

HASSEL SMITH AND THE POLITICS OF STYLE

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“Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”—Dodo⁴ (Lewis Carroll)

It would be just like Hassel Smith to appreciate the irony of the applause and effusion that accompanied *Art in America's* rediscovery of him (once again) in 2003, culminating with the resounding imprimatur of praise for being “known as an underground legend.”² Undoubtedly with the best of intentions, the reviewer had delivered a barb with the deftness of a comedian. An artist cannot be known for being unknown or appreciated for being unappreciated, a paradox Smith knew well, having come to maturity in California during World War II and especially having worked deep within the shadows of San Francisco’s underground. In 1958, Los Angeles Ferus Gallery director Walter Hopps described Smith as “a leading free spirit of art here in the far west.”³ In retrospect, he was more influential than Hopps could have countenanced—a seminal figure for West Coast Abstract Expressionism, Beat assemblage, and Funk Art, intersecting manifestations of a collective underground evolving out of conditions unique to California during the Cold War. Yet as magnificent as his work is, and as influential as he was, Hassel Smith remains essentially an example of “local knowledge,” to use the phrase of anthropologist Clifford Geertz,⁴ beloved in the San Francisco Bay Area but absent from surveys of American art and a mere footnote in “comprehensive” books on Abstract Expressionism, the movement with which he is most closely associated. It is the aim of the present volume to finally share the work of this superb artist with a larger audience.

There really was an authentic underground in San Francisco, not a myth cooked up by critics and art historians—in spite of the haze of confusion surrounding the Beat Generation with its unwelcome beatnik and hippie progeny. For the sake of convenience I will use the term San Francisco Renaissance as a label for this underground, which is generally the designation for a range of literary activity that brought the San Francisco Bay Area to prominence as the hub of a new American poetry avant-garde,⁵ but which was, as poet Allen Ginsberg, music critic Ralph Gleason, and Zen spokesman Alan Watts among others originally argued, part of a broader phenomenon that encompassed visual and performing arts, filmmaking, philosophy, and such hybrid art forms as Wally Hedrick’s proto-psychedelic music-and-light machine (ca. 1952–53) and some of the first documented interdisciplinary “happenings” in postwar America.⁶ In the late forties, these innovators—committed above all to resisting “the State and War” as “eternal enemies of man’s universal humanity and of the individual volition,” to quote poet Robert Duncan—began to coalesce into a self-sustaining community, operating its own venues, galleries, and presses, and providing much of its own audience, thus remaining, for the most part, unaffected by official critical reception or commercial concerns.⁷

In this sense, San Francisco’s avant-garde has little precedent in the history of American art and differs from many European models. Like the intertwining movements of Europe’s interwar period, San Francisco’s underground was aesthetically heterogeneous, multidisciplinary, and composed of shifting coterie that were “full of interstellar walk-ons and disappearing acts,” in the words of poet Bill Berkson.⁸ Yet its artists did not produce contending manifestos nor did they try to topple their elders from places of privilege. No impetus for competition existed for the simple reason that the city possessed no effective patronage.

Smith declared this independence from external tastemakers to be San Francisco’s most important influence. In an essay he wrote with sculptor Mary Fuller McChesney and circulated among their friends before the Italian journal *Evento delle arti* published it in 1958 under the title “Sulla scuola di San Francisco,” Smith observed:

In San Francisco, there is simply no effective market for painting, most especially, there is no market for avant-garde or “modern painting”... Painters do occasionally sell paintings (for prices under \$500) but the possibility is so remote that it might as well not exist at all. However hard he may try to PLEASE a prospective, hypothetical customer, no customer appears and in the end, the painter is encouraged to paint without any customer whatsoever (none exists) in mind... The painting is therefore marked by its ungraciousness, its positive unwillingness to please. In no other locality will you find so many paintings produced about which it can be said, “I wouldn’t put that on my shit-house wall.”⁹

In addition to enabling a disregard for conventional taste, the absence of an art market encouraged a broad range of creative expression and ideology of pluralism that became pervasive just as Abstract Expressionism from New York began appearing regularly in mainstream art magazines in the early fifties. Smith stood at the forefront of this multiplicity, dismissing the notion of progressive, sequential movements in art as the fabrication of “journalists who are only too ready to pin a label or ‘image’ on everyone.”¹⁰ As early as 1950, David Park (who had already abandoned Abstract Expressionism for a self-consciously retrograde style of figuration¹¹) credited Smith as an exemplar of independent-mindedness in San Francisco. In an interview for the *San Francisco News*, he asserted that Smith, along with Richard Diebenkorn, “would be the first to say they have no idea how they are going to paint next year. They are not fixed to one idea. If this leads to a different way of painting that may have a richer personal significance to them, they are in no way bound to continue in their present direction.”¹²

Smith would go on to prove Park correct, making several unfashionable shifts over the course of his career and indulging in detours from the major thrust of his work. Like most artists of his milieu, Smith found little of compelling interest in the trends emanating from the East Coast after the New York School. Certainly, he could not identify with the “aesthetics of boredom,” as Sam Hunter’s college textbook on American art defines the collective detachment and neutrality of Post-Painterly Abstraction, Pop Art, and Minimalism.¹³ All of these movements—whether abstract or representational—essentially marched in line with critic Clement Greenberg’s formalist dictum insisting that contemporary art “should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience.”¹⁴ For San Francisco’s artists, this amounted to a gag order. Artists of almost every persuasion and discipline took an antithetical position, and instead of draining their work of expressive power, prioritized the individual voice over formal invention and embraced an unlimited range of extra-aesthetic content, whether fanciful, psychological, autobiographical, philosophical, or sociopolitical.

Smith played a germinal role in fostering this ethos of inclusivity and absorbed it into his entire life’s work. His oft-quoted pronouncement, “My paintings are intended to be additions to rather than reflections of or upon life,” taken out of context, has been misunderstood as an allegiance to transcendent formalism. Yet the same publication in which the statement appears—the first issue in 1952 of *The Artist’s View*, an interdisciplinary publication that included many creative figures who came to be associated with the San Francisco Renaissance—contains an essay in which Smith challenges the possibility and even desirability of transcending his time and place.¹⁵ Smith not only disapproved of formalism—he went further, denouncing it as “reactionary doctrine” that could be a potential means of “suppressing” the threat of “radical culture.”¹⁶ From the mid-forties until 1997,

when illness prevented him from working, Smith's art—whether abstract or figurative—in some way serves as a commentary on society and his own place in it. He seldom expressed overt political messages—with some notable exceptions: some of his lithographs, collages, photomontages, and assemblages. Yet, regardless of style or approach, as his close friend the architectural critic Allan Temko wrote of Smith on the occasion of his survey at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now Modern Art) in 1975, "The artist's commitment has stayed the same, both as personal declaration and—in Smith's phrase—social metaphor."¹⁷

Thus, when Smith stated with pride that San Francisco's avant-garde—including, of course, himself—was "marked by its ungraciousness, its positive unwillingness to please," he described a collective opposition to the societal status quo; Smith viewed the cozy sentimentality of Norman Rockwell—in the fifties still America's most popular artist—as cover-up for the harsh reality existing beneath a candy-coated veneer. Like his fellow San Francisco painter Frank Lobdell, he felt that the artist with integrity "can't be content with prettiness when a feeling of turmoil seems most characteristic of our times."¹⁸ Just as Dada and Surrealism reacted to the corruption of culture revealed by the destruction of World War I, San Francisco's avant-garde was fueled by antagonism arising from the Cold War and back-to-back military conflicts starting with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and culminating with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Because of its strategic position as the gateway to the Pacific Theater and the frontline for the Cold War, California's experience differed radically from that of Eastern states. As soon as America entered World War II, it began to arm the Pacific Coast with the apparatus of mass destruction. In the early years of the Cold War, the United States pumped an estimated \$150 billion into the West to construct America's "military-industrial complex." Historian Kevin Fernlund has described the resulting landscape as one that "bristled with airfields, army bases, naval yards, marine camps, missile fields, nuclear test sites, proving grounds, bombing ranges, weapons plants, military reservations, training schools, toxic waste dumps, strategic mines, transportation routes, lines of communication, laboratories, command centers, and arsenals."¹⁹

At the same time, the US government waged a war of domestic containment within its borders. The McCarthy Era started earlier, lasted longer, and became more invasive on the West Coast than anywhere else in the country, as federal, state, and local governments—buoyed by a swell of conservative patriotism and support from the region's industries—tried not only to purge California of its political radicalism but to crush whatever cultural activities they considered deviant and therefore "un-American."²⁰ The situation for artists in Manhattan was substantially different; there, as art historian Thomas Crow has observed, the "political temperature" was markedly cooler.²¹ As the research of many mostly European and Canadian historians has compellingly documented, even artists like Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell, and David Smith, who remained faithful to the Left, were unwittingly protected and supported by a secret consortium of CIA-sponsored industrialists, philanthropists, and non-profit arts organizations.²² The self-explanatory "Operation Longleash" was originally conceived of as a means of winning the hearts and minds of European radicals through the export of an edgy, sophisticated, literary and visual avant-garde art made in America. But by 1967, when the San Francisco-based magazine *Ramparts* leaked the operation's illegal activities, the consortium Henry Kissinger later characterized as "an aristocracy dedicated to the service of this nation on behalf of principles beyond partisanship"²³ had become a wildly profitable, self-sufficient "underground" of an altogether different sort from that of San Francisco, supporting an elite constellation of internationally prominent artists, collectors, galleries, and museums.²⁴

Of course, San Francisco's arts community had no such protection, yet the opposition only seems to have intensified its radical leanings, Hassel Smith being an extreme case. Smith had been a Pacifist before World War II, filing as a conscientious objector before learning of his 4-F status that would make him ineligible to serve on medical grounds. By his own

account, his understanding of politics was "rather naïve" until 1941, when he became a social case manager for poverty-stricken men on San Francisco's Skid Row district, and later during the war, for the federal Farm Security Administration, a continuation of President Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era New Deal. In California's fertile San Joaquin Valley, Smith found himself in the midst of a raging class struggle while stationed at Arvin Camp, the last stop on Highway 99 for thousands of impoverished Dust Bowl refugees and the setting of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Dorothea Lange's photographs of migrant workers, and some of Woody Guthrie's best-known protest ballads. When Smith arrived, the Communist Party-sponsored United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) had been struggling for over a decade to unionize California's farm workers. The conflict reached a fever pitch in 1939 with the publication of Steinbeck's novel, which recounted in sordid detail the conditions of starvation, disease, and crime, particularly at Arvin Camp (fictionalized as "Weedpatch" in the book), where migrant laborers were corralled like "human tumbleweeds." Although the novel aroused national sympathy, becoming an immediate best seller and the basis of a popular Hollywood film starring Henry Fonda, its negative portrayal of capitalism and Steinbeck's well-known Communist sympathies did nothing to help the workers but intensified the local government's crackdown on labor organizers and further empowered its agricultural growers. By the time Smith arrived in Arvin and met Steinbeck (he would later get to know Dorothea Lange as well, teaching with her at the California School of Fine Arts in the forties), the union leaders were gone, their hopes of improving conditions crushed by the federal Bracero Program established in 1941, which brought "guest" laborers from Mexico to break strikes and undercut wages before these same workers were deported under Operation Wetback in 1954. Smith thus witnessed the end of one dark chapter and the beginning of another in the tumultuous history of migratory labor in California.

If Steinbeck's novel brought into focus the growing rift between California's Right and Left with respect to social justice, it also served as an early flashpoint for the ensuing political tension over First Amendment rights. The Free Speech Movement would have to wait for the student protests at UC Berkeley in 1964 to give it an official name and birthplace, but for Smith, like many artists and intellectuals in California, the conflict began in 1939 when Kern County banned *The Grapes of Wrath* for being "obscene in the extreme" and local landowners staged a public book-burning in downtown Bakersfield, just as the US was denouncing the Nazis as heinous fascists for committing the same offenses.²⁵ Smith would later recall that his experience in Arvin altered his view of American society beyond "all recognition," leading him to follow Steinbeck in joining the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and remaining a dedicated member long after others in his circle—even if most held on to its ideals—officially severed their Party ties. "We were all madly political," sculptor Mary Fuller McChesney remembers of the immediate postwar years, but "Hassel stayed a staunch Stalinist all the way through," occasionally getting into trouble for his "pro-Russian" rants.²⁶ Though his Communist sympathies eventually may have played a part in his decision to leave the US and take up permanent residence in the England in 1966, Smith remained a lifelong activist for labor, class, racial, and gender equality, and, above all, for free speech.²⁷

When Smith returned to San Francisco in 1945, he became a guest instructor at the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA; now San Francisco Art Institute), where he had studied in the late thirties after turning down a fellowship to Princeton's doctoral program in art history. In the late forties Smith also taught at the African American Booker T. Washington Community Center as well as the California Labor School (CLS), the first and most significant multiethnic cultural institution in the US devoted to fostering "a unique worker's culture," offering workshops from 1942 to 1957 on fine arts, dance, music, writing, and acting as well as courses in women's studies, and attracting prominent visitors like Theodor Adorno, W. E. B. DuBois, Lead Belly, Paul Robeson, and Orson Welles, with alumnae such as Maya Angelou.²⁸

The CLS's faculty, which included a couple of Smith's closest friends and colleagues through the fifties, San Francisco Abstract Expressionists Edward Corbett and Robert McChesney, formed the core of San Francisco's far-left visual artists. Most of them (including Smith briefly before the war) lived in or around the Montgomery Block, an enormous building in North Beach, now the site of the Transamerica Pyramid. It was in the Monkey Block, as the mid-nineteenth-century neoclassical structure became known, that artists and writers from Bret Hart onward lived and worked, including John Muir, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Sargent Johnson, and Jean Varda—as well as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman (it is a little-known fact that Goldman and Berkman edited and published their nationally influential anarchist publication, *The Blast*, in that very building). In the forties, the Monkey Block and its surrounding bars and cafés—notably the Iron Pot, 12 Adler Place, and the Black Cat Café—were the chief gathering places for a literary clientele that in the mid- to late forties included Kenneth Rexroth, John Steinbeck, and William Saroyan.

