

AN ITINERANT LIFE IN MODERN ART

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Hassel Smith described himself in a 1978 interview as an itinerant: "I have done a lot of traveling back and forth across the United States by every known conveyance except horse.... I think it is a significant ... pattern of my life that I have constantly moved, from one place to another. It's a curious fact that the twelve years my wife and I and our family have spent in Bristol represent the longest period of time that any of us have ever lived in one place. So that gives you an idea of how itinerant we have been." Hassel could not have known it at the time, but his itinerancy was to cease in England—in Bristol and nearby environs.

In 1966 Hassel Smith and his second wife, Donna, made the decision to move from Southern California to Bristol to accept a teaching position at the Royal West of England College of Art. The move turned out to be permanent, which to outside observers seemed to represent a conscious career gamble. Smith had an established reputation in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles; in both cities his work had gallery representation and many admirers. His earlier work included the most beautiful and pictorially coherent Abstract Expressionist painting being done anywhere.

Despite fairly frequent trips to the Bay Area to visit friends and colleagues, and guest teaching at the University of California at Berkeley and at Davis, and at the San Francisco Art Institute, Smith never returned to the West Coast art world that had formed his ideas and nurtured him professionally. Many believe that his career was all but sacrificed, a harsh judgment but one that seems borne out by the almost visible fading of his former prominence on the California scene. His later shifts in style were puzzling to many of his admirers, collectors, and dealers, some of whom feared his moment of greatness was slipping away. Whether or not this assessment was justified, it remains a central problem in untangling the threads of a fascinating individual life and its relationship to an impressive body of work.

THE BEGINNINGS

Hassel Smith began life on the shores of Lake Michigan in the small factory town of Sturgis, Michigan, where he was born on April 24, 1915. His parents, Hassel and Helen Adams Smith, were college graduates, and the family enjoyed a comfortable middle-class existence. But home life was, as Smith put it, "very unsettled." His mother had contracted tuberculosis, and at that time the accepted treatment was to seek a healthier climate. Between 1918 and 1923 the family moved frequently—first to Denver where Hassel attended kindergarten, then to warmer Los Angeles, on to San Mateo, and finally to Mill Valley. The Smiths returned in 1928 to Sturgis, where the senior Hassel resumed his job as an advertising executive. The young Hassel attended his first year of high school in Sturgis, but in 1929 the family moved back to San Mateo where Hassel graduated from San Mateo Union High School in 1932.

Among Hassel's high school classmates was Frank Stauffacher, who later became prominent as an experimental filmmaker. He and Hassel forged a close friendship based on a mutual interest in art and jazz. Frank was a trumpet player, an exposure that may have triggered Hassel's early interest in jazz. Jack Stauffacher, Frank's younger brother, remembers meeting Hassel in about 1931. He admired the older boys, whose interest in jazz and art he sought to emulate, though he had other interests leading to a lifelong career as a typographer. Jack and his Greenwood Press in San Francisco's North Beach are celebrated as among the last surviving links to the era of small-press printing.² Frank died young in 1955, depriving Hassel of this valued friendship, which he eventually transferred to Jack during his frequent appearances in the Bay Area after moving to England.

1 // Hassel Smith, Denver, 1920

2 // Hassel Smith, Grand Canyon, 1928

3 // Hassel Smith, San Francisco, 1941

4 // Hassel Smith and friends, canoeing in Michigan, ca. 1929

Hassel's relationship to the Stauffacher family appears to have been an important aspect of his high school years, and, according to Jack, the San Mateo environment nurtured the artistic interests of both Frank and Hassel. There was something of a small "art crowd." Jack remembers the local Burlingame art school that offered life-drawing and painting classes open to high school-age students.³ Closer to Jack's age was another future abstract artist, Sam Francis, who entered San Mateo Union High School after Hassel and Frank left. These creative individuals constituted what Jack thinks of as a San Mateo art group.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND ART SCHOOL

Hassel returned to the Midwest to attend his parents' alma mater, Northwestern University, following in their footsteps to the extent of joining his father's fraternity, Phi Kappa Psi. He was determined to become a chemist, but the German language requirement foiled his ambitions. In order to graduate, he shifted to art history, later adding English literature for a double major. He received honors in both subjects at graduation. Looking back, Smith recognized that this marked the beginning of what he described as "my love affair with painting." In that embryonic art program in which history and practice were not treated as separately as they tend to be now, Hassel began to develop his own painterly skills. His instructor was Rensselaer W. Lee, chair of art history, who was backed by young and enthusiastic teachers who, in Hassel's appreciative words, "helped me a great deal."⁴

Hassel remembers that his exposure to art prior to Northwestern was a single art education course based on the so-called Perry Prints, sepia reproductions covering the history of art masterpieces as they were then construed. In 1932 it was Smith's "distinct impression that the world's greatest artist was Norman Rockwell," joined by Maxfield Parrish in second place. At home, his parents were most interested in literature and music. During frequent family visits to Chicago the family attended plays and concerts but did not, in Hassel's memory, visit museums or galleries. Fortunately, at Northwestern, Hassel and his fellow art students were directed by their tutors to the wealth of art available in Chicago, especially the Century of Progress International Exposition held there in 1933–34. The Art Institute of Chicago was a revelation, "undoubtedly, unquestionably, the most significant collection of paintings from abroad which had been assembled since the time of the Armory Show."⁵

Dazzled as he was by the visual arts on display, Hassel was equally drawn to dance. He attended performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo under the direction of Léonide Massine. Smith retrospectively marveled that "within a very short time I encountered many of the recognized masterpieces of modern art, not only in painting and sculpture, but in the ballet. I had no hesitation whatever in committing myself. I never experienced any reserve in regard to modern art ... I liked it instantly." Smith went on to declare his full conversion to modernist art, but with a meaningful qualification that provided for a broader historical view: "I have been committed ever since to advanced art ... which, however, doesn't prevent me from being interested in the art of the past. I don't really see that any distinction can be made between the past and the present in terms of fundamental effectiveness. It seems to me that the painting of the past is as effective in the present, perhaps even more effective than at the time it was done."⁶ With these words, Hassel Smith placed himself among those modernists who draw as much inspiration from the history of art (and ideas) as from the often radical experiments of his own time. He did not join forces with those whose sole commitment was to overturn the art of the past.

Chicago had prepared Smith well for a future in art, but that career appeared initially to be in art history rather than practice. With the support of Rensselaer Lee, Hassel was admitted to the Princeton art history graduate program where a successful academic career was all but assured. However, a summer break back in California derailed this plan. To keep himself "out of mischief" Hassel signed up for summer session at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA, now San Francisco Art Institute, SFAI). Something about the place and the company

of artists attracted him, and he made the life-altering decision to forsake the prestige of Princeton for the bohemian environment of an art school far removed from the traditional career-making East Coast institutions. He never turned back.

After the summer session of 1936, Hassel became a fully enrolled art student, studying with E. Spencer Mackey, Lee Randolph, and Otis Oldfield. However, the only teacher he credits for making the experience worthwhile was Maurice Sterne, who had a guest stint of several years at the school. Sterne's class provided Hassel what he retrospectively viewed as a "revelation"—the understanding of drawing in particular and its central importance to all art practice. He remembers the life classes, drawing and painting from the nude model, as inspirational: "His instruction was brilliant... If Sterne hadn't been there, I'm sorry to say that in all due respect to the other people, I don't think that they were able to provide much of anything exceptional."⁷ What Sterne offered his students was "his remarkable ability to assist a student in rationalizing his visual experience in terms of drawing."⁸ Hassel's emphasis on drawing as the basis of visual art is an aspect of the value he assigns to tradition and art of the past. Paradoxically, the essential importance of drawing to the training of artists started its decline with the rise of abstract painting, both gestural and post-painterly formalist. In many schools, from the sixties through the seventies drawing was all but submerged as Duchampian conceptualism seemed to make craft and skill—the artist's hand and touch, even painting itself—subordinate to ideas and words.⁹ In this regard, Hassel would have been identified as conservative, indeed old-fashioned, when compared to the growing conceptual bias in many fine art schools. But among Hassel's CSFA colleagues were those who met regularly to draw from the nude figure, continuing the practice they picked up in art school, whether or not their current painting was representational. One of his most devoted students much later remembered that Hassel seemed to treat drawing on a par with painting in terms of importance.¹⁰ This was not unique to Hassel; many artists of his generation held onto drawing as fundamental to their practice. But the implication seems to be that he went further in valuing drawings as equal to paintings. For Hassel Smith drawing was essential to visual thinking and to understanding the world in spatial and formal terms.

PLEIN-AIR PAINTING AND THE REAL (ART) WORLD

Hassel Smith counted among his fellow Sterne class students James Weeks, Nell Sinton—and Jack Wilkinson. Later Hassel and his friend Jack moved into Maynard Dixon's San Francisco studio at 727 Montgomery Street, which Hassel described as "magnificent." Hassel's other artist friends also found studios in San Francisco and, influenced by the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, notably Van Gogh and Gauguin, they all painted out-of-doors (*en plein air*, though Hassel did not use the term). "We were all fairly knowledgeable, knowing and being extremely interested in art of any kind, past, present, and future—we [were] making the art of the future, as we thought of it."¹¹

The impulse to work outside had a splendid precedent in the Bay Area with the Post-Impressionist landscape colorists self-named the Society of Six.¹² Hassel and his group painted the city at night. During the day they traveled around searching for the most picturesque vantage points for painting their nocturnes: "It's a great thing, the experience of painting out of doors, on the spot, under pretty difficult weather conditions ... and particularly in a place like San Francisco with its magnificent panoramas."¹³

Opportunities to sell work were virtually nonexistent. Out of the necessity of making a living, Hassel temporarily stepped aside from the art track he was following and entered a thoroughly unfamiliar world. He learned that with a college degree one could receive in-service training with the California State Relief Administration. He was ill-prepared by his comfortable beginnings for skid-row duty in the company of social workers. He later described his experience as a caseworker as "shattering." But he valued the experience, which he described as important for his development as a person.

