961). Douglas MacAgy was then the director of the Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 25) Walter Hopps, "Introduction," in *Hassel Smith: A Selection of Paintings, 1948–1961*, exh. cat. Pasadena Art Museum (Pasadena, Calif., 1961).
- 26) H. Smith, Butterfield, Interview, quoted in *Alumni Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (August 1978), p. 5.
- 27) *Ferus*, exh. cat. Gagosian Gallery (New York, 2002), p. 116.
- 28) Carlyle Burrows, "Varieties of Savagery," review of the Hassel Smith exhibition at the André Emmerich Gallery, New York, 1961, *New York Herald Tribune*, February 19, 1961.
- 29) Nixon, *Hassel Smith*, p. 31.
- 30) Hassel Smith, in *Hassel Smith*, exh. cat. California School of Fine Arts (San Francisco, 1957).
- 31) Mark Harrington, in conversation with the author, December 2011.
- 32) Werner Spies, "Das inszenierte Zögern, Ein Denkmal expressiver Malerei, Willem de Kooning in der Berliner Akademie der Künste (1984)," reprinted in *Rosart vor Miami* (Munich, 1989), p. 96.
- 33) Hassel Smith, quoted in Nixon, *Hassel Smith*, p. 19.
- 34) *Piet Mondrian*, exh. cat. Gemeentemuseum den Haag, The Hague (Bern, 1985), p. XX.
- 35) Werner Spies, "Bei Josef Albers," in *Anni und Josef Albers: Eine Retrospektive*, exh. cat. Villa Stuck (Munich 1989), p. 86.
- 36) Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry" (1984), in *Collected Essays, 1981–1987* (Zurich, 1988), p. 80.
- 37) Hassel Smith (1977), quoted in Nixon, *Hassel Smith*, p. 55. Hassel Smith strongly identified with Gregory Bateson's description of the "stochastic process."
- 38) Peter Halley, "The Deployment of the Geometric" (1984), in *Collected Essays*, p. 128.
- 39) Halley, *Collected Essays*, p. 23.
- 40) References to music are also found in titles such as *From Rags to Rags* and *From Rags to Riches* (1971–72), inspired by the sitarist and composer Ravi Shankar, or *Bix and the Gang* (1984).
- 41) Nixon, *Hassel Smith*, p. 31.
- 42) Temko, *Hassel Smith*.
- 43) Ibid.
- 44) San Francisco Museum of Art, press release, 1975. How much more rational is the work of Bridget Riley, with line, color, and composition; her works are based on serial progression, repetition, avoiding emphasis on spontaneity, and the personal gesture of Abstract Expressionism. See Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, exh. cat. Guggenheim Museum (New York, 1996), p. 292.
- 45) Temko, "A Lesson in History."
- 46) Clifford Still to Hassel Smith, November 3, 1978, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 47) Hassel Smith, in *Hassel Smith*, exh. cat. California School of Fine Arts (San Francisco, 1957).
- 48) Hopps, "Introduction."
- 49) Hassel Smith (1952), quoted in *ibid.*
- 50) Charles Shere, "Hassel Smith Show Recalls Golden Age," *Oakland Tribune*, November 9, 1975.
- 51) Donna Smith, in conversation with the author, July 2011.
- 52) Temko, "A Lesson in History."
- 53) Hassel Smith, quoted in "Hassel Smith, Being in and Getting out of Cages," ca. 1980, clipping from an art magazine, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 54) Hassel Smith to John Natoulos, Davis, California, September 18, 1989, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 55) Duncan, "Hassel Smith."
- 56) Peter Selz, in *Hassel Smith: 55 Years of Painting*, exh. cat. Sonoma County Museum (Santa Rosa, 2003).
- 57) Nixon, *Hassel Smith*, p. 31.
- 58) Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* (Laguna), no. 6 (October 1962), pp. 29–30; reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1968*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993), p. 132.
- 59) John Coplans, "Re-Discovering Hassel Smith."
- 60) Irving Blum, in *Ferus*, p. 30.
- 61) Duncan, "Hassel Smith."
- 62) Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley et al., 1996).
- 63) *Ferus*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2002.
- 64) David Rimanelli, "Ferus at Gagosian," *Artforum* 41, no. 3 (November 2002), p. 41.
- 65) Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: *Ferus*," review of the exhibition *Ferus* at Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2002, *New York Times*, September 20, 2002.
- 66) Irving Blum, quoted in Barbara Isenberg, "An L. A. Art Story: A New York exhibition celebrates the brief but dazzling decade when Ferus Gallery introduced the best of a new generation of artists," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2006, p. 81.
- 67) McKenna, *Ferus Gallery*, p. 103.
- 68) *West Coast Painting*, Galerie Biedermann, Munich, 2005 (exhibition documentation designed by Christian Schmidt), *Hassel Smith: Jazz of Color*, solo exhibition at Credit Suisse, Kunst im Palais am Leinbühlare, November 2004 – May 2005; *Picture Power to Art*, Camera Artis, Kaske Foundation, Munich, 2005–06 (dialogue of Smith's paintings with recent work by Mark Harrington), all three curated by Peter Giloy-Hirtz.
- 69) Nye and Miró, *Bella Pacifica*.