There were no art galleries in North Beach until Smith, Corbett, and McChesney, along with fellow CLS faculty members Emmy Lou Packard, Byron Randall, and Giacomo Patri, founded the Artist's Guild in 1946, the first of San Francisco's many Beat-era cooperatives. According to the *People's Daily World*, all of the Guild's shows were jury-free and their order determined by pulling names out of a hat.²⁵ Under Smith's leadership as "president," until the gallery closed in the fifties, it made an effort to recruit women artists and balance the ethnicity of its members, and while the lack of records makes its degree of success in this regard difficult to assess, African American Abstract Expressionist Harlan Jackson (now identified as a member of the New York School) became one of the Guild's stars after his first solo exhibition there in 1947 and another in 1950, years before he broke into New York's closely guarded gallery circuit.

It seems that Smith had poor luck with the draw, since there appears to be no documentation that he exhibited at the Guild other than in group shows. Smith's solo exhibitions at the Iron Pot in 1946 and the following year at 12 Adler Place were the events that earned him credibility in San Francisco's underground. Organized by Henri Lenoir, the impresario of North Beach who opened the Vesuvio Café on Columbus Street in 1948,²⁶ soon to become a gathering place for the literary contingent of the San Francisco Renaissance after City Lights Books opened across the way in 1953, these exhibitions demonstrated Smith's signature whiplash line while hinting at postwar enthusiasms that would become mainstays of his life's work: the fearless satire of Francisco Goya, the spoofing slapstick of Charlie Chaplin, the raucous spontaneity of Jelly Roll Morton, and the bold infusion of colloquial vigor into the classical music of Gustav Mahler. These were the four names Smith inscribed on his studio door upon returning to San Francisco in 1945,²¹ a multidisciplinary group—just one visual artist and a comedian, musician, and composer—seemingly eclectic in sensibility, but each, like Smith, an embattled outsider with populist inclinations. Smith never fundamentally strayed from the anti-authoritarian radical humanism he developed in the years immediately after World War II, a sophisticated philosophy essentially rooted in a CPUSA cultural "participation credo" that disapproved of abstraction when it retreated into irrational mystical, obscurantist, or hermetic formalism; a resistance to commodification of the arts by the ruling classes; a neo-Marxist dialectics embracing paradox and contradiction; and an anti-capitalist view of "top-down" control of cultural production aligned with the Frankfurt School's notions of the "Culture Industry."²² Remarkably, Smith would faithfully apply these values in varying degrees to his own art for the rest of his life.

Only on two significant occasions did Smith hew to the Communist Party line—with his elegant drawings and watercolors of workers toiling in the fields, and when he collaborated with Edward Corbett.²³ Robert McChesney, Byron Randall, and Emmy Lou Packard on illustrating the San Francisco International Bookstore's *Communist Manifesto in Pictures*

26 // **UNTITLED**, ca. 1943
Oil and paper on canvas, 14 x 15 in. (35.6 x 38.1 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

to celebrate the centennial of the publication of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *Manifest der Kommunisten*, 1948 (fig. 25).²⁴ Otherwise Smith ignored the Party's call for art with "immediate political utility," and instead of painting evil factory owners and valiant laborers, Smith assailed highbrow taste with his riotous tavern scenes and pop Americana. Rather than painting them in the recommended style of "ideal realism," he attacked his subjects with ferocious slashes of the brush in a palette that could be as uncouth as Willem de Kooning's *Women* paintings. Smith was a man with a program; his crudity, like his low-brow subject matter, was a cultivated weapon in his arsenal of opposition. *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Alfred Frankenstein described Smith's canvases of the time as "brusque, violent, heated, and turbulent," echoing Mary Fuller McChesney's sentiment that the best of these early works possess an undercurrent of anger.²⁵

Smith's brash comedic approach added another dimension of impropriety as humor's tainted association with entertainment kept it a minor tributary in American art during the postwar years.²⁶ In *Road House*, 1943, and *Untitled*, 1947 (p. 92), Smith positions himself as a tongue-in-cheek observer while other paintings show his astute eye for caricature that ridicules without preaching. The visual cacophony of *Untitled*, 1943 (fig. 26), with its flashy advertisements and pulsating colors, initially recalls Stuart Davis's jazzy paeans to the modern city, but compared to the clean, crisp contours of Davis, Smith's painting is decidedly vulgar, both in content and execution. The jostling signs, packed tightly into a claustrophobic space, scream for attention with their clangorous colors—one selling wheat toast and the other featuring a cocktail glass of ludicrously monumental proportions, towering like an absurd statue over a street with an already outsized American sedan. For San Franciscans in the forties, the words "Fish Bowl" on the advertisement would have alluded to the wildly popular attraction at Bimbo's 365 nightclub, "Dol-fira, the Famous Girl in a Fishbowl," which became one of the city's national claims to fame after *Life* magazine ran a feature on it in 1948. As its name suggests, this was an American freak show worthy of Barnum & Bailey, a gimmick that by means of multiple live film projections created the startling illusion of a nude woman swimming in a bar-top fishbowl.²⁷

By the late forties Smith was an ardent feminist,²⁸ depicting blatant consumerist commodifications of women in paintings of billboard nudes and strip clubs, which maintained a sense of humor about the prevalence of human weakness, including his own. In *Topless #1*, 1969–70 (p. 109), the artist implicates himself, appearing in the audience with an expression of stupefaction as he sways in unison with the dancers. Smith, in fact, seems to have taken pleasure in the abundance of vulgarity in California culture, both past and present. He may have even found a twisted source of pride in knowing that topless dancing was reputedly invented in 1964 by Carol Doda—a CSFA dropout with a silicone-enhanced, size-44 bust, dubbed "the Twin Peaks of San Francisco"—at the Condor Club in North Beach, where she achieved renown for her routine of emerging from a hole in the ceiling and dancing on top of a grand piano as it descended to the floor with the aid of hydraulic motors.²⁹

Smith's infatuation with the uniquely bawdy history of San Francisco dates at least as far back as his admiration for Mark Twain while a student at the California School of Fine Arts, when he spent a year on scholarship painting at Angels Camp, the Gold Rush town that inspired Twain's seamy tale of gamblers and swindlers, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County (1865), which Smith paid homage to in an early ambitious painting.³⁰ Smith was also a fan of Bret Harte, who wrote "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1869) while editing the *Overland Monthly* at its offices on Mission Street, not far from the site of Smith's Audifred studio. In 1946, Smith was the first of many artists and writers—including Joan Brown, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Jefferson, Frank Lobdell, Ed Moses, Manuel Neri, and Julius Wasserstein—to move into the historic Audifred Building, a remnant of the Barbary Coast, San Francisco's notorious red-light district that flourished before the great 1906 earthquake and fire. Smith relished the wild history of the building, one of

25 // **THE FACTORIES ARE OWNED BY THE WORKERS NOW!**, 1947
Linocut on paper, 12 x 18 3/4 in. (30.5 x 46 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

the few left standing on the waterfront reportedly due to a quick-thinking bartender who bribed firefighters with whisky. At the turn of the century, the Audiffred housed the Bulkhead Saloon, one of the rowdiest bars in San Francisco, where the art of shanghaiing is said to have been perfected.⁴¹ It was in his Audiffred studio that Smith painted the raucous nightlife of the Black Cat Café (p. 91), probably the closest counterpart postwar San Francisco had to offer with its operetta-singing transvestite waiters.⁴² Some figures in Smith's paintings, however, notably his red-eyed, gap-toothed *Wino*, 1947 (fig. 27), look as if they would be more at home in Sidney Town, as the Barbary Coast was originally called because of its disproportionate population of refugees from Australian penal colonies. Yet even the slop yards of Sidney Town would have been hard-pressed to turn up a wastrel to match the abject face staring out from this canvas. *Wino* is probably Smith's raunchiest figurative painting, but the depravity of this portrait of a drunk is hardly an advertisement for Alcoholics Anonymous; rather, Smith apparently emulated this *Wino* himself, if one grants some truth to his boast that at the age of sixty-five he was still "an incorruptible hell-raiser," given to "outbursts of obscene & abusive language, black humor, compulsive grousing & just plane [sic] insolence," who had "been drunk some part of every day" since he was fifteen.⁴³ As much as Smith may have validated his bohemianism as a means of opposing consensus America, he was clearly a man who enjoyed indulging in a Rabelaisian debauchery for debauchery's sake. Such hedonism might seem out of character for an artist who regarded Matisse as an "indolent voluptuary,"⁴⁴ as well as certain later Bay Area Figurative artists (particularly Richard Diebenkorn), not for their shift to representation⁴⁵ but for their pleasing "lucky when you live in California" paintings.⁴⁶ Yet, Smith's admiration for Rabelais and many other pan-European vernacular satirists of the Renaissance not only bolstered his anti-elitist values, they also pointed the way for his own release from the constraints of an oppressive society. Smith's admiration for these artists and writers began in the early thirties while an undergraduate at Northwestern immersing himself in the Art Institute of Chicago's encyclopedic collection of Northern Renaissance art.

In the mid- to late forties, Smith explored the limits of self-mockery in a series of outlandish self-portraits anticipating Funk ceramicist Robert Arneson's extensive exploration of the genre. Taken together they form a rogue's gallery of scurrilous personae, from the shady miscreant whose slanting eyes hint at thoughts of foul play (p. 87), to the shrugging slacker with his unconvincing "Who, me?" expression (fig. 28), and the bleary-eyed buffoon resembling Emmett Kelly the clown after too many drinks (fig. 29). Like Arneson, Smith drew from the irreverent masters of the Northern Renaissance vernacular. He particularly admired the self-portraits of Jan Steen and Adriaen Brouwer, notably the latter's provocative image of the dissolute artist in paintings such as *The Smokers* (ca. 1636), in which Brouwer slyly positioned himself in the center of a crowd of carousers, turning in his chair to blow smoke at his viewers.⁴⁷

If Smith's lowbrow content and rough-hewn style served as his primary means of dissent, some paintings also contain veiled critiques that pack a serious punch beneath their comic façade. *The Vanishing Indian*, 1947 (p. 93), with its jumble of cartoonish emblems of urban America, may initially appear devoid of obvious commentary but closer scrutiny reveals its multifaceted sociopolitical critique. As its title suggests, the painting addresses the near-genocide of the Native Americans and their subsequent neglect, a matter of deep concern for the artist according to his wife Donna Smith, who recalls that he "was passionate about the injustice and the terrible treatment of the American Indians, as he was about all social injustice."⁴⁸ The issue would loom large in the discourse of San Francisco's Beat-era poets fifties, spreading to Haight-Ashbury's counterculture and giving rise to an emulation of Native American customs, notably communal living and the masculine vogue for wearing hair long in headbands.

27 // **WINO**, 1947
Oil on board, 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)
Private collection

28 // **SELF-PORTRAIT**, 1948
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm)
Private collection

Smith would paint a number of tributes to Native Americans, beginning in 1952–53 with *The Little Big Horn* (p. 121), followed by the gritty yet elegant *The Buffalo Dance*, 1960 (p. 159), a violent display of fudgy blacks and caramel browns slicing and ripping their way through a melting vanilla ground; and *The Indian Love Call*, 1961 (p. 138), a nearly empty canvas with calligraphy so deft and spare that it could pass for Japanese sumi-e. In *The Vanishing Indian*, however, the subject is undeniably the brutal expulsion of the Indian. Smith presents the bodiless head of a tribal chief quite literally in the process of being "squeezed out of the picture" by a frantic urban sprawl, an automobile crushing his neck, and a skyscraper becoming entangled in his headdress. Opposite the chief is a towering ice cream cone as ludicrous as Pop artist Claes Oldenburg's oversized vinyl sculpture of this emblem of pop Americana. In Smith's version, though, the ice cream cone resembles the torch of the Statue of Liberty (elsewhere in Smith's work the motif suggests a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb explosion, as in *Untitled #1* (1955), echoing similar images in the work of Wally Hedrick and Bruce Conner). This triple-entendre is compounded by the nude woman sprawling across the city's horizon, exposing herself as a commodity in the manner of the decorative odalisques of Matisse. But this nude is unquestionably an archetype of America, and a blasphemous one at that, with an American flag hovering directly above her buttocks—no Delacroix Marianne here. The banner would continue to appear throughout Smith's career in political contexts, sometimes veiled, as in the ominous *Valley Bar* (1944), other times overt, as in his untitled assemblage of 1979, a spoofing indictment of mass-media propaganda in which an actual microphone thrusts up like an absurd phallus from a medley of political slogans.