ROSENBERG FELLOWSHIP: BECOMING A REAL ARTIST IN THE GOLD COUNTRY

Following the social casework job in San Francisco, Hassel applied for the Abraham Rosenberg Foundation Traveling Fellowship. Hassel had earned a hometown image as an Eagle Scott along with other character-burnishing achievements. Upon being awarded the fellowship, he and another painter, Richard Hackett, decided to go up to the Gold Rush Mother Lode country east of Sacramento to Angels Camp in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They traveled around the region painting everything that captured their fancies. Hassel moved from place to place, living in Angels Camp, Columbia, and Mokelumne Hill, in effect becoming for a time an itinerant plein-air landscape painter. The terms of the Rosenberg Fellowship required him to provide regular samples of his work along with letters describing his experiences. These reports, addressed to Miss Forbes and Miss Sullivan of the San Francisco Art Association and preserved at the San Francisco Art Institute Archives, provide a fascinating picture of his response to the places visited and the life of the people in isolated rural California in the early years of World War II.¹⁴ Handwritten on large sheets of yellow-brown paper, a report to the Board evocatively creates a portrait of the Angels Camp setting for the paintings done June 15 to September 1, 1941:

In order that I may better describe this phase of the Mother Lode scene may I remind you that Angels Camp, like most of the towns of this region, is built along a winding valley, following the course of the stream from which, in the early days of the gold rush most of the rough gold was taken. In summer, as a result, the town proper is lush and green, presenting quite a different appearance than the arid hills which surround it. Around many an ancient residence has been cultivated that sort of garden for which our grandmothers had such a passion—vines and trailers, snow-balls, Hydrangea, Heliotrope, oleander, herbs and grasses clog the walks and nearly obscure the facades of the houses. Out of this profusion usually rises a pair of dignified cypress, grave and sepulchral. Stone walls (without mortar) seem hardly adequate to girdle the bursting greenery of the places they are appointed to surround. This sort of thing, then, is what has fascinated me.¹⁵

Another trip described later in the same report took Hassel, his grocery man riding shotgun in his Model A Ford, sixty miles south of Angels Camp, where his companion's aunts and grandmother lived: "Here is a real pioneer family—inbred and slightly crazy (as is often the case in communities so completely removed from the outside world), but strong, independent, and capable. I made a number of drawings of the town and intend to go over again soon—do some paintings of the town and the members of the family—if they are willing."¹⁶

POLITICAL AWAKENING IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Despite Smith's care in carefully managing the Rosenberg Fellowship funds, he eventually had to find another source of support. Based on his earlier experience with social work, he managed to get a job with the Farm Security Administration. After training in San Francisco, he was assigned to the Bakersfield office and sent thirty miles further southeast to Arvin, just below the Tehachapi Mountains in the lower San Joaquin Valley. On the edge of the Mojave Desert and, as Smith describes it, "about as far away from everything as you can get ... and hotter than hell," Arvin was in the middle of a vast expanse of cotton fields and potato farms.¹⁷ The main duty of the grant office was handing out food stamps and, in Hassel's case, driving in his Model A from one migratory camp to another to verify residence. In the migrant worker camp, Hassel met social worker June Meyers, who became his first wife.

Through this three-year experience Smith became interested in social and political theory. To a certain extent he was able to continue drawing, and his subjects, fieldworkers picking cotton and engaged in other agricultural labor, reveal his developing social conscience and sympathies. He had entered social work as the somewhat insulated product of the

5 // Hassel Smith, ca. 1940

6 // Hassel Smith, San Francisco, 1941

American middle class, but he left several years later with a radically transformed vision of American society aligned with left-wing causes.

In his own words, Smith's perspective had been "altered out of all recognition."¹⁸ When the United States entered World War II after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, Smith registered as a conscientious objector, following his principles but also because his number came up the first day the draft was instituted. However, he was classified 4-F and his conscientious objector status petition was never ruled upon. Fearing reclassification, he sought "socially significant employment," which led him to the migratory worker program. In 1944 the FSA was phased out, and Hassel was assigned to the Forest Service in Oregon as a timber scaler with the task of determining the clear board feet in a log before cutting:

Pretty soon the war was over, so we came back to San Francisco. I had quite a stroke of good luck because a friend of mine, one of my teachers at the school [CSFA], Ray Bertrand who had taught lithography, became ill... So I suddenly found that I was working at the school [as his replacement] teaching lithography. I was on the premises before Douglas MacAgy and the others made their appearance. There was a general clearing out, a sort of renovation of the whole place, and he hired people like David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Walter Landor, Bob Howard, Jeremy Anderson, and Jim McCray—and he hired me as well.¹⁹

BACK AT CSFA: TEACHING, COLLEAGUES, AND STUDENTS

Following in the footsteps of Maurice Sterne, Smith was teaching drawing under the new regime, which was, in his words, "a revolution in art training." Under the direction of Douglas MacAgy, the years 1945 to 1950 were famously described as the "period of exploration" by Mary McChesney in her study of CSFA.²⁰ Nostalgically, it is considered the school's golden age, and it provided context for the development and maturation of Smith as an artist. He, like many of his peers, found it difficult to resist the powerful influence of guest artists brought by MacAgy—notably Clyfford Still, but also Mark Rothko. This was the period of the rise in San Francisco of a regional school of abstract gestural painting to complement if not rival that of the School of New York. And, as Susan Landauer demonstrates in her indispensable *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, it solidified the position of the CSFA as the center for avant-garde art on the West Coast.

The environment for experimentation was particularly fertile at CSFA from 1945 forward, and the institution hewed self-consciously to a philosophical emphasis on individual creativity and romantic bohemianism. Other schools of the time tended to more practical goals, giving more attention to job training than to artist training. In a departure from its earlier days, CSFA staked out a national reputation for its primary focus on the idea of art for its own sake.

Hassel actually claimed that he and his fellow teachers at CSFA were giving students "much better" training than they themselves had received. He described just what made CSFA special if not unique during the immediate postwar MacAgy years: "For many of us on the staff, the experience was as much, or even more, a learning than a teaching experience. So many of the students were the same age as the instructors that the situation of being an instructor at the school at that time, and/or being a student, was virtually interchangeable.... People got together and learned various things from each other."²¹

The fundamental goal of the institution now was to promote art as an act of exploration. Hassel Smith was drawn to this non-commercial idealistic approach, but at the same time his rapidly developing Marxism also recognized the importance of teaching diverse marketable skills. One writer described it as introducing a "materialist kernel" to art school education.²² Among the curriculum changes wrought by the new director was elimination

of sequential skill acquisition. This broke with the pattern of standard art education in the 1940s. At CSFA prerequisites were removed and students, treated by the new regime as student-artists, were free to find their own paths to painting.

Perhaps more than by philosophical ideas about the objectives of artist training, any teacher must be understood and measured by performance in the classroom. SFAI presented an interesting mixture of teaching styles. Hassel described the almost laissez-faire collaborative approach of the MacAgy years as an "exchange of information." The key was the GI Bill and the arrival of older students, many (such as Richard Diebenkorn and Frank Lobdell) just returned from the war. The opportunity for artists—teachers and students alike—to converse with one another, visit studios, and share ideas constituted for Smith the "greatest value of the situation." The long list of Smith's students at CSFA also includes Deborah Remington, James Kelly, Roy De Forest, Jack Jefferson, John Hultberg, Ernest Briggs, Lilly Fenichel, Julius Wasserstein, and Madeleine Dimond (Martin)—all recognizable names in connection with long professional careers.

Hassel Smith took pride in his positive relationship to his students, most of whom praised him as an inspiring teacher. However, Adelle Landis (later Bischoff), a newcomer to the Bay Area when she enrolled for summer session at CSFA, was initially intimidated by her first art school teacher: "It struck the fear of the Lord into me.... I felt one had to be brilliant to have a conversation with him"²³ Nevertheless, she eventually found the courage to attend the private classes, more like lectures, he later gave in his and June's home on Potrero Hill after he left CSFA (when he also held informal classes at his Mission Street studio). Adelle recalls that Hassel was "very, very informed and intellectual ... he had a brilliant mind.... And that was a very positive experience. [But] it wasn't intimate. He was still very much the instructor."²⁴

Classroom records indicate that Smith's classes had the highest enrollments at CSFA (Clyfford Still's were reportedly among the lowest). Whatever the enrollment, his students appear to have been attracted to him partly by his personality, that quality that at its best drew the loyalty and affection of many—despite his occasional outbursts. Years later student Manuel Neri wrote an undated card that read, "I want to thank you not only for that time in your classroom but more for the opportunity to know you, the person who will always be a vital part of my life and work. Thank you."²⁵ Deborah Remington also remained fond of Hassel and his second wife, Donna, writing newsy and upbeat letters about New York as an "endless source of inspiration and energy ... also good in terms of exposure for the work." In anticipation of a fall 1977 visit to the Bay Area, she looked forward to "a wonderful reunion. How fortunate that we'll all be in the same place for at least one brief moment in time. Until then, my love to you both."²⁶

Among Smith's main supportive artist friends over the years there was Charles Strong, for whom Smith became a mentor. Though not technically Smith's student, Strong nonetheless provided meaningful insight into him as a man and a teacher. Strong had studied art in Colorado and at an art school on Coronado Island (San Diego) run by WPA muralist and Transcendentalist non-objective painter Ed Garman. He learned of the Abstract Expressionist painting tradition at the by-then San Francisco Art Institute, and he went up to the school to see what he could learn. Shortly after arriving he attended a panel discussion chaired by John Coplans. The panelists were William Zogbaum, Wally Hedrick, and Hassel Smith. This was Strong's introduction to Smith, and it neatly and unequivocally conveyed the older artist's audacious eccentricity, something that appealed greatly to Strong who remembers the occasion well. The topic was contemporary painting:

Wally Hedrick put some clear alcohol—vodka or gin—in the water pitcher. It [the panel] quickly broke down because of the alcohol they were slugging down. And

8 // Hassel Smith, studio at 9 Mission Street, San Francisco, 1950

7 // Hassel Smith exhibition, Iron Pot Bar and Restaurant, San Francisco, 1946

Hassel got really ripped, and he proclaimed at one point, “Jackson Pollock, that’s decorator junk.” Coplans was horrified and said, “Hassel, you can’t say that.” And Hassel just reiterated that Pollock was a decorator. And that’s his iconoclastic nature. It was evident to me right then: This guy doesn’t care who hears what he says, he doesn’t play it safe—he’s an interesting guy.²⁷

Hassel’s vocal irreverence at times came right up to the edge of iconoclasm, notably when he was dismissive of the designated old masters of modernism, particularly Picasso and Matisse: “Nothing in Matisse is more distasteful to me than the roll [sic] to which women are assigned by him. It seems to me that if he aspires as he says he does to a form of resignation for tired businessmen then he makes of himself the same indolent voluptuary which his painting so tirelessly represents. The women with whom I am acquainted spend very little time among the philodendron trees.” In Adelle Bischoff’s judgment these statements were intended to shock, “to be outrageous. And they were funny.”²⁸ Hassel Smith was serious, most certainly about his art, but at the same time he was a provocateur. And Charles was among those friends willing to happily embrace both sides of the man, to accept the entire unpredictable package. Nonetheless, that simply would not have been possible were it not for the art. These admirers, and there were others, were above all drawn to the artist, to the paintings, especially those spectacular creations of the fully realized Abstract Expressionist period. Strong was a close observer of Smith’s paintings, pointing out Sterne’s influence and contrasting Smith’s non-objective painting to that of Still:

Sterne’s drawing has a very strong graphic line in it, and that’s what he taught Hassel. That definite, no-nonsense line goes back to those early cotton picker drawings. They have the strong Sterne line that became a signature of Hassel even in the paintings ... a linear spirit of art that I think is, fantastic.... There was a definite graphic quality that carried from paper into paint. But then the twist he did on it was this zippy line [that] had a Crazy Kat kind of humor to it. And no other Abstract Expressionist had that, to my mind. It’s really kind of ironic that he was such good friends with Still, who had the most Calvinist of sensibilities. The last thing that he was interested in was humor. He was interested in apocalyptic visions.²⁹

Among Strong’s many observations on the relationship between Smith and Clyfford Still, the most important may have to do with sense of humor. As Strong suggested, humor—not always readily recognized as such—runs throughout Hassel’s work and may be the single thing that most distinguishes him from other Abstract Expressionist painters. Hassel felt most comfortable with artists, and he liked being around younger people: “He liked the kind of energy they had.... He got sustenance from that. He saw teaching as a social contract and social involvement.”³⁰

There is, however, at least one exception to Strong’s generalizations, the now well-known and respected painter Christopher Brown, who was Paule Anglim’s first gallery assistant. He worked with Hassel while helping to prepare his inaugural show at the 1977 opening of the first gallery—710 Montgomery in the Old Black Cat building. Paule appears to have adored Hassel. She described him as generous and kind, and, even better, he was a “great dancer.” Hassel Smith was to her, “an important, enriching, part of my life.”³¹

Chris’s account of his working interaction with Hassel, however, shows another side of the man. He “took great delight in any evidence of my youthful ignorance, and he would roar with laughter at the smallest suggestion of how his work might best be hung, or even an innocuous figure of speech. So I dismissed him as a crank whose load on me was lightened only by the kindness of his wife, Donna.” Over Brown’s years (1977–81) at Anglim, Hassel did soften. One Sunday morning in New York their paths crossed when Hassel was flying either to or from England and Chris was on gallery business. They went to the Metropolitan

Museum of Art and Chris listened as Hassel expounded on the virtues—and more often failures—of the art on display. And he did not exempt the museum itself, probably the world’s greatest. They had been there barely forty-five minutes when “he simply looked at me and said he’d had enough, that an hour in a ‘damned’ museum was worse even than an hour in a ‘goddam’ court, that nothing was worse for ‘sucking the very life out of you,’ and that the only good relief was to be found in a stiff drink in a dark room, away from ‘this mountain of crap.’... I can’t enter the Met even today without remembering Hassel, and using the first forty-five minutes to look at the things I want to see most before my good energy is sucked dry by the place.”³²

Another favorite “unofficial student” of Hassel’s was Sonia Gechtoff, who, like Charles Strong, never directly studied with him but became a friend, admiring the man enough to observe carefully and thoughtfully. Sonia arrived in San Francisco a bit late to take Smith’s class at CSFA, where she enrolled in late 1951 and continued through the following year. She later taught at the school for several years before moving to New York. She met Hassel early in 1952 by attending the private sessions on Potrero Hill. She found him to be “quite garrulous but also quite charming.”

What I mainly saw was a man very well read, totally devoted to his art, and also very politically committed. He loved to toss around controversial ideas—some of them political because he prided himself on being a member of the Communist Party, and some of them as aesthetic concepts. One argument I had with him had to do with European art and Matisse. He was not a fan of either and that bothered me. However, his arguments were fascinating, even though I did not agree with them. Some of the people who attended those sessions were completely devoted to Hassel and were in awe of him. These were younger artists whose paintings sometimes showed Hassel’s influence.³³

Sonia, with her husband, James Kelly, whom Hassel does legitimately count among his CSFA students (1950–51), visited the Smiths at their Sebastopol home at least once. She describes Hassel as a terrific host: “We all had a great time drinking lots of cheap red wine!”

These close attachments have their reasons. It seems that Hassel greatly enjoyed the company of youth, both in the classroom and out, and some of the resulting bonds were emotional and irrational, entirely devoid of calculation. Some saw this apparent dichotomy in his art as well. Hassel’s great friend and advocate Allan Temko writes in the catalogue for Smith’s 1975 retrospective in San Francisco, “Whatever else his protean art may be—and among other things, in both his figurative and non-figurative work, it has also been a wildly expressive, almost violent art of tremendous intuitive power—it has always been, first and last, a celebration of rational intellect.”³⁴ This could be viewed as a calculated formulation, crafted to place Hassel clearly in two camps, covering or reconciling two extremes. Elsewhere Hassel seems to disparage “spontaneous expression” in painting, one reason for his disliking the term Abstract Expressionism. And, indeed, Temko comes down squarely on the rational side. However, for many of us, the thrill of Hassel Smith is the explosive, “almost violent,” energy and speed of his best work. The rational is not in charge at those creative moments, and it might be fair to point out that the rational also did not govern Hassel Smith’s life and behavior. Charles Strong’s analogy to an “animal sensibility”³⁵ seems to argue for a fundamentally irrational and spontaneous, or, more accurately, emotional default source for the work.

CLYFFORD STILL: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND FRIENDSHIP

Probably the most important event of Smith’s years at CSFA was his meeting Clyfford Still and developing what became a lifelong friendship. In reading their later correspondence it becomes evident that there was a bond created by an antipathy, especially on Still’s part,

10 // **THE BRIDE OF POLYPHEMUS**, ca. 1950
Wood, stone, string and flash bulb, 22 in. (55.9 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

9 // **PORTRAIT OF BABY BOY**, 1948
Oil on canvas, 18 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)
Oakland Museum of California
Gift of Hassel Smith

towards the art world and an impatience with lesser minds and talents—a benighted population that included the majority of their colleagues and the so-called support system of historians/critics, museums, and galleries. The following is but one example of Still's attacks, in this case on Alfred Frankenstein, art and music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who through his reviews earned Still's formidable enmity. In a letter of March 20, 1977, Still begins by wishing Smith "every success with your exhibition" at Gallery Paule Anglim. He then proceeds to excoriate Frankenstein:

Second, this is to tell you how refreshing it was to read your analysis of the capacities and activities of Alfred Frankenstein. Some thirty-four years ago, shortly after my arrival in San Francisco, I became aware of the character of his mentality and made my opinion of him public. Namely, that until the city was rid of this verminous scribbler, no artist would be free to present his work to the public without incurring his verbal defecations. Even Rothko wrote him a scolding letter for misunderstanding my work. The fact remains that the man is an obscene, cunning, self-promoter, but basically stupid and arrogant as only such parasites can be. Your letter summarized his technics [sic] perfectly and one can only hope that a heart attack will follow and relieve San Francisco of the curse of his presence. I also hope that they publish that letter of yours... I salute your courage in carrying on. Obviously your spirits are high.... Yours, Clyfford.³⁶

11 // Hassel Smith and Elmer Bischoff at California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1948

In its exaggerated vitriol, this letter tells a great deal about Clyfford Still. It also tells something about Alfred Frankenstein (his harsh review of Still's show at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1947, organized by curator Jermayne MacAgy, was the occasion of the artist's unforgiving wrath). But it also suggests something about Hassel Smith. Probably it would be best to say that Hassel greatly admired Still as an artist, but that does not mean he admired or even approved of the degree of his negativity or, above all, his politics. But Still and Smith did seem to share (as evidenced in their correspondence) a mutual beleaguered suspicion of the entire art establishment. Judging from their letters at least, it was the two of them against the art world.³⁷ However, according to Donna Smith, what separated them was humor: "I think Clyfford Still didn't really have a sense of humor—and Hassel had a wonderful, irrepressible sense of humor. And I think it is amazing that they were friends."³⁸ Donna's explanation for this puzzling relationship is simply the work: "Hassel had such profound respect for Clyfford's art. And nobody could talk him out of that. People tried."³⁹

Smith did not favor the term Abstract Expressionism in connection with Still and the group that clustered around him, nor did he characterize the Bay Area Figurative artists as fugitives from what had become the dominant New York style. Always the contrarian, Smith observed in passing that "the expression in my opinion is absolutely meaningless, I can't think what it can possibly be referring to."⁴⁰ Nonetheless, when it was useful to invoke the term, Hassel was not above doing so. In a letter responding to a request to borrow a Still painting on loan to the Oakland Museum of Art for a 1977 exhibition at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Hassel, having checked with and received approval from his friend Clyfford, was in the first paragraph both civil and cooperative. But the second paragraph amounted to a lecture on how benighted Eastern critics and curators were in their ignorance of California's contribution to the Abstract Expressionist movement:

I note with dismay that you apparently intend to exclude West Coast representation other than Clyfford Still, thus arrogating to the Eastern group the leadership of the movement to which several West Coast painters, including myself, Frank Lobdell, James Budd Dixon, Ernest Briggs and others made a significant contribution. While recognizing the absolute primacy of the influence of Clyfford Still in the development of the movement known as "Abstract Expressionism" it nevertheless remains true,

12 // Hassel Smith in Sebastopol studio, 1964

16 | 17

and for this very reason, that West Coast painters following his leadership shared in the revolutionary breakthrough which distinguished the period which you intend to cover in your exhibition.⁴¹

After a decade of residence in England, Hassel Smith still saw himself as a Californian, and he identified himself in a historical sense with what had gone on and what was continuing to challenge the notion of New York exclusivity and supremacy.

SAN FRANCISCO BOHEMIA: MARRIED LIFE, JAZZ MUSIC, DANCING, AND BOOZE

One friend from these early days who was especially in touch with Hassel's interest in music, drink, dancing, and partying in general was the now legendary art dealer Charles Campbell. In the late forties and early fifties he was more a nightclub owner than what we now call a gallerist. A few days before his ninety-sixth birthday, Campbell cheerfully submitted to an interview about his introduction to Hassel Smith. The Iron Pot and Black Cat were among the gathering spots for artists and poets during those years. Of course there was always art on the walls. Campbell remembers when Smith and other CSFA faculty and students came down the hill to his jazz nightclub to drink and dance. When asked about art talk, Campbell paused and then allowed that the subject never was discussed. He does, however, remember Hassel always on the dance floor.⁴² Campbell also remembers Hassel coming into his Louvre framing shop (pre-gallery) to buy art supplies or have something framed:

I'd be in back and sometimes I would have jazz music going on. And he'd come in back and say, "God, I'm mad about jazz." And I said, "Well, come on and sit down. What do you want to hear?" And he said, "Well, got anything by Louie Armstrong?" I'd say, "Yes." And we'd sit and play Armstrong and King Oliver records... And a friend of mine and I found a nightclub called The Italian Village at Columbus and Lombard. And in the basement was a nightclub that was empty. And it was one of the few clubs where dancing was permitted... by accident I'd given the government my art and gallery address around Chestnut. So to them The Italian Village basement, which I called The Campbell Club or something, was a printing press. And Hassel came down there frequently. Every weekend it seemed like. And he loved dancing with somebody always. Different girls. That's how I really got to know him. And then when I moved and opened an art gallery a block away he'd show up there. But I never did do an exhibit, I don't think.⁴³

13 // Hassel Smith in Sebastopol studio, late 1950s

Smith's career at CSFA was temporarily interrupted in 1947, an eventful year for Hassel marked by the birth of his and his wife June's son, Joseph, and by his first solo exhibition, at San Francisco's California Palace of the Legion of Honor. Shortly thereafter the family moved to Eugene where Hassel took a teaching position at the University of Oregon. Also on faculty was his former studio mate and painting companion, Jack Wilkinson. Things were coming together in a way that augured well for the future.