Smith thus anticipates the California Beat artists' use of the flag with political intent, such as Wally Hedrick's crumpled *Peace Flag* painting (1953), itself a protest against the Korean War, and Edward Kienholz's *U.S. Duck, or Home from the Summit* (1960), an assemblage consisting of a sad-looking stuffed duck—its feathers seemingly tarred rather than painted the colors of an American flag and its head crushed into the corner of a coffin-looking box—alluding to the "lame-duck" status of President Eisenhower after his failed 1960 conference with Khrushchev.⁴⁹ The emotional charge of these flag motifs makes a striking contrast—indeed, an ideological divide—with the mute neutrality of explorations of the theme by Jasper Johns and Claes Oldenburg, both of whom refused to take a political stance; Johns chose the flag for its impersonal, prefabricated properties, while Oldenburg declared that his wood-and-plaster flag constructions of 1960 expressed a "double view both for and against" American culture.⁵⁰ It is especially revealing to compare Smith's *The Vanishing Indian* with Pop artist Tom Wesselmann's *Little Great American Nude* series, notably his *Nude #6*, 1961 (fig. 30). Like Smith, Wesselmann juxtaposes his nude with an image of the American flag to establish its American identity, but the result could hardly be more different: Wesselmann's figure is, as art historian Sidra Stich has written, "an American icon, quite at home in her bourgeois American setting and bearing the mark of American greatness."⁵¹ For Stich, the proliferation of patriotic symbols in sixties Pop Art "bears witness to a newfound cultural confidence that, if not laying claims to a cultural supremacy, imprints the glaring stamp of America on American art," an observation that goes a long way toward explaining why orthodox Pop Art never caught on in Northern California.⁵²

Despite Smith's attempt at sacrilege, his spoofing burlesques caught the discerning eye of curator Jermaine MacAgy, who organized his first solo museum exhibition in spring of 1947 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. The exhibition met with immediate success, with enthusiastic reviews not only from the radical *Daily People's World* but also from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where Alfred Frankenstein praised Smith's bravura brushwork and calligraphic line.⁵³ Yet Smith was beginning to chafe under the figurative constraints of his work. His dissatisfaction with figuration reflects the pervasive change that had begun some years earlier during World War II and was now evident in nearly every part of the country. During the mid-forties many American artists, especially those of the liberal to non-Communist Left persuasion, were gravitating toward European modernism,

29 // **SELF-PORTRAIT**, 1948
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)
Oakland Museum of California
Gift of the Art Guild of the Oakland Museum Association

adopting Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, and geometric abstraction, blending them in various ways in a shallow, fluctuating space with a subject matter obliquely mythical, tribal, primordial, or dreamlike. Such abstraction took root and spread more quickly in San Francisco, nurtured by the modernist leanings of the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Palace of the Legion of Honor. At the close of the war, in 1945, the *Montgomery Street Skylight*, a left-wing artist's publication billing itself as the "bulletin of San Francisco's bohemia," reported that "a mass conversion" to abstraction had taken place, even among "veterans of the picturesque flowerpot."⁵⁴

But beginning around 1946–47, a bifurcation began developing between what had become a mainstream tendency in San Francisco and a group of non-objective expressionist painters at the California School of Fine Arts, where Smith had been teaching since 1945. This explosion of experimentalism, later to be known as Abstract Expressionism, was due to an extraordinary confluence of events beginning with the influx of former GIs into the student body after World War II. Smith, who had joined Clay Spohn on the staff while the Red Cross was still clearing out its offices, watched the CSFA explode in size due to the onslaught of veterans, requiring a tripling of staff. Douglas MacAgy, the school's new director, was appointed to oversee the task. MacAgy had ties with many of the leading lights of the art scene at that time: Alfred Barr, Peggy Guggenheim, and Katherine Kuh, as well as William Bazotes, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray. While a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Art during the war, MacAgy kept San Francisco abreast of the future New York Abstract Expressionists and organized annual exhibitions of the Surrealist émigrés.⁵⁵ His exhibition on the theme of "Hot Jazz" and accompanying lectures by Rudi Blesh, which drew record crowds to the San Francisco Museum of Art and helped spawn San Francisco's jazz scene, with its own variant of jazz blending the sounds of Dixieland and bebop, giving rise to such talents as the Dave Brubeck Quartet. It took little time for MacAgy to transform the CSFA from a place Smith described as "crawling with debutantes" into an art school one national survey found to be the most "committed to experimental abstraction" in America, including Black Mountain.⁵⁶ From 1946 to 1950 MacAgy invited internationally acclaimed artists, photographers, filmmakers, and poets from around the country to join a core faculty of Dorr Bothwell, Robert Howard, Smith, and Clay Spohn as staff and guests—most importantly Clyfford Still, who taught from 1946 to 1950, as well as Elmer Bischoff, James Broughton, Edward Corbett, Imogen Cunningham, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Diebenkorn, Claire Falkenstein, Stanley William Hayter, Dorothea Lange, David Park, Man Ray, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, Minor White, Ad Reinhardt, and Jean Varda. One of MacAgy's most significant contributions was to initiate pioneering programs in fine arts photography, printmaking, and filmmaking headed, respectively, by Ansel Adams, James Budd Dixon, and Sidney Peterson. The CSFA's experimental filmmaking program, virtually unique to art schools at the time, was extremely influential, leading to a flurry of pioneering art-cinema activity that played a vital part in the San Francisco Renaissance with non-narrative and other films that defy category or genre by artists such as Jordan Belsen, Stan Brakhage, Robert Branaman, Bruce Conner, Bill Heick, Hy Hirsch, Fred Hobbs, Larry Jordan, Chris MacLaine, and Frank Stauffacher, screened in some cases with live jazz ensembles such as those of Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk.⁵⁷

This concentration of talent along with a remarkable student body composed of motivated, no-nonsense war veterans—many of whom were professional artists before the war and just as experienced as their teachers—proved a combustible mix, creating an esprit de corps of an intensity rarely seen in the history of American art and far surpassing its counterpart in New York. This helps to explain why Abstract Expressionism, as a distinct phenomenon, was recognized first in San Francisco, even by the East Coast press.⁵⁸ In 1948, while the critics most responsible for canonizing the movement were describing New York's avant-garde as a far-flung trend amalgamating Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism (Harold Rosenberg went on record stating in late 1947 that William Bazotes, Robert Motherwell,

and Adolph Gottlieb were "attached neither to a community nor to one another"), the *New York Times* was reporting a controversial "First Sensation" movement in San Francisco, whose "ardent champions" paint with "slap dash gusto."⁵⁹ Long before the terms "Abstract Expressionism," "Action Painting," and "the New York School" came into common parlance, a fully non-objective, improvisational movement allied with jazz and the new spontaneous "open" and "free form" poetry had been identified as a coherent movement in San Francisco, variously known as "First Sensation," "Spiritism," "Amorphous Chromatism," or, as Smith like to call it, "Non-objectivism." By 1948, its artists had achieved a sufficiently extremist presence to seriously alarm the local public, press, and government, in several cases inciting viewers to physically attack and destroy their art.⁶⁰

Working independently of one another and anticipating developments in the East, two CSFA painters, John Grillo and Clyfford Still, stand out as early innovators. As early as 1946, Grillo's explosive drip paintings, projectile splatterings on cast-off objects like discarded doors as well as canvas and paper, paralleled those of Jackson Pollock, though his palette tended to be much more radiant, at times almost phosphorescent, and his compositions more varied than the comparatively delicate edge-to-edge skeins of Pollock (fig. 31). One of Grillo's methods, according to a classmate who watched him work, was to create runny streaks moving in different directions by standing back from his easel, hurling brushloads of paint, letting them drip, and turning them over, a technique he picked up while stationed in the South Seas; throwing cocoa, coffee grounds, and whatever he could find on sheets of paper. Grillo epitomizes the CSFA's independent-minded veterans whose wartime experiences had shaken and rearranged former attitudes and beliefs in societal conventions and authority. By contrast, the only Abstract Expressionist of the New York School who served in uniform was Ad Reinhardt. The West Coast veterans traumatized by combat, notably Edward Corbett, Frank Lobell, Jack Jefferson, Walter Kuhlman, and Wally Hedrick, along with the anarchist poets beginning to cluster in San Francisco—like Smith, who had his own political awakening on the battlefield of Arvin—were deeply appreciative and receptive to the raw brutality and anti-authoritarianism of Clyfford Still.

As radical as Grillo's paintings were—in 1948, Sam Hunter went so far as to proclaim in the *New York Times* that his "explosive abstraction" was produced "in a moment of intensity" that "acknowledges allegiance to no tradition"—nothing in contemporary art could match the brute power of Still's new paintings, which affected artists of every discipline in the fledgling San Francisco Renaissance.⁶¹ Because he was so secretive about his art, which he kept in his studio under lock and key, few, including Smith, were prepared for what they saw in Still's exhibition at the Legion of Honor in 1947. Still had made no attempt to represent anything other than unsightly trowelings of paint, sometimes blistered, other times smeared on raw canvas with a contemptuous attitude some viewers judged as scatological. (This was not so far from Still's comment about one of his own paintings, that it was "just another rag I wiped my ass on."⁶²) Although Still specified that he was not interested in paying "graphic homage" to an era of "science—of mechanism—of power and death" and "mammoth arrogance,"⁶³ the paintings in this exhibition, with their thick, scabrous fields of dull browns, ashen blacks, and bloody reds—occasionally suggesting torn skin ("skin" is a term he used for his canvases) (fig. 32) and riven with brutal gashes and ragged streaks—matched the decibel of Allen Ginsberg's epic poem *Howl* in their defiance of what Still called the contemporary "Culture State," which, like Ginsberg, he compared to Moloch, the child-devouring god of the Canaanites.⁶⁴ At the same time, Still's novel conception of space, created by the upward-thrusting movement of flame-like shapes, conjured sensations of boundlessness and ascension, thus symbolically enacting his emancipation from a society he viewed as hostage to "authoritarian devices of social control"⁶⁵ and "their vested interests."⁶⁶ In effect if not intent, Still conducted a revolt in paint against all constraints upon the potency of the individual that could only be described as Promethean, even if doomed to fail. These canvases—unlike most of the paintings he created after leaving San Francisco in

30 // TOM WESSELMANN, NUDE #6 (LITTLE GREAT AMERICAN NUDE SERIES), 1961
Acrylic and collage on board, 10 x 11½ in. (25.4 x 29.2 cm)
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Englander

31 // JOHN GRILLO, UNTITLED, 1946
Watercolor on paper, 14 x 17 in. (35.6 x 43.2 cm)
Private collection

32 // CLYFFORD STILL, 1947-R NO. 2, 1947
Oil on canvas, 105 x 92 in. (266.7 x 233.7 cm)
Private collection

1950—radiate with the heat of anger buried beneath a blackened crust, a primal rage surging up like molten lava, the depth and reach of which seems incalculable. Their skin is pock-marked with scars; the wounds are laid bare; all is exposed in readiness for battle. Who would go naked into war? The exhibition left the visual and literary art community stunned. Kenneth Rexroth remembered, “People came up to his vast pictures very quietly, and topped over them without a murmur, and came out with nothing to say.”⁶⁷

Much has been made of the radically inventive style of Still’s paintings, and it may be true, as Robert Motherwell was among the first to discern, that Still’s expansive fields were further removed from European abstraction than the drip paintings of Pollock or gesture-filled canvases of de Kooning.⁶⁸ Still’s circumvention of Cubist and Surrealist vocabularies no doubt served as a powerful catalyst for artists on both coasts to express themselves without direct recourse to European modernist tradition. However, to lead the charge of a style-based avant-garde was hardly Still’s intent. Significantly, he preferred to use the word “instrument” instead of “painting” because, like Smith and many other creative spirits in San Francisco, he rejected formalism in good part because of his aversion to commodification. Still has been characterized as politically conservative because of comments attributed to him in support of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-Communist crusade,⁶⁹ yet as art historian David Craven persuasively argued, many of his statements attest to a perception of American society as totalitarian as that of fascist and communist regimes.⁷⁰ Still’s views appear to be allied with what Rexroth would later call the “Social Lie” that he believed governed all “advanced” societies in order to maintain their hierarchy of exploitation and servitude, utilizing forms of deception that pervade all aspects of culture, including artistic expression.

The year of Still’s 1947 show at the Legion of Honor was something of an *annus mirabilis* for San Francisco’s avant-garde, not only uniting the transnational literary community soon to be known as the Beat Generation but also bringing into its fold many Abstract Expressionists and Assemblage artists, all whom, wittingly or not, came together with common cause and collective momentum to form the San Francisco Renaissance. In 1947, Jack Kerouac initiated a migration that would ultimately include Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, seeking liberation from the formalist, symbolic, and impersonal New Criticism of the literary establishment in the East.⁷¹ More importantly, 1947 was the year that Kenneth Rexroth’s Anarchist Circle first began publishing *The Ark*, the hand-press publication that probably did the most to launch the “mimeograph revolution,” an unprecedented outpouring of underground books, magazines, mail art, and comix via inexpensive mimeo, letterpress, and offset machines.⁷² The editorial for *Ark*’s spring 1947 issue began, “In direct opposition to the debasement of human values made flauntingly evident by the war, there is rising among writers in America, as elsewhere, a social consciousness which recognizes the integrity of the personality as the most substantial and considerable of values.”⁷³ Lawrence Ferlinghetti declared that in 1947, “The future still lay in the West. On the last frontier, in San Francisco, an *Ark* had been launched.”⁷⁴ As poet Jack Foley has noted, the little magazine’s ultimate contribution would be to link San Francisco’s literary avant-garde with the Venice West and Black Mountain schools “to form a broad new national poetry front.”⁷⁵ Equally important in 1947 was Madeline Gleason’s initiation of the Festival of Contemporary Poetry at the Lucien Labaudt Gallery, where Smith would in 1950 have his first joint exhibition of “junk sculpture,” as he liked to call it. If *The Ark* launched San Francisco’s literary avant-garde, Gleason’s annual festival was the first venue to bring poetry, music, and the visual arts together, setting a precedent for the better known jazz-and-poetry performances of the fifties at the artist-and-poet-run cooperatives King Ubu and Six galleries, fostering San Francisco’s distinctive “participatory mystique.”⁷⁶

All of this would be significant for Smith, particularly because of *his* contribution, not the other way around.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the event in 1947 that was pivotal for Smith’s own art was Clyfford Still’s show. Although few works survive from the beginning of Smith’s shift

33 // **UNTITLED**, 1955
Oil on canvas, 69 x 65 in. (172.7 x 165.1 cm)
Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art
Gift of Marie Eccles Caine Foundation

34 // **UNTITLED**, 1948
Oil on canvas, 34 x 39 in. (86.4 x 101 cm)
Oakland Museum of California
Gift of Hassel Smith

away from the figurative expressionism that characterized his painting in the mid- to late forties, according to the artist his first abstractions were the direct result of seeing Still’s 1947 exhibition: “There’s no secret about it.” Smith later explained in an interview, “I just got sick and tired of what I was doing so I decided to see if I could do something else. Just like that. It was conscious and overnight, based on an overnight decision, really.”⁷⁸ Smith’s break with figuration was, however, not as sudden as this account suggests. Although Smith had earlier dabbled with non-objective art, his first earnest efforts in abstract painting were not until 1948—a year after the Still exhibition—and throughout the late forties and fifties, he painted an occasional figurative canvas and worked in various forms of assemblage, collage, and photomontage more allied in spirit and sensibility to San Francisco’s Beat artists such as Wally Hedrick and Bruce Conner. Moreover, transitional works such as *Untitled*, 1948 (fig. 34), with their improvised blend of figuration and abstraction, demonstrate that Smith went through a gradual evolution and not an immediate conversion.