Hassel, however, disliked Oregon and what he quickly came to see as its dead-end faculty complacency, and in response to a letter to Douglas MacAgy he was invited back to CSFA.⁴⁴ At the end of the Oregon school year he and his young family returned to San Francisco to reestablish domestic life in the Bay Area. Soon they joined forces with their friends Robert and Mary McChesney, whom they had met in 1946, and moved across the Bay to Point Richmond. There they all lived a communal bohemian life in a large building shared with painter Ed Corbett and, later, poet-painter Weldon Kees.

June and Hassel were especially close to the McChesneys, each couple recognizing the other as kindred spirits, if not fully soul mates. Their friendship was abetted by a shared political

environment that suffused their Point Richmond redoubt. Mary described Hassel and June as both members of the Communist Party, in which they were “very active,”⁴⁵ though Mac and Mary were more radical in their commitment to the revolution. During the war Mac shipped out with the Merchant Marine, an experience that led him to work as an organizer for the Marine Cooks and Stewards, the most radical union on the West Coast, which was later disbanded by the Taft-Hartley Act.⁴⁶ Surprisingly, despite their convictions, apparently neither politics nor art were the main things for this small coterie of artists. Mary remembers the group ethos in social terms:

The art wasn't a central issue and the politics weren't. The central issue for almost all of us was being identified together as a cultural group because we were kind of bohemians. We liked to drink a lot, we liked to dance a lot, we liked to talk a lot. And our talk consisted mainly ... of philosophy. Hassel wasn't an academic intellectual like Corbett.... But he was a really great companion. He was a very flamboyant person, a very opinionated person, very interesting, and a great talker. And he had theories about everything.⁴⁷

Mary further remembers that when drinking Hassel could be what she called a “great ranter”:

When he got really loaded, he'd start giving a lecture about the slavery in Greece and the founders of our philosophy, probably from me getting into quoting Plato or some crap like that. The next thing you know Hassel would begin an anti-Greek rant.... If somebody quoted somebody, he said “Well, that's bullshit.” The other person said, “No, no. It was in the dictionary.” “What dictionary?” “*Funk and Wagnall's*.” And Hassel said, “That's a *very* reactionary publication.”⁴⁸

Even in such circumstances, his intelligence and wit—if not sobriety—were usually on display. Mary further describes Hassel as “just marvelous fun,” a great dancer who was “physical in his natural being.”⁴⁹

Simone Simon, an undergraduate student at SFAI who had the good fortune to be invited to audit Hassel's graduate seminar in 1979–80, fondly remembers what she also describes as “banter.” And she recalls his expressiveness as he moved around the classroom: “It was a very entertaining mix of encouragement, criticism, and a disjointed, humorous, spectacle of Hassel bopping around to his own rhythm”⁵⁰ Simon credits Hassel's direct-contact approach and specific commentary for bringing out the abstract painter she became. She remembers him telling her, “You have clues scattered around. You are using the landscape as an anchor, as a way of organizing. Distribute the shapes all over the surface, so you have more freedom of choice. Don't put the shapes in situations.”⁵¹ In essence, let the shapes dance.

Stepson Mark Harrington, with whom Hassel had many conversations over the years about art and ideas, makes more of his penchant for movement and dance, carrying it further into the painting itself as a kind of artistic metaphor. Poet Robert Duncan, a great admirer of Hassel Smith, referred to the “potentiality” of the range of the stroke, the application of paint, in Action Painting for becoming “a metaphorical vocabulary of motion itself in nature.”⁵² Harrington describes Smith's specific relationship to movement and its importance in his work in terms of a dancer's articulating shapes in space: “The dancer leaps through space to emphasize events and the passages between events.... Hassel listened to music with the instincts of a dancer and brought music to his painting with the rigor and spatial control of dance. Hassel's vocabulary concerning his own work utilized the words ‘intervals and events.’”⁵³

Music and dance come together as a basis for Smith's art. Maurice Sterne inspired him to study and understand shapes freed from illusionary space. According to Harrington,

Hassel was provoked to think of the world in a new way. This led to a “lifelong concern with the possible ‘eventfulness’ of pictorial space.”⁵⁴ But Hassel's enthusiasm for music and dance should not be understood as exclusively intellectual or artistic, as his own words attest: “I still prefer jazz to ‘good music.’ Yearn though, for the period, now unhappily past, when we could go out and DANCE to the music of a good band without shelling out half a week's earnings. It's spiritually and physically frustrating to have to sit and listen when the music is saying, ‘Move!’”⁵⁵

FORCED DEPARTURE AND LIFE AFTER CSFA

Hassel was unceremoniously terminated at CSFA in 1952 by Ernest Mundt, successor to Douglas MacAgy. Hassel described the event of his forced resignation simply as when “we got kicked out of the California School of Fine Arts (it was a question of ‘you can't fire me, I quit’). I then taught at Presidio Hills School for a couple of years, teaching art to all six grades.”⁵⁶ He moved on to various community centers in San Francisco, including Mission, Visitation Valley, and Booker T. Washington. Despite the value of this community service activity, it could not have been the next career step that even populist Hassel Smith had envisioned.

Among the speculation about the exact circumstances of Hassel's departure, the most common explanation has been that, with the climate change in administration, he ran afoul of his own left-wing politics. He was serious and unyielding in his commitment: his refusal to sign the notorious loyalty oath at Oregon was a badge of honor for him. The relevant documents at the SFAI archive, however, consist mainly of a small handful of letters, the most interesting being Hassel's preemptive-strike resignation. The letter addressed to Ernest Born, president of the board of directors of the San Francisco Art Association (which governed both CSFA and the San Francisco Museum of Art), rather than to Ernest Mundt, gave four reasons for his action: “The Director of the school has on several occasions during the last year made it plain to me that my presence in the school was odious to him as well as to members of the Board of Directors ... [and] ... my presence in the classroom is inimicable [*sic*] to the welfare of the students. I deny this.”⁵⁷ Mundt's acceptance of the resignation, effective January 25, 1952, is concise and businesslike: “Personally, I should like to add my appreciation for what you have done for the School, and my best wishes for success with your plans for the future.”⁵⁸ The fact that there was no love lost is evident not only in this exchange but also in the letters of resignation from David Park and Elmer Bischoff, in both cases occasioned by Hassel's dismissal and their strong disagreement with the administration's policies.

The degree to which Hassel's well-known confrontational nature was a factor in his dismissal remains conjectural. But it would seem that he was a main target, perhaps the only one besides Ed Corbett, in what led to an exodus of several leading faculty. The previous spring, Clyfford Still had written from New York politely declining an overture to return, largely due to a salary figure he described as “several times less than what I can afford to charge.”⁵⁹ Diebenkorn had already decamped for Albuquerque where, under the GI Bill, he pursued an MFA at the University of New Mexico. Park and Bischoff were expected to remain, as an invitation that Bischoff initially accepted and then declined confirms: “Yesterday I learned that Hassel Smith was adding his resignation to that of David Park. I feel now that if I were to delay in the entering of mine it might permit the impression that our respective actions were prompted by separate considerations or resulted from different causes.”⁶⁰ Park's resignation actually preceded Smith's, but it still makes clear that developments around Smith—including a shift towards vocational training—were primary among Park's reasons given for leaving: “This decision is prompted by the dismissal of Hassel Smith, the school's failure to inaugurate any form of faculty contract, and my extreme distaste for being in the position of disagreeing with and criticizing your policies.”⁶¹

Perhaps the biggest change following Hassel Smith's dismissal from CSFA, certainly in terms of career, was that exhibition activity increased significantly. The Iron Pot and California Palace of the Legion of Honor shows (1946, 1947) started things off. But with the solo shows in 1953 at the East-West Gallery and King Ubu Gallery, Smith was, in retrospect, fully launched. In 1955 he was included in the show organized by Walter Hopps and Ben Bartosh for Barnsdall Park in Los Angeles. The venue was changed to the Santa Monica Pier, in the Merry-Go-Round Building (the name by which the exhibition is remembered). *Action I*, in retrospect, was one of the true declarations of California independence (both Northern and Southern) and a loud knock on the door of American modern art history.

HASSEL'S APPLE ORCHARD

Throughout these changes the McChesneys remained close to the Smiths (though Mary considered June inadequately bohemian). Robert and Mary moved to a retreat on Mount Sonoma east of Petaluma, and in 1953 Hassel and June, with son Joseph in tow, followed them north to an apple orchard in Sebastopol. In the beginning, with no "suitable place" to paint, Hassel devoted his time to working the orchard. For a time he confesses that he did not feel like painting anyway: "It seemed to me then that painting, non-objective painting—all that had gone on in San Francisco and New York and elsewhere—had reached a dead end, a quitting place."⁶² There was a kind of withdrawal from abstraction, and Hassel admits that for a year or two he considered doing the same ("I painted a couple of lousy landscapes"). But when his new studio in the orchard was finished he discovered that "I still believe[d] in my reasons for painting in the non-objective way in the first place."⁶³ An exhibition scheduled for March 1957 at the San Francisco Art Association (SFAA) gallery provided the jump-start Smith needed. In addition to managing the orchard (with a steady increase in sales of his art, the orchard was contracted out) and—after the initial painting break—creating new work for the SFAA exhibition, in partnership with Robert McChesney Hassel set up the Sonoma Open-Air Art School offering summer classes.

In the apple orchard Hassel had created a restorative domestic and artistic retreat. By that time, Joe was more than old enough to begin storing childhood memories, and he provides an account of life in the Smith household in his early years:

When my mother was alive, and healthy, we had lots of friends over at big dancing and drinking parties, mostly jazz. We went camping in state parks a lot, fishing and "rock hunting." Our family was very nature-conscious, with many books in the library by Gerald Durrell, Konrad Lorenz, and the field guides of Roger Tory Peterson. I learned quite early how to identify wildlife. Hassel had good geology skills and was an avid bottle collector also. At home we had no television. We listened to music, read books, and drew. Books by Saroyan, Wolfe, Twain, Mann, London, Stendhal, Behan, and Thomas were all known to me long before I encountered them in school. There are early pictures of Hassel, myself, and another kid sitting on the floor, drawing. Hassel made great, funny cartoons. I have many of these cartoons.