Yet there was nothing capricious or fleeting in Smith’s admiration for Still. Smith professed an undying allegiance to the older artist throughout the fifties, twenty years later calling him “probably the greatest painter alive.”⁷⁹ The appreciation seems to have been mutual; Still clearly respected Smith’s intellect and admired his work.⁸⁰ They became friends, traded paintings, corresponded, and visited each other long after Still severed all ties with his former artist-friends in New York for their overly “practical” concerns.⁸¹ When they were teaching together at the CSFA in the late forties, Still occasionally visited and came to parties at the triplex Smith shared with Corbett, McChesney, Mary Fuller McChesney, and poet Weldon Kees (as well as where Ad Reinhardt stayed in 1950) across the San Francisco Bay in Point Richmond. And at Still’s retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1979, when he was terminally ill with cancer, Smith was the artist Still chose to spend most of the evening with, escaping the din of the reception and talking in seclusion for several hours.⁸² From outward appearances the two men had little in common, an almost comically ill-matched pair because they were, in so many respects, temperamental opposites—Still the epitome of gravitas, self-control, and somber reserve; Smith irrepressibly animated, energetic, and impulsive. Still’s puritanical attitudes and spartan personal habits were very much out of sync at the high-spirited CSFA, with its Studio 13 jazz band and riotous, hard-drinking parties. As Smith later recalled, Still was “the sort of guy who never permitted himself any messing around.” And while Smith was apt to wear jeans and rolled-up plaid flannel shirts in solidarity with the working class, Still, he recalled, “dressed more like a business man. He wore a Homburg hat, a gray suit and tie, and frequently wore gray gloves and muffler” and “perpetually seemed like he was chilly.”⁸³

Yet they had far more in common than one might guess. As a Dust Bowl victim who had struggled to survive on a small farm in the drought-stricken prairies of Alberta, Canada, Still shared Smith’s hatred of agribusiness and its mechanized “factories in the field.”⁸⁴ And Still, who had helped establish a summer art colony on the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington, was one of the few painters Smith knew with a sense of empathy as deep as his own for the injustice done to the Native Americans. On matters of politics they also found common ground. Although Still certainly did not agree with Smith’s Marxist convictions, both opposed what they saw as totalitarian tendencies in American culture. Clearly, Smith appreciated Still’s outspoken views regarding the machinations of the art market, which both saw as being more destructive to artistic integrity than Hollywood’s “Culture Industry” that was attacked by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School. For Still and Smith, the art world not only distorted art’s meaning but also dared to manipulate artistic freedom in the very name of the principles of democracy it betrayed.

Thus in spite of their personal differences, Still and Smith found in each other a philosophical kinship, which gave Smith “hope and aspiration” at a time of ebbing conviction in his own artistic direction.⁸⁵ Still provided an approach entirely different from his New York con-

temporaries in that he did not seek, through Surrealist automatism, to express the workings of his unconscious, nor was he interested in finding universal imagery drawn from Jungian notions of a “collective unconscious.” For Smith, such ideas had been an obstacle to his acceptance of Abstract Expressionism and the cause of heated arguments with Elmer Bischoff, David Park, and Mark Rothko.⁸⁶ As Nancy Boas points out in her biography of David Park, Smith was more “politically attuned” than most of his fellow artists in San Francisco, telling her in an interview that he regarded Carl Jung as “one of the people who provided the intellectual background to fascism.”⁸⁷ Still’s art, by contrast to the New York “Intrasubjectives,” invested the physical properties of painting with purposeful meaning; as the artist repeatedly said, his work was “an instrument of thought” premised on carefully considered philosophical ideas.⁸⁸

Smith’s energetic abstractions never looked much like the fastidious work of Still, but he adopted his metaphoric approach to abstraction, in particular his expansive large scale and treatment of space as a symbol of autonomy. Like other artists at the core of the Abstract Expressionist movement in San Francisco, Smith used Still’s work only as point of departure, occasionally incorporating his shaggy vaults of color into his style but endowing them with his own kinesthetic, jazz-inspired enthusiasm. To assume San Francisco’s Abstract Expressionism was a one-man revolution based on the innovations of Still is to insult the many artists who were innovative in their own right. There were imitators, to be sure, but the best artists developed idioms of their own: Edward Corbett’s smoky mists, Richard Diebenkorn’s gestural grids, George Stillman’s spidery scaffolds, and Frank Lobdell’s brooding forms, by turns ghostly and ponderously hulking. Certainly, Hassel Smith’s playful whiplash line expresses a personality very different from the fearsome grandeur of Still.

To speak of style in Smith’s work, however, is to fast-forward to the mid- to late fifties, after Smith had retreated from the trenches of San Francisco to the peaceful serenity of an apple orchard in rural Sebastopol, about an hour and a half’s drive from the city, where he would create some of the most spectacular and unabashedly virtuosic canvases in the history of Abstract Expressionism—the “thunderbolt” paintings, as Allan Temko called them for their lightning-fast draftsmanship and “flying phalli, or something very much like them, spurting ambiguously through wide bursts of color.”⁸⁹ Only after spending a decade battling for freedom of expression did Smith permit himself the luxury of mastery evident in works like *Psychoseismorama*, 1960 (p. 163), and *2 to the Moon*, 1961 (p. 137). These paintings, which Smith began exhibiting around 1957 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, inspired a generation of Southern California artists, notably John Altoon, whose whimsical *Ocean Park* and *Hyperion* (fig. 36) series of the early sixties owe much to Smith’s cartoonish squiggles in works such as *Untitled*, 1955 (fig. 33), and *Blue Meets Bloy*, 1956–57 (fig. 35). Paintings such as these manage to be as elegant as they are irreverent, a balancing act no other painter of his generation achieved to such a magnificent degree.

Until then, Smith skirted finesse, working in a multiplicity of flagrantly unpalatable styles from the grubby, runny-edged color masses of *Untitled* (1949) to the calligraphic tangle of *You, Too Can Have Lovely Hair* (1953), a reference to the painting’s linear snarl. (It should be noted, however, that Smith produced a few brilliant canvases in spite of himself during this period, notably *Alone with the Killer*, 1948 [fig. 37],⁹⁰ and *The Little Big Horn*, 1952–53 [p. 121], a dithyrambic orgy of gestures commemorating Custer’s Last Stand as the greatest victory the Plains Indians ever had against the US Army.) Smith joined a number of artists in San Francisco who took up arms marshaling an arsenal of artistic radicalism—particularly the drip, splatter, and smear—to defy efforts to stifle their creative voices by the campaign of anti-modernism that swept through the US in 1947–48, spearheaded by Congress with the energetic participation of Richard Nixon, then a Congressman from Southern California intent on purging the “scourge of the red tide” in his home state. In their view, as Congressman George Dondero explained, modern art not only posed a threat to national

35 // **BLUE MEETS BLOY**, 1956–57
Oil on canvas, 71¼ x 47¾ in. (182.2 x 121.3 cm)
Location unknown

36 // **JOHN ALTOON, UNTITLED (HYPERION SERIES)**, 1964
Pastel on paper, 54 x 40 in. (137.2 x 101.6 cm)
San Jose Museum of Art
Gift of Gifford and Joann Philips, 2008

37 // **ALONE WITH THE KILLER**, 1948
Oil on canvas, 20 x 22 in. (50.8 x 55.9 cm)
Oakland Museum of California
Gift of Mrs. David Park

security but a danger to the American way of life because “it does not glorify our country, our cheerful and smiling people.”⁹¹ Clearly emboldened by the audacity of Still, Smith leapt into the fray with a series of alarmingly tasteless abstractions that made Still’s paintings look tame. In the summer of 1948, Smith made his public debut of his non-objective paintings in a group exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Entitled, innocuously enough, *Elmer Bischoff, David Park, Hassel [sic] Smith*, the show caused a great commotion, attracting considerably more attention than Still’s the year before. Berkeley artist Erle Loran, serving as West Coast correspondent for *Art News*, reported that the exhibition:

[H]it the whole local art world with amazement. It was like seeing the French cartoons illustrating the public reaction to the first Impressionist shows in Paris to watch the faces of the bewildered visitors. The more timid would look furtively at others as if to seek companionship in their bewilderment; the sophisticated were often quite frank about their stupefaction. Nothing like this had been seen in such large amounts in one place. One could go back twenty-five years to recall the savage swirlings and gummy thickness in a Soutine, but nothing had ever quite looked like this. It was the most complete release from restraints of all kinds that had ever occurred. Even the over-loaded blacks, browns, and whites of Clifford [sic] Still (exhibited previously at the Legion of Honor) seemed composed and orderly by comparison with many of the paintings of this group. Many described the work in terms of cans of paint being tipped over, smeared up and allowed to dribble and drool (even though remembering that almost the same things had been said about Expressionist art). Associative textural similarities were brought to mind and while they had rich and pungent qualities they were of the sort generally judged unpleasant.⁹²

Although Loran’s review comments broadly on the exhibition, it is ultimately only Smith’s paintings that can be described in such highly evocative words. Perhaps the unappreciative assessment by Bits Hayden, who had collaborated with Smith on *The Communist Manifesto in Pictures* (1948), captured Smith’s painting best when he described *Where Alph the Sacred River Ran*: “This theme was literally carried out by (I assume) squeezing several tubes of different colored paint on the canvas and mixing with a dash of turpentine, whereupon the ‘Sacred River’ ran.”⁹³ While fellow artists of the San Francisco Renaissance applauded these paintings, as Smith’s student Jess did, as “an attack against the materialism of capitalist society,”⁹⁴ they encouraged shocked opponents to coin the phrase the “drip and drool school.”⁹⁵

Smith’s paintings not only flew in the face of anti-modernists who considered such work just short of treason, but they took Still’s anti-commercialism a step further by assuring his canvases would literally self-destruct, either by using pigments mixed only with turpentine without a binding agent, or by destroying the paintings himself.⁹⁶ Like Duchamp before him, Smith considered the idea in these works to be more important than the finished object, presaging the explosion of assemblage, performance, installation, and Conceptual Art in the coming decades. Along with ephemeral paintings, Smith produced some of California’s earliest Beat assemblages composed of junk and other perishable materials, constructing them from detritus he picked up on the beach near his Point Richmond home in 1948.⁹⁷ He would later recall that the tide of the San Francisco Bay deposited an abundance of treasures—“this absolutely incredible accumulation of stuff. We used to sift through it. Pick out all kinds of things and put it together. I went on to do things using all kinds of materials.”⁹⁸

In comparison to Manhattan, where garbage was collected from its sidewalks regularly, the San Francisco Bay Area’s wide open spaces were filled with junkyards and dumps, seemingly visible everywhere, along highways and shorelines, even in the sand dunes of Ocean Beach. Collecting garbage from the back of the CSFA, Smith collaborated with Clay Spohn of the *Museum of Unknown and Little-Known Objects* (1949), a temporary installation of pseudoscientific, nonsensical exhibits, generally acknowledged as a seminal artwork

for the Beat assemblage movement. By Smith's account, he himself contributed "a menacing object by cutting the back of a bentwood chair. It exploded open, with sharp, jagged edges everywhere."⁹⁹ According to sculptor Seymour Locks, Smith encouraged a decidedly crude aesthetic compared with the more polished works of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Joseph Cornell; in his view, the nastier the better. Locks recalled being invited to a party Smith threw in the late forties in which guests were required to bring a Dada object. In those years, artists could find fanciful material from the remnants of Victorian buildings in San Francisco that had been razed for redevelopment (this would be a favorite source for Bruce Conner), and in one site he found an ornate door panel, and proceeded to painstakingly embellish it with a surface bristling with nails and spikes. "I thought of it as a joke," he recalled, but when Smith saw it, he said, "Man, that's the crudest thing I ever saw." I said, "Hassel, you don't know what you're looking at." As Locks observed, "That was the beginning."¹⁰⁰ Locks would later go on to create some of the most intriguing sculpture produced in the Bay Area during the fifties—fanciful creatures with scaly crocodilian skins, composed of hundreds, sometimes thousands of densely clustered nail heads.

Even before Smith took part in the collaborative "museum absurda," as he called Spohn's installation, he had seized upon the notion of spontaneous, collective expression, an idea that John Cage and Anna Halpern would pursue in the early fifties, and Allan Kaprow would christen by the end of the decade as "happenings." Smith told the story of how this came about on the morning of Christmas day, 1948, in Eugene, Oregon, where he taught at the university for one semester. Published in the 1952 issue of *Artist's View* with the prescient title "Art in Action," Smith is unrestrained in his almost childlike wonderment and delight. Clearly a profoundly revelatory experience for Smith and indicative of his grasp of art's deepest wellsprings in the human spirit, the text is worth quoting at length. Eugene was not accustomed to snow, he begins, and so the town awoke "to see for the first time in many years that special light in the room (just a little like the light under water), which is the effect, seen from indoors, of the bright sunshine on a world buried in snow."

The snow was the big thing that day. Toys and ornamented trees, opening presents, and a big dinner with guests—these things were important as they usually are on Christmas Day but the snow was the big thing. Right after breakfast every family in town got out in the yard and the "ritual" of making a snowman began. But if ritual is an expressive act reduced to a logical symbol of that act, this was all expressive action—a grand, collective, expressive act on the part of the residents of Eugene, Oregon on Christmas morning 1948. There was no apathy in this process. The abhorrence of the mistake, so characteristic of the performance of ritual was missing from this production—no problems, no rationale of realism (or the lack of it), no aesthetic, instead energy and action, ingenuity and humor. Never in the world was there such a bunch of snowmen. Every yard in town had one, all kinds, sizes and dimensions. In some parts of town, especially over by the stadium, where the yards open up into one another and the planting is sparse, the total spectacle was like some snowed-in Stone Hinge [sic] or Easter Island, a great totemic tableau, a great show of spontaneous artistry in (significantly) a highly perishable medium. At that the snowmen lasted through several weeks of snappy weather, melting a little in the daytime, freezing at night, deteriorating gradually through funny alterations of character (the corners of a mouth relaxing, an eye dropping out, a hand amputated) until at last they were just blackened icy nubs strewn about with cinders and sticks, an occasional hat or limp glove.¹⁰¹

Although it appears that Smith himself would not go on to organize or participate in collective happenings, San Francisco's poets, artists, and musicians would make the art form a staple of the region, mostly performed in the privacy of homes or private galleries rarely attended by the public. One of the most dramatic instances preceded Jimi Hendrix's celebrated

smashing of his guitar on stage in the sixties. Accounts vary, but the event, which took place at the Six Gallery some time between 1955 and 1957, consisted of several artists and poets collectively destroying a piano with an axe, possibly after creating an ice sculpture with a blow torch.¹⁰² Perishability, however, did become an important theme for Smith in the late forties and fifties. He may have been one of the first artists to create "edible art" with his *Adventures in Food*, ca. 1955 (fig. 38), one of the few assemblages he actually sold—to Peter Martin, co-owner with Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books—consisting of, according to the words Smith scrawled on the back of a photograph: "Peanut Butter and Jellyfish Sandwich," "Foul Bowl," and "Pate de Frou Frou."¹⁰³ This may have been an inspiration for the three-foot-high martini glass that Wally Hedrick, Joan Brown, and Manuel Neri made in the mid-fifties to celebrate the opening of the New Mission Gallery, which reportedly held around four gallons of gin garnished with enormous fake olives on skewers. According to Hedrick, it was one of the many art happenings that he and Jay DeFeo hosted at their Fillmore Street apartment, in this case attracting a television crew, who decided after watching partiers dunking for ice cubes from the cocktail glass as if they were bobbing for apples in a barrel, that the spectacle was too racy for the evening news.¹⁰⁴

Humor in Smith's "junk sculpture," as the artist himself called it, could revel in pure silliness, but just as often, its insinuations, teased out from their playful façade, reveal a dark and profoundly serious wit. If Sandra Starr wrote of Beat assemblage, "The great richness of this art lies not in color or form but in the denseness of metaphor, which is laid on as thickly as the paint in San Francisco Bay Area Expressionism," her observation can equally be applied to much of Smith's work in this medium.¹⁰⁵ *Cops Hide/Love Your Magic Spell is Everywhere*, 1950s (fig. 39), offers up as many layers of meaning as the impastos of Clyfford Still. Consisting of a painted target with words above it that look mechanical, if not stenciled, this work might seem an homage to Jasper Johns's iconic encaustics. But Smith was no fan of Johns's deadpan productions, and unlike the consummate New Yorker's uninflected appropriations of commercial logos or his constructions of expressionless human appendages (as in the widely reproduced *Target with Plaster Casts* of 1955, later owned by Leo Castelli), Smith's target construction is anything but mute. The words "Cops Hide" may have been cut out of a magazine or newspaper, but the voice is unmistakably Smith's, and by extension the entire San Francisco artistic underground, commanding law enforcement to run for cover. The absurdity and bittersweet pathos of this demand recalls the bravado and bluster of Charlie Chaplin's indignant Little Tramp, the tail-coated, floppy-shoed vagrant who refuses to be cowed by government officials, admonishing them with a scowl and wave of his cane, and when provoked, assaulting them with furious kicks. The montage of peanuts that forms the backdrop of Smith's assemblage reinforces the burlesque humor of the piece, suggesting a circus-like atmosphere in which the police, like Ginsberg's bumbling FBI agents in *Howl*, are clowns in an absurd comedy.

The absurdity of Smith's demand is especially ironic given that Smith was himself a target of police; indeed, as the red, white, and blue palette of *Cops Hide* makes clear, he was a fugitive from America, both from its government and its people. Significantly, the color red is reserved for the sheet of cardboard with perforations suggesting bullet holes, beneath which a couple of phrases can be glimpsed but not clearly deciphered. Literally, it is Smith who is undercover here; the meaning of his words may remain forever hidden. Smith's membership in the CPUSA was well known to the local police and FBI, and a single misstep might have led to his arrest. Although Smith was notorious for dramatic embellishment, his recollection of harassment is borne out by his California Un-American Activities Committee file.¹⁰⁶ In an interview with Sandra Starr, Smith explained his predicament:

In my case, I was being chased by the FBI... They chased me all the way to Los Angeles. I was under surveillance—God knows why. I never felt that I was a threat to the nation or anything. They wasted an awful lot of time keeping track of people

38 // **ADVENTURES IN FOOD**, ca. 1955
Mixed media, dimensions and location unknown

39 // **COPS HIDE (LOVE YOUR MAGIC SPELL IS EVERYWHERE)**, 1950s
Mixed-media assemblage, 9 x 7 in. (24.1 x 18.4 cm)
Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art
Gift of Marie Eccles Caine Foundation

who were no danger to anybody. It was just crazy. You don't like it, having these people snooping around and spying on you and asking your neighbors what you're doing and so on. That happened. They used to come to my door. As far as personal experience, it went on for pretty close to twenty years, beginning immediately after the war and going on until we moved to England, which was 1965.¹⁰⁷

If, as Tennessee Williams observed in 1948, "reactionary opinion descends like a ton of bricks on the head of any artist who speaks out against the current of prescribed ideas" (prophetically, at that early date, Williams went on to say that he looked forward to the "honest and brave" day when young people would discard "conservative business suits," let their "hair grow long" and "make wild gestures, fight, shout and fall downstairs!"),¹⁰⁸ by the fifties the atmosphere of oppression had become suffocating. For most of the country, the hysteria of the McCarthy era had died down by 1954 with the end of the Senate hearings, but in California with the arms and space race heating up, the crackdown on "un-American" activities only intensified. In addition to having a particularly strong federal HUAC presence, California had its own state-run Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities. Its declassified reports from 1946 to 1970, some of them now available online, reveal a degree of persecution exceeding that of McCarthy. No organization or institution—not even the Girl Scouts—was immune to its investigation, and in 1948 it placed art and culture near the top of its list, asserting:

There is no field of art or culture in which Communists have not developed a program and charted organizational and propaganda activity. Literature, painting, music, the theatre, opera, ballet, and every one of the popular arts are logical targets for Red corruption because of their recognized influence upon masses of people.... Since all art is critical to a greater or lesser degree of nature, humanity and the imperfect institutions of mankind, artists and art mediums are prime material for the Communist program. Communism, we must always remember, feeds on dissent and discord.¹⁰⁹

Thus, Beat assemblage artist George Herms was not exaggerating when he observed of the 1950s, "you weren't allowed to say you were an artist because it had subversive connotations." It was this situation—the forcing of artists and writers to become independent and self-sustaining—that produced, in his opinion, the San Francisco Renaissance.¹¹⁰ Smith was among the first artists in San Francisco to go underground, even in his activities as a teacher. In 1952, perhaps in part because of his controversial organizing activities on behalf of the CSFA's faculty, Smith was forced to resign, and promptly established his own atelier. Charging a fee of \$30 for group painting sessions at his studio in the Audifred Building on Mission Street and lectures at his home, then on Potrero Hill in San Francisco, Smith acknowledged privately his desire to "clean CSFA out," since he now regarded the school as a fascistic bureaucracy with a materialist Bauhaus program operated under the new director Ernest Mundt.¹¹¹ In the summer of 1952, a mimeographed, hand-distributed "advertisement" for a lecture series, entitled "Theories of Non-Objective Painting," promised: "Every effort will be made to avoid those clichés of criticism which, appearing constantly in newspapers, magazines, books, and talk, have made it necessarily difficult for the person in search of it to discover a significant attachment for painting, even in its presence."¹¹² Although discussions often degenerated into raucous drinking parties, Smith's "students," a formidable and independent-minded group that included an unusual number of women artists—Madeleine Dimond,¹¹³ Lilly Fenichel, Sonia Gechtoff, Adelle Landis, and Deborah Remington, along with Richard Brodney, Roy De Forest, James Kelly, Seymour Locks, and Julius Wasserstein—carried out numerous heated debates, with Smith doing most of the talking.¹¹⁴

Whereas in the 1940s the CSFA had provided refuge, now the basement of City Lights, the artist-and-poet-run bars and cafés, Smith's house and studio (along with the studios of others,

40 // **SIGN FROM KING UBU GALLERY**, 1953
Tempera on paper, 38 x 25 in. (96.5 x 63.5 cm)
The Poetry Collection, State University of New York, Buffalo

41 // **UNTITLED**, 1947
Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in. (80 x 80 cm)
Collection Paul Hertz

42 // **UNTITLED**, 1963
Ink and pencil on paper, 19 1/4 x 16 in. (50.2 x 40.6 cm)
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive,
University of California, Berkeley
Purchased with funds provided by Mrs. Phyllis Wattis
and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1980

43 // **HOMAGE TO BOB SCOBEEY**, 1963
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Collection Byron Meyer

notably James Budd Dixon's) and the 2322 Fillmore building, which historian Rebecca Solnit described as a "sort of latter-day Bateau Lavoir,"¹¹⁵ and a succession of cooperative galleries provided forums for exchange, which Ginsberg praised as "islands of freedom" that he and Kerouac could not find in Manhattan.¹¹⁶ These foxholes provided the only safety for critical debate during Cold War America, and for this reason their hours of operation were sporadic and usually unfriendly to the public: the King Ubu Gallery was open from seven to ten in the evening Mondays and Wednesdays, while Wallace Berman's Semina Gallery, in the marshlands of Larkspur, was accessible only at low tide or by raft, and its exhibitions reportedly sometimes lasted a few hours each.¹¹⁷ Berman's gallery was as clandestine as his hand-printed *Semina* (not technically a "publication" since its mailing list included only trusted friends), which featured writings by authors who would never have passed the censorship turnstiles. For Berman, as for Smith, the real heroes of the era alongside the jazz musicians were the improvisational comedians, including Mort Sahl and especially Lenny Bruce, who dared to joke publicly in San Francisco's popular nightclubs like the Hungry i and Purple Onion about censorship, political and religious hypocrisy, and his own police harassment, refusing to stop even after his arrest in 1961 on obscenity charges for using the word "cocksucker."¹¹⁸

Nearly all of Smith's exhibitions took place in these underground, artist-and-poet-run venues after leaving the CSFA. In 1952, when Smith's friend the poet Robert Duncan and his partner Jess (a former student of Smith's and Still's), with the painter Harry Jacobus (also a former CSFA student), opened the King Ubu—named after the quintessential anarchist in the 1890 absurdist play by Alfred Jarry that was beloved by the Dadaists, and as eclectic in spirit as the Dada artists and poets—they invited Smith to participate in its inaugural show. It was followed by two back-to-back exhibitions billed as "36 Performances by Twelve Painters," consisting of Smith and artists studying in his Mission Street loft, with a poster Smith himself created (fig. 40).¹¹⁹ A sign of the enormous regard that Duncan and Jess had for Smith, they gave over the cavernous King Ubu to a solo exhibition of Smith's art in the two months before the gallery closed.¹²⁰ Smith also took part in a signal exhibition of Beat assemblage called *Common Art Accumulations* in the early to mid-fifties at The Place, an art gallery/poetry-and-jazz pub reminiscent of the founding venue of Dada, Hugo Ball's Café Voltaire in Zurich, with "Blabbermouth Nights" serving as a free-speech forum every Monday, in which members of the audience were invited to climb onto the balcony "soapbox" and perform or rant as long as the audience allowed. A range of musicians played there, from Lu Watters to Dave Brubeck, and The Place gave Joel Barletta, Jay DeFeo, Jess, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, and possibly Joan Brown their first one-person exhibitions.¹²¹ Shortly after painter Leo Krikorian opened it in 1953, The Place became perhaps the most important gathering spot for artists, poets, and musicians to mingle until Jack Kerouac sensationalized it in his 1958 novels, *The Dharma Bums* and *The Subterraneans*, which portrayed San Francisco's underground in a way that simultaneously popularized and discredited its serious innovators.¹²²

Kerouac probably had more to do with Smith's disavowal of any connection with the Beats than *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen, who coined the term "beatnik" as a riff on the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite.¹²³ (Interestingly, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, would later pronounce the Beats a greater threat to America's national security than the Communists.¹²⁴) Smith would never forgive Kerouac for using his name as a pseudonym for the junkie, thief, and street hustler Herbert Huncke in *On the Road* (1957), the first novel to sensationalize San Francisco's art community, though Smith's pet peeve was Kerouac's ignorance of West Coast jazz and stereotypical depiction of African Americans and migrant workers in the San Joaquin Valley. Smith, like many others who had been on the ground floor of the movement, was outraged when the *New York Times* hailed *On the Road* as the "clearest utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago and whose principal avatar he is." In *Playboy* magazine in 1959, Kerouac, a Republican, would boast, "I am the originator of the term [Beat Generation], and around it the term and generation

have taken shape."¹²⁵ He further appeared on Steve Allen's television show, reading to the accompaniment of Allen's tinkling piano keys.¹²⁶ In 1960, when MGM released its film adaptation of Kerouac's *Subterraneans*, which increased the flood of wannabe Beats to San Francisco, Rexroth published an article in the *San Francisco Examiner* stating that "the Beatnik" is "only the Organization Man walking around" with "the uniform of the beard, sandals, dirty sweatshirt and torn jeans"—nothing more "than a gray flannel suit worn inside out."¹²⁷ As much as Smith regarded Rexroth as an "intellectual snob of the worst sort," it is likely that he would have greatly appreciated Rexroth's appraisal.¹²⁸ The beatniks were the product of the media. Smith later told Sandra Starr in an interview, "We used to say, [to the beatniks] 'Hey, we were Beat before you were born.'"¹²⁹