We went to Mexico with Robert and Mary McChesney during the winter. My mother was a very lively, outgoing, friendly woman with dark hair and a ready laugh. She liked reading and dancing and was herself a good artist. Her family was Canadian. Hassel was very interested in and inspired by old masters painting—we had lots of discussions about Renaissance painters and Europeans like Goya and Canaletto. My parents were very interested in social politics, so those opinions were part of our life also. Hassel had learned to be a good cook, so he cooked many of our meals. We had dinner table discussions, the norm being good food, good drink, good conversation. In the years in Sebastopol, we worked in the orchard a good deal, picking apples and other fruit.⁶⁴

16 // **UNTITLED**, 1969–70
Oil on canvas, 48½ x 48¼ in. (123.2 x 123.8 cm)
Collection Bruce Smith

17 // Hassel Smith with son Bruce, Wiegand Gallery, 1988

But the idyll was temporary. June was diagnosed with cancer and the slow end to their life together began. By all accounts, Hassel was a devoted husband, taking over the duties of cooking for the family, caring for Joe, and maintaining the home. Mary McChesney, their closest friend at the time, described Hassel's loyalty and care for June in the last months of her life as admirable. June Meyers Smith died in 1958.

STARTING A NEW LIFE WITH DONNA

In 1959, Hassel married Donna Raffety Harrington, whose sons, Mark and Stephan, became younger stepbrothers for the eleven-year-old Joseph. Bruce was born in 1960, and his arrival completed the newly configured Smith clan comfortably settled in the Sebastopol orchard. The Harrington boys were never formally adopted, a conscious decision which Mark explains as Hassel's thoughtful recognition of the importance of their maintaining a relationship with their father, Richard Harrington. In Mark's memory he and his brother were eager to embrace their new family, to "fully embrace this new guy": "We started calling him dad." When asked if the three boys were happy together in Sebastopol and the following years in England, he immediately replied with "Very happy. Very happy." But he allows that Hassel's son Joe would probably describe the situation differently: "He'd lost his mother, and I think he was still very much in grief about that. I think it took him a very long time to sort that out."⁶⁵

Most of Hassel's friends and associates, if not all of his faculty colleagues, are quick to talk about how delightful and interesting he could be. That it was exciting to be in his presence. Nonetheless, most would also admit that Hassel Smith also had a volatile, unpredictable side that could appear without warning. Experiencing that in a social or professional setting could be unnerving. But to those who knew and responded to his counterbalancing qualities as a stimulating and entertaining social force, the rants and insults seemed part of the package—the price to pay for the entirely original company of Hassel Smith. Since this quality was mentioned by almost everyone—including the closest of friends—we might simply acknowledge it and move on. But one voice should be heard on the subject. Hassel's wife, Donna, had to make her personal peace with something that apparently neither she nor he could control. In an effort to acknowledge Hassel's anger but also to present a balanced picture, she succinctly provided a basis for understanding this particularly complex individual:

He was noisy; he made a lot of enemies. People either loved him or hated him. But he was a very tender man under all that. He was loving, caring, and shy. You wouldn't think so, but he was. And I think part of that exterior bombast was because he was shy underneath.⁶⁶

It must have been interesting, albeit perhaps alarming, to see the two sides of Hassel Smith's personality emerge. But the question that justifies some focus on Hassel's unpredictable behavior is to what extent these traits are evident in his work. How do the paintings reflect the tension between rational control and explosive loss of it—the conflict between intellect and passion, ego and id? More than one or two careful observers offer the terms "angry" or "embattled" when trying to penetrate beneath the pictorial surface of Smith's powerful paintings.

The angry side of Hassel Smith's personality was generally released by alcohol. He was known as a drinker; of course, among his artist friends he was not unique in this respect. In fact, his best friends seemed to share his affection for fermented fruits and grains. Allan Temko was not an exception, nor were Robert and Mary McChesney, three of his closest friends. Mary has very colorful drinking stories about Hassel. But in his case the alcohol-induced transformation could be extreme. One friend, Keith Alward, who was "terribly fond" of him nevertheless, described the phenomenon:

Always there was booze, as he called it. He could be mad at the whole lot—the indignity of the world, the enormous injustices, bad ideas about his art or art in general,

18 // Hassel Smith in Rode studio, 1983

the wrong-headedness of someone or some group of someones—and when he was in his cups, watch out if he seized on you as the enemy.⁶⁷

Whether he acknowledged it or not (and Donna insists he saw no reason to change), Hassel's personal life was tumultuous. He could be a sweetheart at home, a good provider and a talented cook, but a kind of terror sometimes out at night in social situations. Donna admitted that if she called him on his behavior it was at her peril: “That’s the way it is [he would say]; don’t tell me how to behave.’ Sometimes I would get really angry. But I didn’t ask him to change, and I don’t think he ever thought he had to change or could.... But of course he did change as he got older though.” Donna reluctantly acknowledged that the anger did have its effect: “Our social life was limited.” She went on to tell how when they met, or at least before the wedding, he had said to her: “There are things you should know about me. One is I’m an atheist. And the other is that I’m a Communist.” She just smiled. “He didn’t tell me he was an alcoholic.”⁶⁸

However, according to Donna her husband never drank while working. She remembers how he would paint in the studio for hours, going out at nine in the morning and returning at five, “sometimes with paintbrush in hand,” and start cooking dinner.⁶⁹ By all accounts he focused on his work almost as an engineer solving a difficult problem of his own creation, all lucid intelligence and rationality. Booze was not welcome in the creative project.

A POLITICAL WORLDVIEW ON THE LEFT

Much has been made of Smith's left-wing politics, and especially his membership in the Communist Party. In Donna's view, Hassel's idealism was the reason for his joining the Communist Party. It gave a specific identity framework and name to the more general social and political convictions that he had been formed back in Arvin working for the Farm Security Administration. According to his wife, he would be more accurately labeled as a socialist than as a genuine communist. Nonetheless, his early circle of friends tended to be like-minded in such matters, many of them Party members. That was a factor in his tight friendship with the McChesneys and later with Barbara Scales. Both women, Mary and Barbara, question not Hassel's leftist ideological commitment but rather his involvement with activism. The impression is that Hassel was not generally to be found on the front lines or in the trenches of social protest. While his beliefs were profound, they were personal. It was as if, as Barbara suggests, Hassel in politics and other aspects of his life crafted his own private world, one in which he need not follow the example of others, even people whom he admired. Hassel was an authentic individualist, and perhaps some of his difficulties stemmed from his fierce determination to be his own man, answering to no one. Harrington looks at the question from a different angle: “There was a tension between the demands of activism and the urgency of painting—Hassel *Painted*.”⁷⁰

Barbara Scales (who is married to Keith Alward) was introduced to Hassel by Seymour Locks (her San Francisco State University art professor) at the apple orchard. She offers several interesting insights about Hassel's work in relation to political concerns, especially civil rights issues. She describes him as an intellectual trying to resolve things, to set up and solve problems, as in the “measured paintings” of the seventies. Furthermore, she sees these works as a “formulaic” means to achieve the artistic erasure of self. Above all, she believes that for Hassel Smith, “Doing art is a way of thinking.”⁷¹ The Zen objective of eliminating self, as most evident in the contemporaneous paintings of Los Angeles artist John McLaughlin, may well provide a means to achieve order and control in a disorderly world.

Donna tells two related stories from the Sebastopol days that give an idea of how Hassel operated politically and, even more enlightening, how he sought to protect his family from government surveillance. The FBI visited the Smith house fairly frequently in attempts to get Hassel to name names, identify Communist Party members and fellow travelers. Donna

found it amazing how much these unwelcome visitors knew about the family, that June had died and Hassel remarried, that he had two stepchildren, and that his new wife was pregnant. “They would ask questions and Hassel would repeat, ‘I have nothing to say to you. I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say to you.’ One would say something threatening. And Hassel said, ‘Are you threatening me? Are you threatening me?’ ‘No, but we need to know...’ And, again, ‘I have nothing to say to you.’ So finally they just had to give up. But it did go on and on.”⁷²

After the House Un-American Activities Committee hearing in San Francisco, there was a famous protest on the steps of City Hall, to which the police responded with fire hoses. A film was made and the Veterans Association of Sebastopol was screening it. The Smith's very left-wing friends called to say they were attending and Hassel and Donna should join them. They showed up, but none of their friends did. Even the McChesneys, called by Hassel the Petaluminaries (Hassel and company were the Sebastopolcats), did not appear. Hassel and Donna were almost certainly the only lefties in attendance. “As soon as the film finished, Hassel was on his feet. That was a context in which he had to speak, and he did. And we were asked to leave. Hassel said, ‘This is a public meeting and I will stay.’ We refused to leave. They wanted to agree with one another and have no dissenting voices.”⁷³ But for the most part, Hassel minded his own business, keeping the interests of his family foremost in mind.

THE SCENE: NEW GALLERIES, POETS, ARTISTS, AND MUSICIANS

One of Smith's early one-person gallery shows was in 1953 at Ethel Gechtoff's East and West Gallery, a venue for avant-garde artists in San Francisco. With the paucity of galleries in San Francisco at the time, most opportunities for artists to exhibit grew out of their own community. Ethel Gechtoff, for example, was an artist herself and the mother of Hassel's student Sonia. Most of the artist-run venues—the cooperative Metart Gallery (1949), King Ubu Gallery (1952, founded by poet Robert Duncan and artists Jess and Harry Jacobus), and The Six Gallery (1954, founded by Wally Hedrick and other students in Jack Spicer's poetry class at CSFA) where Allen Ginsberg did one of his famous readings of *Howl*—were really the only way to have work seen, but in truth it would be seen only by friends and others already converted.

Among the earliest venues devoted to artists associated with CSFA was the Lucien Labaudt Gallery opened in 1946 by Marcelle Labaudt as a memorial to her husband, the prominent San Francisco muralist (Coit Tower, Beach Chalet) who died in World War II. Madame Labaudt showed Richard Diebenkorn and Hassel Smith together in 1950. Smith was a founding member of the contemporaneous Artists' Guild. None of these shoestring operations attracted much attention, but they provided a gathering place for artists to show work and presumably talk about art and poetry and, sometimes, listen to music. This gallery nexus of artist social life extended to several live-in studio buildings, notably 2322 Fillmore, the primary address of San Francisco bohemia in the fifties and early sixties and the residence of a vital and now storied creative community.

In fact, the Fillmore-Marina residents chose *not* to be identified with the stereotyped image of North Beach Beats in black, sporting goatees and sipping espresso in the Italian cafés on Grant Avenue. This more serious band included poets such as Duncan, Michael McClure, Kenneth Rexroth, and, later, painter-poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose City Lights bookstore founded with Peter Martin became internationally famous as the spiritual home of the Beat Generation. They had close ties with the artists, which carried a potent cross-pollination of ideas about art associated with the Beat movement but not by any means identical to it. However, many of the poets greatly admired Clyfford Still and the Abstract Expressionist artists that he influenced.