By this time, Smith had long since decamped for Sebastopol and was in the process of trying to reposition himself as an artist more closely associated with the painters of Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery than San Francisco's art community. Smith was certainly active in Los Angeles; he was among the artists to participate in the legendary *Merry-Go-Round* show on the Santa Monica Pier in 1955 (jointly organized by Walter Hopps's Syndell Studio and the Six Gallery) as well as in the Ferus Gallery's inaugural 1957 exhibition, in both cases alongside many of his Mission Street students. The Ferus also gave Smith four solo exhibitions, more than any other Northern California artist. During his brief teaching stint at UCLA from 1964 to 1965, Smith apparently made quite an impression on many younger artists who went on to become L.A. art stars, including John Altoon, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Tony Berlant, Lynn Foulkes, Craig Kauffman, Edward Kienholz, John Mason, and Ed Moses. Hopps described Smith as "a sort of gatherer," holding parties and "a lot of salons"¹³⁰ in the Silverlake district at "this crazy place" Smith described as looking "very much like a Viking house."¹³¹

Nonetheless, there is no question that Smith was far more influential in San Francisco, where his impact continued long after he left. Smith's exhibitions of assemblage sculpture at Lucien Labaudt Gallery (1950), *The Place* (ca. 1953–55),¹³² and at the East and West (1955), a gallery Sonia Gechtoff's mother Ethel Gechtoff opened around the corner from the Six Gallery, were not lost on the Beat assemblage artists, particularly after Bern Porter—the inveterate underground publisher whose little magazine, *Berkeley: A Journal of Modern Culture*, and private press published censored writings by Henry Miller as well as Robert Duncan and Philip Lamantia's first books—produced a portfolio of Harry Bowden's photographs of Smith's assemblages in 1955, simply entitled *Constructions*. Smith also kept a presence in San Francisco by regularly exhibiting at Jim Newman's Dilexi Gallery, where he had a series of solo shows of his extraordinary thunderbolt paintings and drawings from 1958 to 1965, exhibiting alongside many younger artists indebted to him, including Roy De Forest, Jess, Deborah Remington, and Julius Wasserstein.¹³³

But it was Smith's irreverent humor—the most consistent and enduring quality of his art—that had the most profound impact on generations of Bay Area artists to come. Even the move to lowbrow by Pop artists has been traced to San Franciscans like Jess, who in turn drew from Smith.¹³⁴ For Smith, no subject was sacred; his own art, the art of friends (for example the gutsy early figurative painting of Park, which Smith parodied as *Woman with a Snood* in 1952),¹³⁵ and the most revered "masterpieces" of modernism such as Picasso's *Girl in Mirror*, which Smith spoofed in a high-spirited burlesque featuring, as Allan Temko wrote, "a very San Franciscan girl twisting away in bra and panties from her reflection (*Untitled*, 1947 [fig. 41])."¹³⁶ Smith's own mentor, Clyfford Still, came under his comic scrutiny in *Tiptoe Down to Art*, 1950 (p. 125), where Still's control of the edges that Smith admired so much has been defiled with the approach of an insect preparing to creep on two spindly legs into a Still-like field of color.

Tiptoe Down to Art gives a hint of the direction Smith would pursue in the late fifties. His early Abstract Expressionist works—even when playful, as in his "beast paintings" of 1948,

46 // **UNTITLED**, 1963
Ink and pencil on paper, 15 x 19 in. (40 x 50.2 cm)
Private collection

47 // **WOW!**, 1959
Paper collage, 15 x 12 in. (38.1 x 30.5 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

with their menacing spikes and probing tendrils—contained at least an undertone of anger and even violence.¹³⁷ But as the fifties progressed, Smith's humor lightened considerably and lost its savagery. In the catalogue published on the occasion of his survey at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1961, Walter Hopps noted that humor in Smith's paintings never amounted to a single obvious "sight gag" but rather revealed itself with subtlety and sophistication. Writing of the Abstract Expressionist paintings from 1957 to 1961, Hopps observed, "In the midst of a lyrical expanse there might suddenly appear a laugh provoking bulge, pathetic flap, or zany twist of line, which will capture one's eye, release it, capture it again. Smith might plant a surprise in any least expected part of a painting. The process is not dissimilar to that used by Chaplin of establishing fascinating sequences or rhythms of smaller precise surprises within the larger total work."¹³⁸ Often Smith's surprises are of a slyly libidinous nature: flying phalli, bulging breasts, and protruding buttocks, all of which are too obnoxious to be taken seriously. These unexpected innuendos are akin to the whimsy and caprice of the Dixieland revival musicians Smith admired, like Lu Watters or Bob Scobey, who might break from their routines and suddenly burst into a rendition of "Three Blind Mice" or "Pop Goes the Weasel." To compare the gyrating squiggles in *Homage to Bob Scobey*, 1963 (fig. 43), to the densely packed psychological morphologies of Arshile Gorky, as so many critics have (presuming derivation), is to completely misunderstand Smith and his comedic, jazz-inspired spirit.

Smith's *The Triumph of Gargoylism*, 1957 (p. 123), has absorbed the raunchy humor and joyful exuberance of San Francisco's Dixieland bands, but it is just as indebted to the velvety rhythms of bebop. Although its title and some of its imagery harks back to his "beast" works, the painting is anything but beastly; instead, it is smooth and satiny in its luxuriant reds and confident calligraphy. Smith's former faux naïveté is entirely absent from these paintings, which range from the stunning *Dakota*, 1961 (fig. 44), composed of bleedthrough slabs of paint scraped and layered to create luscious surface effects, to the tsunami-like *Red Splash*, 1961 (fig. 45). But mostly, Smith seems to glory in his rediscovery of the unerring line of his earliest figurative work. *Bird Lover*, 1957 (pp. 114–15), for example, a tribute to Charlie "Bird" Parker, emulates the dazzling twists and turns of the bebop master's saxophone. By 1960, Smith's Abstract Expressionist paintings captured the improvisational acrobatics, high-velocity tempos, and complex rhythms of bebop. Examples abound but a few stand out: *Untitled #14* and *#9* from 1960 (pp. 133, 134); *Sebastopol I*, 1961 (p. 155); *Ma Ma Ra*, 1961 (p. 166); and *Number 11*, 1961 (p. 130); and his superb drawings (fig. 42) of the early sixties, such as *Untitled*, 1963 (fig. 46). In all of these, line appears to be on the loose—spontaneous, restless, and in perpetual motion—but like the sound emitted from an instrument of an experienced improvisational jazz musician, Smith's hand is firmly in control and absolutely exacting in its delivery of key, pitch, and timbre.

Despite Smith's relative seclusion in Sebastopol, his thunderbolt paintings met immediate critical success at the Ferus Gallery in 1958, followed by a sell-out exhibition at the New Arts Gallery in Houston the next year. When the actress Hedy Lamarr purchased his painting *Golden Spur* (1959), Smith became something of a celebrity. Smith's work was picked up by prestigious galleries in New York and London, yet amidst all this glamour and rising stardom, his paintings became increasingly absurd. To begin with, Smith poked fun at his own commercial success in Houston with a painting he ironically called *Snubs Money for Love*, 1959 (p. 153). At the same time, Smith made a collage entitled *WOW!*, 1959 (fig. 47), featuring a bulging muscleman next to an advertisement reading, "HEY SKINNY How would YOU like to GAIN 56 POUNDS OF MIGHTY MUSCLE LIKE / DID?" In 1961, the year Hopps gave him an exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, Smith produced *The Giant Salamander* (p. 120), a crude and thoroughly unmarketable painting with imagery as ridiculous as its title—a thick black line snaking its way along the bottom of a lurid red field—followed by another curious-looking painting with a green patch resembling a dug-up clump of grass flying through a sky-blue expanse, beneath which Smith scrawled the title, *Go to the Bow*

44 // **DAKOTA**, 1961
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm)
Collection David Keaton

45 // **RED SPLASH**, 1961
Oil on canvas, 69½ x 68 in. (176.5 x 172.7)
Collection Norm Lariviere

Wow Dog House and From There to Where it Tells You, 1962 (fig. 49). Given Smith's history of self-parody, this may well be a punishing self-admonishment, for he was always his own most brutal critic. If not for the crime of doggerel, or some species of dogdom, why else would Smith choose to abandon his immensely successful thunderbolt paintings just two years later and make such a career-bruising shift to figuration? This was not by any means an example of the luscious style of figuration that Bischoff and Diebenkorn so successfully pursued but was instead an unfashionable figuration that commented, as always with his own brand of whimsy, on the suburban culture of Southern California, 1965 (fig. 48).

Smith could not abide pretentiousness or fakery, whether he saw it in himself or in others, and he sought to root it out and expose it whenever possible. No matter how stupendously virtuosic, his thunderbolt paintings never trafficked in heroic pretense, and certainly not in lofty rhetoric. No one, least of all Smith himself, made claims for them as fever charts of emotion, purveyors of visual Esperanto, sublime transcendence, or expressions of tragedy. It is hard to imagine Smith telling a critic, as Rothko did, that "The people who weep before my paintings are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them."¹³⁹ Many of his Abstract Expressionist paintings teased out just such fakery; in fact, with their jokey titles (who could take a painting called *The Giant Salamander* seriously?), they poked fun at the very movement of Abstract Expressionism itself. It seems these works were ultimately not an occasion for pure levity but rather for exemplifying the eighteenth-century philosopher Francis Hutchinson's remark that "Ridicule is an attack against false grandeur and interferes with excessive admiration."¹⁴⁰ More importantly, Smith's humor, as his fellow prankster Clay Spohn observed, provided "a kind of free release from the bondage of dogma," which is precisely why it found such resonance among his younger peers.¹⁴¹ Three generations were encouraged by Smith's subversive irreverence: his own Mission Street students, with their whimsical abstractions, notably Madeleine Dimond, Deborah Remington, and James Kelly (also locally known for his assemblage *Design for an Army Blanket* (1952), complete with leopard-spotted frame and protruding rubber glove), a raft of Beat-era poets and assemblage artists who have given Smith at least some of the credit for their humorous license, most importantly Robert Duncan, whose comic masque *Foust Foutu* (tr. Faust Fucked) performed by Michael McClure, Jack Spicer et al. at the Six Gallery, featured a paint-splattering-and-smearing, expletive-spouting artist who could easily have been modeled after Smith; Duncan's partner Jess's improbable mix of Joycean wordplay and the nonsense rhymes of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear; and the Dadaesque junk sculpture of Wally Hedrick, which, like Smith's, was often designed to self-destruct; the "Nut" movement launched by Roy De Forest and David Zack, whose ideal artist, in De Forest's words, was "an eccentric, peculiar individual creating art as a fantasy with amazing intention of totally building a miniature cosmos into which the nut could retire with all of his friends, animals, and paraphernalia." The latter was a subset of Funk Art, a loosely affiliated group of artists whose penchant for humor Peter Selz defined in 1967 when he wrote:

The Funk artists knew too well that a fraudulent morality is a fact of their world and they have no illusions that they can change it. If these artists expressed anything at all, it is senselessness, absurdity, and fun. They delight in nonsense, they abandon all the strait jackets of rationality, and with an intrusive sense of humor, they present their own elemental feelings and visceral processes. If there is any moral, "it's for you to find out."¹⁴²

Smith turned again and again to humor, in every phase of his rich and varied career, from the satiric expressionist figurative works right up through his witty "measured paintings," which paradoxically refer to the random bounce of balls in pinball machines and city-street stickball games—to "indiscipline" rather than order (p. 168). Indeed, Smith described his modular grids as "prisons" that he created for the purpose of "escape" from authority, comparing them to "navigational devices" guiding him to destinations originating outside

of the frame, just as his Abstract Expressionist paintings suggested movement beyond their borders as parables of freedom.¹⁴³ Still had characterized his own art in these terms: "To be stopped by a frame's edge was intolerable, a Euclidean prison," he exhorted in his typical Nietzschean fashion. "It had to be annihilated, its authoritarian implications repudiated."¹⁴⁴ Finally, the fundamental premise of Smith's art, like that of Still's, was to advocate the individual's capacity for self-determination.

48 // **L.A. UNDERPASS**, 1965
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Collection Gerald Buck

49 // **GO TO THE BOW WOW DOG HOUSE AND FROM THERE TO WHERE IT TELLS YOU**, 1962
Oil on canvas, 67 x 67 in. (171.5 x 171.5 cm)
Midwest Museum of American Art

50 // **UNTITLED**, 1963
Oil on canvas, 18 x 48 in. (45.7 x 121.9 cm)
Collection Gerald Buck

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- Hassel Smith, quoting the verdict of the Dode hired in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1901), in *The Artist's View* (San Francisco), no. 1 (July 1952), n.p., a privately printed broadsheet published by Claire Mahl. Each of the seven issues of *The Artist's View*, from July 1952 to March 1954, featured a single artist or writer. The first was devoted to Smith; others featured Robert Duncan, Jess Collins, Madeline Gleason, David Park, and the extraordinary but largely forgotten Phillip Roobar, a CSFA student of Smith's, who Robert Motherwell would later praise as "possibly the finest collagist in the country." Quoted in Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), p. 32.
- Michael Duncan, "Hassel Smith at the Sonoma County Museum," *Art in America* 91, no. 7 (July 2003), p. 103.
- Walter Hopps, letter to Kathryn Swenson, October 20, 1968, New Arts [Gallery] records, 1952–1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (AAA).
- Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983; repr. 2000).
- For example, see Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (Cambridge, UK, 1989).
- See Thomas Albright et al., *Rolling Renaissance: San Francisco Underground Art in Celebration, 1945–1968*, ed. Intersection and Glide Urban Center (San Francisco, 1968). The "Rolling Renaissance" was conceived in the Bay Area "tradition" as a multidisciplinary "event" including painting, sculpture, dance, films, poetry, music, drama, and photography. The publication consists of contributions by Robert Duncan, James Broughton, Richard Brautigan, Ralph Gleason, Pauline Kael, Knute Stiller, Jim Monte, and Mary Fuller McChesney, among others. Allen Ginsberg welled the common impulse and simultaneity of the San Francisco Renaissance when he said: "The whole point of modern poetry, dance—performance, prose even, music, was the element of improvisation and spontaneity and open form. The development of poetry as well as jazz and painting, seems to be chronologically parallel." Quoted in Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago, 1998), p. 1.
- Robert Duncan, Introduction, *The Years as Catches: First Poems, 1939–1948* (San Francisco, 1966), quoted in Jack Foley, *Visions and Affiliations: A California Literary Time-Line: Poets & Poetry*, quoted in Jack Foley, *Visions and Affiliations: A California Literary Time-Line: Poets & Poetry*, p. 21.
- Bill Berkson, "Factum Fidei: A Walk-Through Apropos the Late Sixties," in Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibitions: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco, 1990), p. 1.

- Hassel Smith and Mary Fuller McChesney, "Sulla scuola di San Francisco," *Evento delle arti 2* (1958), p. 26. This article was published as a retort to Hubert Crehan, "Is There a California School of Painting?" *Art News* 54, no. 9 (January 1955), which itself was a response to Paul Mills's exhibition and symposium, *California School, Yes or No?*, hosted by the Oakland Art Museum (now Museum of California), which contrasted San Francisco Abstract Expressionism with the New York School. Clifford Still, who uncharacteristically participated in this group exhibition willingly (supporting Smith's request to loan his painting, 1948-C, 1948, then in Smith's collection), applauded the museum's effort to accurately record the history of the West Coast movement, writing to Mills, "I look forward to a time when a clarification of the principles I laid down and made this work possible can be established...in fact, the Bay Area, in certain respects and among the few who were informed, anticipated by over nine years both New York and Paris." Clifford Still, letter to Paul Mills, May 6, 1956, Archives of California Art, Oakland Museum of California.
- Hassel Smith, letter to Betty A. Davis, May 19, 1977, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- According to Park's close friend Elmer Blüchhoff, Park took "perverse pleasure" in paintings that were "imposter business" and "kind of corny." Quoted in Paul Mills, *The New Figurative Art of David Park* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 1988), p. 74.
- David Park, quoted in Nan White, "Free-Form Abstractions Stir up Controversy in This Area: Leaders of New School, Various Known as 'Spiritist' and 'Blob,' Tell Theories," *San Francisco News*, March 18, 1950.
- "The Aesthetics of Boredom: Abstract Painting Since 1960" is one of Hunter's chapter headings in Sam Hunter with John Jacobus, *American Art of the 20th Century: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York, 1973; repr. 1984), pp. 372–413.
- Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1965), reprinted in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York, 1982), p. 8.
- The Artist's View* (San Francisco), no. 1 (July 1952), n.p.
- Hassel Smith's, "Excerpts from a letter to friends staying in Italy" (February 1957), quoted in San Francisco Art Association, ed., *Hassel Smith*, exh. brochure, California School of Fine Arts Gallery (San Francisco, 1957), n.p.
- Allan Temko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1954–1975*, San Francisco Museum of Art (San Francisco, 1975), n.p.
- Frank Lobell, quoted in Landauer, *San Francisco School*, p. 142.
- Kevin J. Fernlund, ed., *The Cold War American West, 1945–1969* (Albuquerque, 1990), p. 1.
- See "Fourth Report of the [California Legislature] Senate Fact-finding Committee on Un-American Activities, 1948: Communist-Front Organizations." See Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/reportofsenate04ocalrich> (accessed February 21, 2012).