Hassel Smith referred to his abstract work frequently as non-objective, a quality admired by Robert Duncan,⁷⁴ preferring that term to “abstract.” Ferlinghetti weighed in on the subject of a close painter-poet connection in the fifties. He cautioned that this, in his view, was overplayed if not “downright wrongly reported.”⁷⁵ At the time, Ferlinghetti was in Hassel’s studio at 9 Mission Street, the Audiffred Building. Frank Lobdell was in the adjoining studio but they never met. Ferlinghetti had his own particular take on the situation:

The Audiffred Building was not in North Beach, and I never saw any of the poets there.... The poets were at the other end of Columbus [from the Art Institute on Chestnut Street] near Caffè Trieste and City Lights. The distance between them was perhaps a third of a mile, but otherwise they were much further apart, not in the same universe.... To the poets, the figurative painters were a “Have-a-nice-day School of Painting,” since there seemed to be no social protest of any kind in their work.⁷⁶

Ferlinghetti departed the Mission Street studio in 1958, the same year that Hassel was invited to show at the avant-garde Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, founded by Walter Hopps and artist Edward Kienholz. This association reinforced Hassel’s new art proclivities and personal friendships. In many ways, the true Hassel Smith may have emerged (or been revealed) within that frequently denigrated, yet seductive Hollywood culture. Strangely, Hassel may represent a seamless crossover between the two art worlds of California, supposedly antagonistic or at least incompatible. Hassel also began exhibiting at Jim Newman’s Dilixi Gallery in San Francisco. The connections between Hopps and Newman, between North and South, were never more evident or more revelatory of how contemporary progressive artists transcended regional divisions.

The experience with Ferus Gallery and the introduction to that art community was liberating if not fully transformative. In addition, Hassel was developing a stronger sense of how to promote his work—that visibility and even image are necessary to art world success:

I began to have a little more success with my painting—that is, selling it.... Charles Gimpel saw my work in Houston [Kathryn Swenson’s New Arts] and started to show the paintings in London, and he arranged for my paintings to be shown in New York with André Emmerich. The shows were reasonably successful ... so I wasn’t doing too badly. But the reason I first went to England was a direct result of showing in London. Charles said, “Why don’t you come to over to England?” None of us had ever been outside the United States except to Mexico and Canada. So we thought, “Well, that’s a good idea.”⁷⁷

The Smith family spent the year 1962–63 in Mousehole, Cornwall. When the year was up, they returned to the Sebastopol apple orchard, and Hassel began a two-year stint (1963–65) as art department lecturer at UC Berkeley. He was not offered a tenure-track position there, and in a letter to UCLA art department chair Frederick Wight, he wrote, “I am at the moment a member of the staff of the Art Department at Berkeley, but for reasons both professional and personal, I would like to move myself and my family to the Los Angeles area.”⁷⁸ According to Donna, Berkeley announced, “We’ve enjoyed having you as a guest, but if you’re going to stay you’re going to have to go down to the bottom rung.” Hassel was insulted and he would not do it.⁷⁹

HAPPINESS IN HOLLYWOOD

It may come as a surprise to Bay Area stalwarts that Hassel Smith actually loved Los Angeles. Harrington acknowledges the attraction: “For Hassel, L.A. had an open, cool, and sometimes anarchic spirit, very distant from the relative coziness and seeming self-satisfaction of the Bay Area. L.A. had something of that crazy mix that Hassel loved.”⁸⁰ Donna confirms her

husband’s enthusiasm: “Yes, Hassel loved L.A., and the artists. They were striving and edgy. He was with David Stuart then [1965], and John Altoon was a loved friend. I think L.A. is organized by Hollywood so that everything is exaggerated and over the top. But Hassel could do over the top.” Hassel loved the eccentric house they lived in on Talmadge Street at Fountain in the Silver Lake/Los Feliz district. It had been moved from Melrose because of the freeway, purchased for one dollar on condition that it be moved. Hassel remembers it as “one of the most beautiful houses we ever lived in. We became extremely attached to it and so did everybody else. It was a great meeting place and we hated to leave it—but then I didn’t get on all that well at UCLA.”⁸¹ Donna Smith described the house in similarly glowing terms, as “big and comfortable with lovely details—window seats and French doors—and crazy because it had been moved ... and so had doors leading nowhere. It was an anomaly in the neighborhood and on its site.”⁸² The house suited the occupants.

The Smiths were happy in Los Angeles. They adjusted admirably to the quirky urban reality of the City of Angels after a decade in a rural Sonoma County apple orchard. This certainly indicates a certain spirit of adventure, but it also shows an unexpected side of Hassel Smith. He decided he felt better as part of the L.A. scene and, by his own account, he pretty much—in attitude—became an L.A. artist for a decade. Donna and Mark Harrington agree that if things had gone differently at UCLA, where the faculty (some of them) objected to Hassel’s teaching method, they would have been most content to remain. Harrington provides another insight into Hassel that could in part explain his receptivity to the L.A. ethos: “While a man of lifelong deep and high moral conviction, Hassel adored and cherished the disreputable within the boundaries of the square, timid, and dishonest.”⁸³ However that observation may have played in Hassel’s Hollywood assimilation, the fact is that he was mostly comfortable in an environment in which, incidentally, his new figurative work could be appreciated and warmly received. It is certain that Hassel’s work evolved differently in the sunshine than it had in cool, overcast Cornwall. At any rate, Allan Temko was among the Hassel watchers who claim the L.A. environment “evoked altogether remarkable—and, so far as I know, unequalled—figure-paintings of Southern California.”⁸⁴ Nonetheless, Smith continued to show mostly abstract work.

Hassel’s Southern California friends had everything to do with the warm embrace of his new home. He later remarked that he felt the closest personal connections with this community of artists.⁸⁵ Presumably he had made an artistic connection that in effect loosened the ties to his Bay Area past. Among his new favorite art companions were John Altoon and Tony Berlant, particularly supportive friends during Hassel’s difficult year at UCLA. Altoon had visited the apple orchard several times and Berlant maintained contact over many years after serving with Hassel on the UCLA faculty. A handwritten letter from Berlant to Hassel years later is among eight preserved in his papers at the Archives of American Art, each one a warm expression of gratitude for their friendship: “I think of you often with admiration and affection. I’m sorry we didn’t end up living in the same place... I know that we would have ended up having some great times together.”⁸⁶ Berlant recalls his friend as a “kind of mentor/pal/extra father figure.”⁸⁷

Considering how collegial Hassel seemed to have been with some of his fellow CSFA artists, socializing and exchanging ideas and studio visits, it is noteworthy that shortly after the move back to Sebastopol he abruptly redirected his attention toward L.A. Twenty years later he described the shift and suggests a reason: “Most of my contacts with artists from this period onward were with a group associated with the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. I was often in L.A.... I was not in sympathy with the direction taken in the mid-fifties by my earlier associates at the California School of Fine Arts.”⁸⁸ Men like Peter Voulkos, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, and Ed Moses were part of a Who’s Who of the Los Angeles avant-garde. And Hassel was one of them. If UCLA had been more welcoming and less hamstrung by petty departmental politics (which led Diebenkorn to resign after several

20 // Hassel Smith at Rode studio, 1995

years on faculty), the Smith family could well have become Angelenos. One cannot help wondering what difference that might have made for his career.

DANCING WITH DEALERS

Art galleries and dealers both here and abroad came to play an important role in Hassel Smith's growing visibility in the sixties. Los Angeles was emerging as an important art center, second only to New York some observers claimed. Part of that new status had to do with the active scene among galleries up and down La Cienega Boulevard in West Hollywood. Hassel first showed at Ferus Gallery at its first location, 736A N. La Cienega, and then the following year, in February 1958, he had one of his three solo shows across the street at 723.⁸⁹ Ferus Gallery closed in 1966. Kienholz and Hopps had departed several years earlier, leaving Ferus in the entrepreneurial hands of Irving Blum. By that time, Smith had moved first to Everett Ellen Gallery (active 1960–63) and then on to David Stuart, who remained a close friend and permanent Southern California agent.

Another sustained positive relationship was with Jim Newman, who invited Hassel to participate in the inaugural exhibition in April 1958 at his new Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco located at 471 Broadway; it was a Bay Area counterpart to Ferus.⁹⁰ Newman cared about the artists who at the time had little opportunity to be seen, and he endeavored to give them a professional setting to show their work. His own resources and the support of a few other contemporary art lovers made this possible. He has brought that idealism to his projects ever since. The Smith family welcomed Newman into their orchard world in 1956, the year he moved to San Francisco. The quality of their friendship is warmly described by Newman:

Hassel was at the peak of his powers. He had, I believe, three shows in my galleries in SF, at each location, the final show consisting of figurative paintings.... I consider him to be an important early influence on my understanding of art. His ideas were provocative, challenging, radical. He loved music, particularly early jazz, and we spent many hours listening to music at his Sebastopol home. Those occasions included wine and good food. Hassel was a great artist, one of the most important of his generation. His approach to the canvas was invariably sure and deft. His drawings from the early 1960s are among the best I know. I enjoy the few I have in my collection.⁹¹

Newman responded directly to the Big Question about the impact of Hassel's expatriation: "As for 'what happened to Hassel?' I don't know that anything happened at all. He left to live in Bristol, after the British dealer Charles Gimpel began to show his work in London. He might have thought at the time that his career would take off in a big way. That never happened. It should have."⁹²

Irving Blum also greatly admires Hassel's art from the same period to which Newman is drawn. His collection includes three spectacular abstract compositions. Irving recalls driving to Sebastopol with Hassel's friend John Altoon to pick up paintings for a show at Ferus, eating, drinking—having a "riotous evening"—then returning to L.A. that same night. According to Blum, none of them gave it a second thought: "We never should have left." There was a terrible crash, during which all the paintings flew out of the trailer being pulled by Altoon's station wagon. Several works were damaged beyond repair. The solo show at Ferus went on as scheduled, with Irving buying several paintings himself to somehow keep the whole business afloat: "We were never able to sell a lot of his work. There wasn't a big audience. But I thought the work was extraordinary."⁹³

Blum's view of Smith's subsequent career is interesting in that it reflects a belief that he was about to establish himself on firmer ground, to build a stronger position, if only he had stayed in California. Irving addressed two of the big issues in looking at Hassel's life and

career. The first was his volatile personality: "Hassel could get angry. Boy could he ever. And I saw that side of him a couple of times. He could be very crusty. But he could be charming as well. I mean, you know, two sides of the coin." Irving said that a dealer's job was to sell the art, not get involved in personality issues. The other, perhaps more critical, observation concerns the direction the career took: "I don't really know why he pulled up stakes as abruptly as he did and decided to not only leave the state, but leave the country. It could have been because of a certain neglect he felt.... When he left—I somehow failed to stay in touch—I had a hard time selling the work. People were interested more in minimalism, in geometry, in Pop, than they were in first generation Abstract Expressionism."⁹⁴

Paule Anglim, Smith's friend and exclusive San Francisco representative for a decade (1977–87), also questions, strictly from a career perspective, the abrupt move to England: "There was this hiatus. A long absence here and in New York. And then the change of work.... He could have been in England and still showed here. He should have continued to show here and there."⁹⁵ Paule was disappointed when Hassel deserted her for John Berggruen in 1986 (he showed at Anglim once more in 1987). But she actually approved of the move, believing that "it was the right gallery for Hassel. It's unfortunate that it didn't work."⁹⁶

The reason given by Hassel in a letter to Elmer Bischoff was that Paule Anglim did not actively promote him in New York and Europe: "It appears that it will soon become necessary for me to terminate my association with Gallery Paule Anglim ... probably in 1985 [two years before he actually left]. I am mindful, however, of the need to find out where I am to land before I leap. Consequently I am giving a thought to Berggruen."⁹⁷ That turned out to be a one-year relationship, apparently not a good fit. Anglim said it was due to "personal interaction," not lack of sales. Hassel proceeded to move on to a variety of California galleries, looking for the ideal representation, which was increasingly hard to find as his work slipped out of favor.⁹⁸ The breaks with André Emmerich and Charles Gimpel were, according to letters at the Archives, seen as a kind of betrayal.⁹⁹ These difficulties and a decline in Hassel's public career came considerably after the move to England, but many supportive observers see a connection. Anglim's sympathetic remark suggests the toll exacted from Smith: "I'm sure Hassel suffered from the lack of recognition as an artist, as a philosopher—not as a person. There must have been sadness in his heart for the [eventual] lack of recognition of his work. And when the work changed so much ... people did not follow the transition."¹⁰⁰

Further disappointment for Hassel was that his career at UCLA seemed to have no future. Just as his hopes for a tenure-track position were dashed, a cordial letter of invitation arrived from painter Paul Feiler in England. Without hesitation, Hassel accepted the generous offer of a senior teaching position at the Royal West of England College of Art in Bristol. As Harrington points out, the escalation of the Vietnam War and the decline of the market for Abstract Expressionism, along with the domination of Pop Art, which had virtually taken over the New York art market, contributed to the appeal of relocating to England. Already in 1962 Ferus had shown *Campbell Soup Cans* by Andy Warhol, the first solo show of the future Emperor of Pop. As much as Hassel had become attached to Los Angeles, his local prospects did not look promising. And during the year in Mousehole he had already been welcomed as an Abstract Expressionist celebrity in England.

WEST COUNTRY ENGLAND

For many interested observers, the decision of Hassel and Donna to pick up stakes and move to England virtually removed them from public view in the US, despite frequent visits by Hassel for professional activities and to see friends. Actually, what appeared to be a mystery turns out to be none at all. After the yearlong (1962) sojourn in Mousehole, everyone in the Smith family was in love with that part of England. Though they may not have realized it at the time, Hassel and Donna Smith had inadvertently discovered their family safe harbor.

21 // Sebastopol home, California

22 // Rode home and studio, Somerset, England

Hassel believed his work would be better appreciated, with concomitant increased sales, in London. Lawrence Alloway had written favorably of his work when exhibited at Gimpel Fils in 1963, when the opening reception was attended by historian and critic Sir Herbert Read. Gimpel encouraged Smith's belief that Europe could provide the remedy to lagging sales in the US. However, Hassel Smith was not directed exclusively by considerations for his art career. In making their decision, he and Donna were giving weight to quality of life and family. They loved England, they had been happy in their trial visit, and doors were closing in California.

Smith accepted offers to teach in the Bay Area, visited frequently, and especially in the early years attended his exhibitions in San Francisco. In both countries, Hassel continued his teaching and pleasure in associating with youth. A student at Bristol in the early seventies, Suzy Barnard became a favorite whom he helped transport to San Francisco as an au pair and where she attended the Art Institute. She never returned, but she remained a member of the extended Smith family. In 1973–75, Hassel was a visiting professor at the University of California at Davis. Ralph Petty, an undergraduate, managed to get into Hassel's very popular class in the fall of 1975. At his interview Hassel had him spread his work out and tell him what they were about: "I began to give him a typical undergraduate spiel about how I threw the paint on, and then would try to conjure an image, then develop the image that emerged. Before I could finish he jumped in with, 'Oh, I see. A bit like seeing a bunny rabbit in the limoleum.' He didn't have to say anything else. I knew he was what I needed."¹⁰¹

Hassel welcomed these temporary teaching appointments. He was also an instructor at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1977 to 1980, juggling that responsibility with a position as principal lecturer at the art school of Bristol Polytechnic and at the Cardiff College of Art in Wales. He was intent on keeping his California connections. Asked whether he missed his California existence and friends, whether he had any regrets, Hassel dispatched any notions of involuntary exile: "Well, I go back and forth quite a bit. I like being there [UC Davis] ... because good friends of mine are there, Wayne Thiebaud and Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri and Bill Wiley... In an age of air travel, I feel that I can live in one place and yet not abandon all my contacts in the other."¹⁰²

Nonetheless, Hassel made it clear that their home was England, and fairly quickly they gave up the idea of returning. And he gave reasons: "I'm afraid that I must say that we all like living in Europe better than living in California. It isn't perfect, but we love being able to go to France and Italy and Spain, quite easily, and we do... The ecology of Europe, the ability which Europeans have demonstrated to take care of their countryside is fantastic. That is more and more important to us."¹⁰³ At one point, they decided if they were going to return, they would have to do it then. However, Donna's British qualification as a social worker would not be honored in California. Professionally she would have to start over. Donna remembers the drive up into Oxfordshire on a beautiful October day that convinced them to give up, once and for all, thoughts of returning:

We got home to Bristol and were in the kitchen having a late Sunday evening supper. I looked at Hassel sitting at the table and he was crying. And I said, "What is it? What is it?" And he said, "Oh, it's so beautiful. I don't want to leave. I said, "I don't either. Let's not go." The whole thing was cancelled.¹⁰⁴

From late 1966 until his death in early 2007, Smith did not stray from the west of England for any significant period of time. The family had two residences (Bristol, 1966–80, and Rode, 1980–2007), and Hassel had as many studios and teaching jobs, but always within the Bristol Channel-Avon area. What effect did this geography have on Hassel's work and the changes that occurred? Hassel himself was not sure, but by way of answering he offered that "the move to England ... provided me with an opportunity for a number of years removed

from what you might call the art world. Sort of displaced." He went on to say that "Bristol has no art scene at all of any consequence."¹⁰⁵ Mark Harrington reinforces this idea with the observation that what may have bound his stepfather to the West Country of England was "not the art market or career advancement, but the alternative values of privacy and seclusion. He may have willed the cold shoulder that England seemed to reserve for him."¹⁰⁶

It is not at all unlikely that Hassel Smith's itinerant journey was a search for a retreat where he could pursue his art and enjoy his family without the pressures he had experienced in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Bristol and environs were comparatively calm, the pace was slower. Hassel himself acknowledged that he had never been much interested in the more social aspects of the art world.¹⁰⁷ But the price paid for stability was a growing professional semi-invisibility in which his ideas about art could be developed without interference but also without regular critical and commercial input. Perhaps these factors contributed to the marked changes in the work itself.

Although the several explorations were entirely serious in conception and realization, they tended to have a rational reserve, especially the so-called measured paintings (late 1970s to mid-1980s). They employed geometric shapes, but Hassel refused to describe the works as geometric. They exhibited a hard-edged approach and treatment that seems to be, at least in objective, unique to Smith. He likened them to mapmaking and game boards, navigation and regulated play within demarcated (measured) boundaries. In many respects this work seems to replace the powerful and compelling energy, speed, and even violence of the Abstract Expressionist work with a cerebral control and order. This creative direction may well have been possible only by working in the quiet seclusion of the Bristol studio. These rational paintings call for an orderly working environment as well as a systematic mind, and in a way they could participate reciprocally by contributing to that psychological and physical space. The works that followed in the late eighties and up through the nineties abandoned the geometry for a more loose-brushed painting style that recalls the dynamic freedom of the much earlier abstractions. The final series Smith produced has the feeling of Asian ink brushwork, as in *Nil by Mouth*, 1997 (fig. 24) with its Zen-like arrangement of two forms with soft and yielding edges.

With the onset of illness in 1998 Hassel Smith was no longer able to paint. His career obstacles were largely of his own making, but he would counter that he did not compromise his principles, whether in art, politics, or the realm of ideas. Peter Selz suggests that the difficulty the late work had in gaining acceptance was owed to Hassel's habit of changing dealers.¹⁰⁸ Not only were people confused by the shifts in style, but they also had a hard time tracking him through the galleries.

Smith refused to be derailed by such concerns. His principles required that he be true to his art: nothing else mattered. What may have appeared to be a loss of direction within the evolution of his painting was really Hassel's approach to pictorial thinking. He was, in his mind, entirely and effectively consistent. There should be no doubt about the "seriousness" of his artistic project. Whether one likes the methodical measured paintings as well as the more celebrated abstractions of the late forties through the early sixties—perhaps the forceful "thunderbolt" paintings such as those from the Sonoma years—is beside the point. What is indisputable is that Smith conceived and created a distinctly recognizable personal stamp within a highly individualistic body of work. The best of his paintings put him in the company of the leading abstract artists of his generation. And he accomplished this on his own terms, which after all is the first requirement of great art.