- 21) Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent, 1955–69* (New York, 1996), p. 32. See also Susan Landauer, "Countering Cultures: The California Connection," in Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 1–21. Though Clement Greenberg's self-acknowledged connection with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom must be recognized as an inherent bias, the article asserted in a late interview that the New York Abstract Expressionists, most of whom he knew personally, did not experience the Red Scare as an issue, claiming that "McCarthy was sounding off in Washington and didn't intrude, so no attention was paid." Greenberg went on to insist that the atomic bomb was even less significant, such that any artist mentioning it "would have been hoisted out of the room," concealing only that "maybe in public they did but among themselves good, bad, that 's'all." Robert Burstow, "An interview with Clement Greenberg," *Price Magazine* 18 (1994), www.france.com/magazine (accessed March 12, 2012). Conversely, the late art historian David Craven argued that the New York School, far from being political, emerged in opposition to corporate capitalism; see his *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge, UK, 1989), and essay, "A Legacy for the Latin American Left: Abstract Expressionism as Anti-Imperialist Art," in Joan Martner, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context* (New Brunswick, N. J., 2007). Martner's collection of essays, which also argues broadly for a political "reading" of Abstract Expressionism, ignores the West Coast branch of the movement other than the work of Clyfford Still, who is identified as a member of the New York School. These New York-centric historians would do well in their effort at positing a political basis for Abstract Expressionism to look into the politically charged work of West Coast Abstract Expressionists like Hassel Smith, Edward Corbett, Robert McChesney, Frank Lobell, Walter Kuhlman, George Stillman, and Ronald Bladen, among others. Marshalling evidence of the New York School's political motivations, David Craven relied heavily on the "unorthodox Marxist" Meyer Schapiro as the movement's true spokesman, but it is hard to imagine any of the San Francisco artists needing to ask, particularly as late as 1957–58, as Schapiro reportedly "searchingly" did: "Are we entering a phase of history in which the economic prevails to such a degree that cultural and politics and personal freedom are altogether secondary?" Craven, *Abstract Expressionism and Critique*, p. 96. Unless he posed the question rhetorically—which is not Craven's interpretation—Schapiro would have been hoisted out of the room in San Francisco. Interestingly, the poets associated with the New York School—John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler—were "deliberately apolitical," according to David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poetry* (New York, 2009).
- 22) The CIA-backed promotion of Abstract Expressionism has been a subject of intense study since the publication of Serge Guilbaut's controversial *How New York Stole the Ideas of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (1982), though it is noted that Guilbaut was not the first to pursue the topic, being preceded by Christopher Lasch (1968), Max Koolof (1973), Eva Cockroft (1974), and David and Cecile Shapiro (1977). Guilbaut's conflation of the artists' intentions and the political uses of their art, and the undermined the piecemeal work for many American art historians, notably Irving Lavin, in his *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Re-evaluation* (New York, 2009), pp. 173–85. However, in the past decade, there has been a vigorous effort to correct Guilbaut's conflation; see Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, and Gregory Gilbert, "Signifying War as Topical Spectacle in Abstract Expressionist Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 27 (2004), pp. 311–37. Bram Dijkstra also argues against pro-American intent but finds significant political neutrality among the New York Abstract Expressionists in *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1929–1980* (New York, 2002), pp. 291–68. For more on the New York-centric consensus of government officials, intellectuals, periodicals, institutions, artists, and writers, and the CIA's manipulation, interpretation, and dissemination of American cultural production, see Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (London, 1989). Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, 1999), based on her slightly earlier *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cold War* (London, 1998); Nancy Jacobs, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism* (Cambridge, UK, 2000); Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and Post-War American Hegemony* (London, 2002); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008). See also Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out: Shells for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill and London, 2005). The list of essays published in Canadian and European periodicals, particularly the *Oxford Art Journal*, is too lengthy to list here, but authors include Francis Francina, Nancy Jacobs, and Louis Battaglia. For the San Francisco context, see David Beasley, *Douglas MacAgy and the Foundations of Modern Art Creativity* (Simcoe, Ontario, 1997), pp. 20–29. The one thing that the above-mentioned historians overwhelmingly agree upon is that the CIA-backed consensus resulted in a financially successful group of New York artists of world renown by the end of the 1950s. There can be little doubt, however, that in its covert and overt activities, formulated and propagated the skewed conception of Abstract Expressionism as an exclusive product of a gifted few in the borders of Manhattan.
- 23) Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, p. 2.
- 24) See Rebecca Solnit's excellent discussion of the differences between the New York and San Francisco scenes in her *Secret Exhibition*, pp. 42–43.
- 25) See Rick Wartzman, *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 2009).
- 26) Oral history interview with Mary Fuller McChesney (by Paul J. Karlstrom), 2011 Mar. 8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 13.
- 27) Oral history interview with Hans Hartung (by Paul J. Karlstrom), 1978 Sept. 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 13.
- 28) For more on the California Labor School, see Mark Dean Johnson, ed., *At Work: The Art of California Labor* (San Francisco, 2003), pp. 49–61.
- 29) Carl Williams, "Artists Run Their Own Gallery—Gulielm's First Show Under Way," *Daily People's World*, August 21, 1946. According to Williams, the Artist's Guild was the only one in San Francisco at the time of his writing that was "operated by artists and solely for the benefit of the artists."
- 30) "The Artists' Guild," *Painting, Photographs, Memorabilia*, review of the exhibition at the Transamerica Pyramid Lobby, *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 9, 1980.
- 31) Henri Lenoir, "Slightly Sketchy," *The Montgomery Street Skylight*, July 1, 1946.
- 32) See "Theodor Adorno and Hans Hahnemann," *The Cultural Critique*, vol. 1, no. 5 (January 1981), p. 10. Lenoir (1944), in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002). The draft of this text was written by Adorno and Horkheimer while living in Los Angeles during World War II, though it was published in German in New York in 1944.
- 33) Corbett produced an illustration, but for reasons unknown it was rejected; Susan Landauer, *Edward Corbett: A Retrospective* (Richmond, Calif., 1990).
- 34) Smith's painting *Peace Workers Unite Democracy* (1947), which depicts a protest, appears to be an anomaly.
- 35) Fuller McChesney/Karlstrom, interview, pp. 40–42.
- 36) See Susan Landauer, *The Lighter Side of Bay Area Figurative* (Kansas City, 2000).
- 37) Lenoir, *Painting, Photographs, Memorabilia*, review of the exhibition at the Transamerica Pyramid Lobby, *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 9, 1980.
- 38) Recalling the late forties, McChesney said, "Hassel was a very strong supporter of women, very strong of women intellectuals and just generally... Mac [her husband Robert McChesney] and Hassel and Corbett had respectful attitudes toward women as their intellectual [and artistic equals]," which she attributed at least in part to their involvement with the Communist Party and its affiliates. Fuller McChesney/Karlstrom, interview.
- 39) It seems perhaps more than plausible that Doda started the sixties craze for topless dancing. See "Carol Doda," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_Doda (accessed February 21, 2012).
- 40) Smith wrote in a letter to "Miss Forbes" of the California School of Fine Arts from Angels Camp that he was planning to submit a painting to be referred to as "Jumping Frog" to whom I am acquainted in Rome competition [letter dated February 14, 1942, Smith artist file, Archives of the American Contemporary Library, San Francisco Art Institute].
- 41) John Bryan, "Dingy Reminder of the Old Embarcadero," *San Francisco Chronicle*, clipping ca. 1964, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 42) See Jack Lovell (with a preface by Benjamin Fulmer), *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco, 1953), which refers to the Black Cat Cafe as "Bohemia's Burlesk Bastion," observing, "THE DICTIONARY says a bohemia is 'one of a class of artists, intellectuals, etc. who have adopted a mode of life in protest against, or indifference to, the common conventions of society.'" Rebels have been flaunting convention at the Black Cat for over twenty years. Any night you can watch genuine artists, intellectuals, and softies boisterously protesting, or being loudly indifferent to each and common social practices as solitary and conversation, rebellious art work lines the littered, smoke-stained walls" (p. 113). In the 1950s the Black Cat was San Francisco's most prominent gay/lesbian straight bar. For information on the Black Cat's iconic place in the history of gay rights, see Susan Stryker and Jin Van Biskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Peninsula* (San Francisco, 1996), pp. 23–25.
- 43) Hassel Smith, untitled typescript document, ca. 1978, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 44) Smith, *The Artist's View*, n.p. Smith here elaborated: "Nothing in Matisse is more distasteful to me than the wall[s] in which women are assigned by him... The women with whom I am acquainted spend very little time among the philodendrons trees."
- 45) Hassel Smith, interview by Paul Mills, October 27, 1961, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 46) Hassel Smith, interview by Joan Martner, September 19, 1978, p. 10. See also interview with Hassel Smith papers, AAA. Smith forgave Elmer Bichsel but apparently not Richard Diebenkorn.
- 47) See Ingrid A. Cartwright, *How slender how wilder: Disoblate Portraits in Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Art* (College Park, Md., 2007), pp. 202–3.
- 48) Donna Smith, conversation with the author, September 27, 2011, Oakland, California.
- 49) Susan Landauer, William H. Gerdts, and Patricia Trenton, *The Not-So-Still Life: A Century of California Painting and Sculpture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003) 103–4.
- 50) Gise Odenberg, quoted in Sidra Stich, *Made in USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, The 50s and '60s*, exh. cat. University Art Museum, Berkeley et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), p. 25.
- 51) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 52) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 53) Pele Edlises, "Hassel Smith—Vitality and Humor," *Daily People's World*, May 10, 1947; Alfred Frankenstein, review, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 1947.
- 54) G. P. Hitchcock, "Annual Drunkenly Abstract," *Montgomery Street Skylight*, November 9, 1945.
- 55) These were the earliest solo museum shows in the US of members of the future New York School, though their work was for the most part semi-figurative and strongly influenced by the cubist-surrealist hybrids of the European émigrés, and not the non-objective Abstract Expressionism for which they would become known. MacAgy's shows included Arakle Gorky (1941), Jackson Pollock (1943), Mark Tobey (1945), Mark Rothko (1946), Hans Hofmann (1946), and Robert Motherwell (1947). I have found no evidence that Smith viewed any of these exhibitions or took interest in these artists at this early date.
- 56) Bartlett H. Hayes, "Art Schools U.S.A.," *Art News* 47, no. 6 (September 1948), pp. 46–47, 60, and William Hall, "School of Art Acquires World Fame," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 11, 1948.
- 57) William Moritz, "Visual Music and Film: An Art Before 1950," in Paul J. Karlstrom, ed., *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900–1950* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 233–34. Moritz writes, "California experimental film and visual music clearly inspired new underground, independent, personal and/or avant-garde work in film in both New York and Europe, including the trip paintings of Jackson Pollock" (p. 230). See also James Brough, "Experimental Film in San Francisco," in Albright et al., *Rolling Renaissance*, pp. 25–26.
- 58) For a comparison between the recognition of Abstract Expressionism on the East and West Coasts, see Landauer, *The Cultural Cold War*, pp. 1–13, and Michael Lega, "The Formation of an Avant-Garde in New York," in Michael Auping et al., *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York, 1987), pp. 13–33.
- 59) Alton Lounsbeth, "San Francisco: Division and Vitality," *New York Times*, October 24, 1948. Foot Weldon Kees would assert in 1950 in the *New York Times* that next to New York, "San Francisco strikes at least this observer... as the liveliest center of art activity in the country today." Singing out Smith along with Willem de Kooning, George Stillman, and Philip Koester as the best of San Francisco's painters, Kees asserts: "Work by any one of these men would set New York's avant-garde seismographs a-quiver." Weldon Kees, "San Francisco Artists Set a Pace," *New York Times*, December 31, 1950.
- 60) Interview by the author with Walter Kuhlman, July 9, 1988, Sausalito, California, and George Stillman, October 5, 1990, Oakland, California.
- 61) Sam Hunter, review of one-man show at Artist's Gallery, *New York Times*, October 30, 1948. Quoted in Susan Landauer, *Grillo: Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years, 1946–1948* (North Truro, Mass., 2000), back cover.
- 62) George Stillman recalled in an interview with the author, July 12, 1988, Oakland, California, "I remember being at an opening one time and Still, myself, and some other people were standing around one of his paintings, when someone said to Still, 'God, that's beautiful.' God, that's beautiful, that's beautiful, a moment and then said, 'It's just another f--- wiper my ass on.' Still never accepted a compliment."
- 63) Clyfford Still, quoted in Thomas Kellein, ed., *Clyfford Still, 1904–1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections* (Munich, 1992), p. 162.
- 64) Still, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 164.
- 65) Still, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 160.
- 66) Still, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 163.
- 67) Kenneth Rexroth, quoted in Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area*, p. 28.
- 68) Motherwell referred to Still as "the most original" Abstract Expressionist, "a shot out of the blue," after seeing his painting in New York. Quoted in Sidney Simon, "Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School, 1939–43: An Interview with Walter Motherwell Conducted in New York in January 1987," *Art International* 11, no. 6 (Summer 1997), p. 23. This was also Greenberg's assessment in 1956; see *Art and Culture*, pp. 222–24.
- 69) Testaments to Still's support of McCarthy leading to his presumed political conservatism first appeared (to the author's regret) in Susan Landauer, "Clyfford Still and Abstract Expressionism in San Francisco," in Kellein, *Clyfford Still, 1904–1980*, pp. 95–94.
- 70) Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 102 and especially pp. 164–67.
- 71) Foley, *Visions and Affiliations*, p. 61.
- 72) *The Art's* first issue included cover art and illustrations provided by Ronald Bladen, a Clyfford Still-inspired CSA student. As poet and novelist Ron Loewenstein has commented, "[M]ore important than the quality of the contents was the fact of these magazines' abundance and speed. Having them, we could see what we were doing, as it came, hot off the griddle." Ron Loewenstein, "After the (Mis-)equation Revolution," in Richard Danner, ed., *Berkeley Deep*, <http://www.lightgrey.org/BD-11-A-M-HTML> (accessed November 3, 2011).
- 73) Foley, *Visions and Affiliations*, p. 53.
- 74) *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 75) *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 76) "Parity of mystique" appears to be post William Everson's term; see Foley, *Visions and Affiliations*, p. 52. According to Allen Ginsberg's biographer, Jonah Raskin, "News of the innovative West Coast poetry readings began to reach New York... [only when Richard] Eberhart's review appeared in the *New York Times* on September 2, 1956. Under the headline 'West Coast Rhythms,' the author noted that San Francisco was the epicenter of a movement of young, radical poets, and that 'the most remarkable poet that had emerged from the movement was Howl.'" Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004), pp. 185–86.
- 77) For more on Smith's impact and the influence more generally of the San Francisco non-objective painters (especially Still) on the San Francisco Renaissance, see Kevin Power, *Where You Art: Poetics and Visual Art* (Berkeley, 2011), pp. 47–67, 115–60.
- 78) Hassel Smith, quoted in Mary Fuller McChesney, *A Period of Exploration: San Francisco 1945–1960*, exh. cat. Oakland Museum (Oakland, 1973), p. 21.
- 79) Hassel Smith, quoted in Tenko, *Hassel Smith*, n.p.
- 80) See Rick Wartzman, *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 2009), pp. 20–29.
- 81) Clyfford Still, letter to Clay Spahn, November 22, 1957, Clay Spahn papers, AAA. There is ample correspondence attesting to the closeness between Still and Smith, as well as to the views they shared about the art world in the letters from Still to Smith in the Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 82) Mark Harrington, conversation with the author, September 27, 2011, Oakland, California.
- 83) Smith, "Interview by Paul Mills," n.p.
- 84) David Anfan, "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead," in James T. Demetree, ed., *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944–1960*. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (New Haven and London, 2001), p. 22; see also Chronology, p. 162.
- 85) Kevin Power, "A Conversation with Hassel Smith," *Arts Review* (London) (ca. 1977), pp. 313–14, clipping in Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 86) David Beasley, *Understanding Modern Art: the Boundless Spirit of Clay Edgar Spohn* (Simcoe, Ontario, 1999), p. 59.
- 87) Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2010), p. 129.
- 88) *Ibid.*
- 89) Tenko, *Hassel Smith*, n.p.
- 90) For more on this parody, see Landauer, "Clyfford Still and Abstract Expressionism," pp. 99–100.
- 91) George Donders, quoted in Karlstrom, *On the Edge of America*, p. 78.
- 92) Eric Loran, "San Francisco," *Art News* (September 1940), p. 45.
- 93) Bits Hayden, "Two Exhibits which Show the Dilemma of Modern Art," undated clipping, ca. 1948, Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 94) Jess, interview with the author at the artist's home, San Francisco, April 28, 1989.
- 95) Landauer, *San Francisco School*, p. 18.
- 96) *Ibid.*, p. 137; see also Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Coast to Coast," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 1953.
- 97) According to Diebenkorn, "There was one that looked kind like the inside of a radio set with tubes." Sandra Leonard Starr, ed., *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, exh. cat. James Corcoran Gallery et al. (Los Angeles, 1988), p. 67.
- 98) "The Fourth Deadly Sin," *Art News* (September 1940), p. 45.
- 99) Hassel Smith, interview with Meredith Tromble, *Artsweek* (1992), p. 14, clipping in Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 100) Seymour Locks, quoted in Seymour Howard et al., *The Beat Generation Galleries and Beyond* (Davis, Calif., 1996), p. 35.
- 101) Smith, "Art in Action," *The Artist's View*, n.p.
- 102) For differing accounts of this event, and a photo of the San Francisco Collective Expressionists' "happening" December 1, 1957, also at the Six Gallery, see Howard et al., *Beat Generation Galleries*, pp. 87–89. Michael McClure, in a conversation with the author, November 1, 2011, Oakland, California, was reluctant to go on record with his memory of the "juno acting," which he recalled was a response to Ginsberg's reading of *Howl* in 1955. He thought the event might have been called "Six Stray Cats," and may have included three anarchist poets—Bob Stock, Michael Fried, and Bill Margolis—but not Kerouac or Ginsberg.
- 103) Still, the handwritten inscription (presumably Smith's) on the back of a photograph of the artwork in the Smith papers, AAA.
- 104) Wally Hedrick, interview by Mary Kerr, February 4, 1996, www.wallyhedrick.com/images/links/headricking.html (accessed March 3, 2012), p. 15. Some of these "happenings" may have taken place at the annual California parties Hedrick and DeLo hosted in their Fillmore Street apartment.
- 105) Starr, *Lost and Found*, p. 16.
- 106) California In-American Activities Committee (CUAC) file on Hassel Smith, California State Library, Sacramento.
- 107) Smith, quoted in Starr, *Lost and Found*, p. 86.
- 108) Raskin, *American Scream*, pp. 4, 6.
- 109) "Fourth Report of the California Senate," p. 69.
- 110) Starr, *Lost and Found*, p. 100.
- 111) Hassel Smith, letter to Edward Corbett, ca. 1952, Edward Corbett papers, AAA, reel 4377.
- 112) Landauer, *San Francisco School*, p. 239 n85.
- 113) Madeleine Dimond's paintings probably came the closest stylistically to Smith's. Dimond's husband Peter Martin co-founded City Lights Bookstore in 1953 with Lawrence Ferlinghetti.
- 114) Sonia Gheffro recently recalled of Smith's "lecture series," "It was a way to get to know more of the artists, like how a social thing than anything else, and Hassel was the biggest yacker imaginable, you know, talk, talk, talk. A really bright man and very well read, probably much better than the rest of us up there, and he was very political, too. It was a wide-open discussion, people would come and go, and it wasn't a class... It was just a place, as far as I was concerned, to go and be with other fellow painters, and listen to Hassel going on. If you admired him, you thought it was great and if you didn't, you didn't go again." She remembers that her husband, James Kelly, a veteran two years older than Smith, initially considered the school "a crock of shit," though, presumably at Gheffro's prodding, he became a regular and often exhibited with the group. Sonia Gheffro, interview by Marshall N. Price (2006), in *Sonia Gheffro: The First Years*, exh. cat. Nyxhaus (New York, 2011), p. 10.
- 115) Rebecca Solnit, "Fillmore: The Beats in the Western Addition," *FoundSF*, http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Fillmore:_The_Beats_in_the_Western_Addition (accessed March 3, 2012). Solnit describes the Western Addition more generally as "the Hartom of the West, with its largely African American nightclubs, bars, theaters and more fostering a dynamic cultural life."
- 116) According to Jonah Raskin, Ginsberg "described San Francisco just before the Beat Revolution of the mid-1950s as 'terribly straight-lined and provincial,' though he also noted that there were 'islands of freedom' and a 'whole underground culture that went unnoticed by the city at large.' When Ginsberg arrived in San Francisco in 1954, he couldn't help but be invigorated by the underground cast of characters—the hipsters, bohemians, pacifists, artists, anarchists, mystics, homosexuals, and lesbians. Some were natives, and some—like Chicago-born writer Kenneth Rexroth—were in self-proclaimed exile from cities all across America." Raskin, *American Scream*, pp. 124–25.
- 117) See Starr, *Lost and Found*, pp. 105–6.
- 118) "Leaky Bruce," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenny_Bruce (accessed February 23, 2012).
- 119) Christopher Wagstaff, *An Art of Wondering: The King Uly Gallery, 1852–1853*, exh. cat. Natonsulas (New York, 2009).
- 120) Novolvo Gallery (Davis, Calif., 1989), p. 29.
- 121) Joan Brown's show is recollectied by Wally Hedrick but otherwise undocumented as far as I know. See interview of Hedrick by Mary Kerr, p. 6.
- 122) For reminiscences of The Place and the San Francisco Renaissance generally before the onslaught of the beatniks, see Jack Ladd, *Life's Place* (Sageberg, Denmark, 1998).
- 123) Herb Caen's column appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on April 2, 1958. The Soviet Union's *Sputnik 1* was the first artificial satellite to orbit the earth, igniting the "sp Sputnik crisis" that launched the US-Soviet space race.
- 124) Raskin, *American Scream*, p. 202.
- 125) David M. Fine and Paul Skensay, *San Francisco in Fiction: Essays in Regional Literature* (Albuquerque, 1989), pp. 126–27.
- 126) *Ibid.*, p. 82. See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford, 2011), p. 82. Hale calls 1959 "the year of the beatnik" for among other reasons. *Life* magazine "publicized the Beat rebellion even as it blasted the lifestyle in an article entitled, 'The Only Rebellion Around.' But the Shabby Beats Dangle the Job in Arguing, Salking and Bad Poetry." She also notes that Dohrn Gillis premiered on television as the beatnik character Maynard G. Kresley.
- 127) Kenneth Rexroth, "New Forms of Art and Culture," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 7, 1960.
- 128) Hassel Smith, response to questions for publication of interview with Kevin Power, n.d. (ca. 1977–80), Hassel Smith papers, AAA.
- 129) Hassel Smith, quoted in Starr, *Lost and Found*, p. 101.
- 130) Jan Butterfield, quoting Walter Hops, in an interview with Hassel Smith, ca. 1978, Hassel Smith papers, AAA, reel 2008.
- 131) H. Smith/Karlstrom, interview, n.p.
- 132) Leo Krikorian, a painter and former student of Black Mountain College, opened The Place in 1953, so the date of "Common Art Accumulations" could not have been 1951, as the literature on California modernism's trip ascertains.
- 133) It appears from documentary evidence such as checklists, announcements, and reviews that Smith had solo shows at the Dixon in 1958, 1962, 1964, and 1965, and that even though he was working mostly figuratively by the mid-sixties, his last two shows were devoted exclusively to abstract work.
- 134) Significant evidence of Smith's famous use of the title, *No Return*, was provided by Smith's use of the same title in 1955.
- 135) John Fitz Gibbon, *The Pilot Hill Collection of Contemporary Art*, Crocker Art Museum (Sacramento, 2003), p. 124.
- 136) Tenko, "Hesti! Rent! Paintings, Photographs, Memorabilia," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 9, 1980.
- 137) For more on the "beat paintings," see Landauer, *San Francisco School*, p. 136.
- 138) Walker Hops, *Hassel Smith: A Selection of Paintings, 1949–1961*, exh. cat. Pasadena Art Museum (Pasadena, Calif., 1961), p. 9.
- 139) Mark Rothko, quoted in James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago, 1993), p. 484.
- 140) Quoted in Ronald Bergoffen, "The 'Art World' of the 1950s," *Artforum* 29, no. 5 (January 1991), p. 97.
- 141) Clay Spahn, quoted in Susan Landauer, "Painting Under the Shadow: California Modernism and the Second World War," in Karlstrom, *On the Edge of America*, p. 53.
- 142) Peter F. Rank, exh. cat. University Art Museum (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 4–5.
- 143) Hassel Smith, quoted in Tenko, *Hassel Smith*, n.p.
- 144) Clyfford Still, quoted in Landauer, *San Francisco School*, p. 75.