24 // **NIL BY MOUTH**, 1997
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 36 in. (182.9 x 91.4 cm)
Collection Bruce Isakson

23 // Hassel Smith, 1996

- 1) Oral history interview with Hassel Smith [interviewed by the author, San Francisco], 1978 Sept. 5, p. 1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (AAA). This interview serves as the main source for the biographical information provided. Other sources are an interview by Jan Butterfield (undated, conducted in the early seventies) and a Chronology compiled by the artist himself drawing upon these interviews and several other sources, including his friend Allan Tomko's, *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1954-1975*, exh. cat. San Francisco Museum of Art (San Francisco, 1975). The other main interview sources are Donna Smith, Mark Harrington, and Mary McChesney. Susan Landauer's *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley et al., 1996) is the basic source for my discussion of this subject throughout this chapter. I am grateful to my wife, Ann Heath Karlstrom, for her professional editorial assistance with a complicated manuscript.
- 2) Jack Stauffacher, interviewed by the author, December 23, 2010. Through the Greenwood Press (established in 1936 and named for the street in San Mateo where the first press was built), Jack collaborated as designer and typographer with writers and artists, among them Hassel Smith, Sam Francis, and Henry Miller.
- 3) *Ibid.*, Described by Stauffacher as "unique," the school was founded in 1929 by Richard C. Stephens and is now the Academy of Art University. The Academy, as an art school, now stands at the opposite pole of what Hassel experienced at the California School of Fine Arts.
- 4) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 5. In addition to Benseleaser-Lee, Smith remembers two of his instructors (tutors), Clara MacGowan and Karl Gustander: Smith's interests and his acceptance to the Princeton graduate program owed a great deal to Lee.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 6. Smith was especially impressed by the contemporary art on display in Chicago during the World's Fair, as well as the Renaissance and other old master works, many of which had "never traveled from their home galleries before".
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 9. Smith further diminished CSFA as an art school by placing the instruction at Northwestern above it.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) For a discussion of the role of drawing in art schools and the decline of traditional teaching methods, see Howard Singerman's *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley et al., 1999).
- 10) Sissy Barnard, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, March 29, 2011, and follow-up e-mail. Barnard studied with Smith at Bristol (England) Polytechnic's Fine Art Department from 1977 to 1980.
- 11) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 9.
- 12) For the currently definitive study of these painters, see Nancy Boas, "*Society of Six*," *California Colorists* (San Francisco, 1986).
- 13) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 10.
- 14) The Rosenberg Foundation correspondence is part of an important cache of material related to Smith's years at California School of Fine Arts under the care of librarian Jeff Gunderson, whom I typically generous treatment of researchers I enjoyed. The description of Smith's time in the Gold Country comes from these materials.
- 15) Hassel Smith report to the Board of San Francisco Art Association, Angels Camp, August 29 [1941].
- 16) *Ibid.*
- 17) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 12.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 20) See Mary Fuller McChesney, *A Period of Exploration: San Francisco 1945-1960*, exh. cat. Oakland Museum (Oakland, 1973). This book and the accompanying exhibitions were intended to draw attention to what amounted to a major shift at CSFA.
- 21) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 13-15.
- 22) Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 104. The writer presents a kind of dilemma that accompanied the "high art" ideas of Clyfford Still, with which Hassel Smith "struggled" for four years before painting his first abstractions. In so doing, he was signing himself with the new philosophical direction of the school as well as "capitulating" to Still's influence.
- 23) Adelle Landis Bischoff, interviewed by the author, Berkeley, February 27, 2011, p. 2.
- 24) *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 25) Manuel Neri to Hassel Smith, note, 1969, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, box 1, folder 37.
- 26) Deborah Remington to Hassel and Donna Smith, September 5, 1977, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, box 1, folder 106.
- 27) Charles Strong, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, May 16, 2011.
- 28) Hassel Smith, *The Artist's View* 1 (July 1952), broadsheet privately printed by Claire Mahl, San Francisco, and Bischoff/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 7.
- 29) Strong/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 25-28.
- 30) *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 22-23.
- 31) Paula Anglin, interviewed by the author, January 19, 2011, pp. 3, 9.
- 32) Christopher Brown, e-mail to the author, November 22, 2011.
- 33) Sonia Gechtoff, e-mail to the author, December 1, 2011. All subsequent Gechtoff quotes are from this source.
- 34) Tomko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings*.
- 35) Strong/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 22-23.
- 36) See Clyfford Still to Hassel Smith, March 20, 1977, Hassel Smith papers, AAA. This is one extreme but not atypical example of Still's epistolary tirades.
- 37) The letters at AAA in the Hassel Smith papers are more than cranky, especially on Still's part. Smith's tend to be long and acerbic, but not as immoderate as Still's. The two seemed to represent united force to counter ignorance and philistinism.
- 38) Donna Smith, interviewed by the author, New York City, March 19, 2011, p. 7.
- 39) *Ibid.*
- 40) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 18.
- 41) Hassel Smith to Robert C. Hobbs, 4 May 1977, Hassel Smith papers, AAA. Hobbs was Adjunct Curator of Modern Art at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. It is not clear that Hassel's intended lesson was absorbed. What is clear is that his identification with California art apparently survived the move to England.
- 42) Charles Campbell, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, January 10, 2011.
- 43) *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 44) Hassel Smith to Douglas MacAgy, undated [November? 1948], San Francisco Art Institute Archives, Hassel Smith folder.
- 45) Mary McChesney, interviewed by the author, Sonoma Mountain (Petaluma, Calif), March 8, 2011, p. 4.
- 46) *Ibid.*
- 47) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 48) *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
- 49) *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 50) Simone Simon, e-mail response to the author's interview questions, October 29, 2011.
- 51) *Ibid.*
- 52) Robert Duncan, review of Lilly Feniche's series *Studies of Clouds and Smogs*, 1981, AAA, Smith Papers, box 2, folder 109. Single sheet kept by Smith.
- 53) Mark Harrington, e-mail to the author, November 6, 2011.
- 54) *Ibid.*
- 55) Artist statement for Hassel Smith exhibition, San Francisco Art Association Gallery, California School of Fine Arts, March 8-29, 1957.
- 56) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 20.
- 57) Hassel Smith to Ernest Born, January 10, 1952 (copies shown to Ernest Mundt and Karl Kastern), San Francisco Art Institute Archives.
- 58) Ernest Mundt to Hassel Smith, January 25, 1952, San Francisco Art Institute Archives.
- 59) Clyfford Still to Ernest Mundt, March 8, 1951, San Francisco Art Institute Archives.
- 60) Elmer Bischoff to Ernest Mundt, January 11, 1952, San Francisco Art Institute Archives.
- 61) David Park to Ernest Mundt, January 8, 1952, San Francisco Art Institute Archives. See also Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life* (Berkeley et al., 2012), pp. 144-45.
- 62) Artist statement for Hassel Smith exhibition, San Francisco Art Association Gallery, California School of Fine Arts, March 8-29, 1957.
- 63) *Ibid.*
- 64) Joseph Smith, e-mail to the author, December 1, 2011.
- 65) Mark Harrington, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, May 25, 2010, p. 16.
- 66) D. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 4-5.
- 67) Keith Alward, e-mail to the author, March 23, 2011. Reinforcing the theme picked up by others, Alward also observed that Smith "grew to be an outsider and he carried with him a disdain that verged on anger".
- 68) D. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 38-41.
- 69) *Ibid.*, pp. 39.
- 70) Mark Harrington, editorial note to the author.
- 71) Barbara Scales, interviewed by the author, Berkeley, March 11, 2011, p. 2.
- 72) D. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 14-15.
- 73) *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 14.
- 74) Robert Duncan, interviewed by Kevin Power (1970), in Power, *Where You're At: Poetics and Visual Art* (Berkeley, 2011), p. 115. Power's interview with Smith, conducted in 1978, was published in *Arts Review* and led to a correspondence now in the Smith papers at AAA.
- 75) Lawrence Ferlinghetti, e-mail to the author, November 21, 2011.
- 76) *Ibid.* A memorable feud between Ferlinghetti and Smith over paintings allegedly purloined from the Mission Street studio (documented in letters in the Smith papers, AAA) may have colored Ferlinghetti's account. But it is evident that the painters so described were Bay Area Figurative realists, also by then disparaged by Hassel.
- 77) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 20.
- 78) Hassel Smith to Frederick Wight, February 24, 1965, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, roll 2008, frame 552.
- 79) D. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 25. As well regarded as Hassel was with some faculty colleagues, the resistance he encountered to being accepted as full faculty was a factor, despite some of his best friends' being on the committee. At UCLA the objection was his teaching methods. At Berkeley it may have been a few faculty members who had reservations or were jealous, as was the case with Diabekorn at UCLA.
- 80) Mark Harrington, e-mail to the author, November 23, 2011.
- 81) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 21-22.
- 82) Donna Smith, e-mail to the author, August 26, 2011.
- 83) Mark Harrington, e-mail to the author, November 20, 2011.
- 84) Tomko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings*.
- 85) Letter from Hassel Smith to Betty A. Davis (graduate student at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), May 19, 1977. Smith generously responds to nine questions for her art history research thesis.
- 86) Tony Berlant to Hassel Smith, August 24, 1998, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, box 1, folder 42.
- 87) Tony Berlant, interviewed by the author, Santa Monica, January 27, 2011, p. 2.
- 88) Hassel Smith to Betty A. Davis, *ibid.*
- 89) For an out-of-towner, Hassel Smith had an active connection to the Ferus Gallery and artists with twelve shows (three solo) between 1957 and 1962, at which time he was beginning his long-time association with David Stuart. The fact that Smith's Los Angeles art world centered around Ferus is an indication of his avant-garde credentials in the early sixties.
- 90) For a history of Jim Newman's Dilxi Gallery, see essays by Terry St. John and Jim Newman in *The Dilxi Years 1958-1970*, exh. cat. Oakland Museum (Oakland, 1984). There is some confusion about the dates of Hassel's first outings at Ferus and Dilxi. The Oakland catalogue (p. 87) has Hassel's first shows in both galleries in the same year, 1958, but Ferus seems to take the honors with a March 1957 appearance in L. A. by Hassel Smith in a group show.
- 91) Jim Newman, e-mail to the author, November 17, 2011.
- 92) *Ibid.*
- 93) Irving Blum, interviewed by the author, Los Angeles, January 27, 2011, pp. 3-4.
- 94) *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
- 95) Anglin/Karlstrom, Interview, pp. 22-23.
- 96) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 97) Hassel Smith to Elmer Bischoff, November 20, 1984, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, box 1, folder 43.
- 98) Among the galleries besides Anglin and Berggruen from 1970 were, also in San Francisco, Suzanne Saxe Gallery (1970-73), Inness/Lanoue Gallery (1988), and Harcourt Modern and Contemporary Art (1995); in Davis, Natsoulas (1988, 1991, 1997, 2001); in Los Angeles, David Stuart (1973) and Tortue Gallery (1980); in Santa Monica, Blum Helman (1987); and in London, Studio Gallery (1995) and Thornton Bevan Arts (1998).
- 99) See correspondence from Charles Gimpel and André Emmerich at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, box 1, folders 37 (Emmerich) and 74 (Gimpel/Filo).
- 100) Anglin/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 15.
- 101) Ralph Peery, "Meeting Hassel: A Student's Homage," October 15, 2011.
- 102) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 23.
- 103) *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 104) D. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 16.
- 105) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 27.
- 106) Mark Harrington, "Hassel Smith in the West Country," February 2011, statement for a Hassel Smith exhibition of the works from the eighties and nineties at the Silk Mill Studios during the 2011 Frome Festival, Somerset, England.
- 107) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 27.
- 108) Peter Selz, phone conversation with the author, December 4, 2011. This observation by Selz also appeared in John Seed, "Hassel Smith: The Painter of Persistent Challenges (1915-2007)," *Huffington Post*, January 20, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-seed/hassel-smith-19152007-the_3_811454.html.