HASSEL SMITH AND THE STRUCTURE OF ABSTRACT PAINTING

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While visiting Antoni Gaudí's Casa Milà in Barcelona in the spring of 2010, I saw an exhibition of work by the late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century artist Mariano Fortuny Madrazo (1871–1949), who, in addition to painting and drawing, worked as a set designer and later became a highly successful costume and textile designer. Although born in Granada, most of Fortuny's mature creative output was accomplished in Venice. Considered by the social elite of his time as "the alchemist of Venice," Fortuny was credited with saying, "Art is the goal of my life."[1] The extraordinary bravura of Fortuny's remark might be compared with the frequently quoted comment over a half-century later by Hassel Smith: "My paintings are intended to be additions to rather than reflections of or upon life." Whereas Fortuny was in the thick of Art Nouveau affectation, Hassel Smith exuded a certain distance in painting, a definitive 1950s "California cool," among his followers in San Francisco. In fact, Smith's quote may well serve as an appropriate antidote to Fortuny's early modernist conceit. While I detect a certain structural connection between the two artists who come from two different historical times, cultures, and places, there is a certain quality of line and tension shared in their early drawings. Hassel Smith undoubtedly acquired this from Maurice Sterne, his teacher at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1936, while Fortuny's line was given to a more aristocratic apprenticeship.[2] Other than their affinity for drawing, there is virtually no further mediumistic connection between their respective works, except for the fluid, occasionally quirky mannerisms in the way they worked, each in their own separate mediums. Just as admirers in Venice once touted Fortuny during the heyday of Art Nouveau, we might identify Hassel Smith as "the alchemist of San Francisco" at a later time, during the origins of Bay Area abstract painting at the conclusion of World War II.

Whether from the ranks of museums, galleries, art history, or art criticism, devotees of Hassel Smith's paintings over the years have articulated that while the artist was exemplary in every way, he was also unpredictable and thus difficult to categorize in relation to a single movement or style. Some observed that his personality was not suited to working against what he believed he should do, that he was suspicious of trends, and reticent to follow the media hype. Smith spent a good portion of his career working against the possibility of being put in a box or given a label that conformed to existing art-world categories. Rather than compartmentalization, he leaned in the direction of freedom and openness through anaesthetic vigilance that moved in opposition to conformity and against the practice of institutional stylization.

In contrast to many of his colleagues, Smith was not the kind of artist who would continue to live and work in one place. While during his early career he could work equally as well in urban and rural settings, in his later career he was perfectly comfortable splitting his time between California and the west of England. Even so, he never removed himself entirely from the San Francisco Bay Area or his early attachments to the California School of Fine Arts. Years after he had studied and taught there, Smith would frequently return to what had later become the San Francisco Art Institute (where he eventually received an honorary degree in 1991). Many who knew Hassel Smith, or who examined the precision of his work, or who read the plethora of interviews, essays, letters, notes, and related documents related to the artist's career, will understand that he was a pioneering abstract painter.

63 // **UNTITLED**, 1950
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in. (137.2 x 137.2 cm)
Collection Jonathan Parker

Although the professed interest of this essay focuses on Hassel Smith's gestural abstract work, he was equally committed to representation, as he was to non-gestural forms of concrete abstraction that evolved in 1969 through the early eighties. With each of these genres, he worked with utter confidence and agility, believing—as did Gorky—that a true modernist should participate in more than a single mode of expression. From his first significant introduction to abstract painting in the late forties, he continued to advocate connections between various diverse forms, even as his colleagues would eventually abandon one for the other. Yet despite his occasional pluralist reckonings, especially in the eighties, Smith was as far removed from postmodernism as any painter could be. His manner of speaking was neither ironical nor detached. He championed the sincerity of intent in a painter's work more than style or the choice of subject matter. His paintings from mid-century to the veritable cusp of the twenty-first century reveal nothing less than the pursuit of an artist whose career signified an overwhelming apologia in defense of modernist painting, verging on aesthetic necessity.

In reading through various essays and statements available on the work and temperament of Hassel Smith, one may be curious as to how his relatively diverse paintings could transmit such a powerful effect on so many artists, critics, and admirers. Was it simply the structural idea—the manner in which the artist handled the paint, the space, and the color—or was it the formal mechanism that enabled the content of his work to emerge? In *Untitled*, 1950 (fig. 63)—painted during a key year in Smith's development toward a Chromatic Expressionist style—the dominant pink field is pushed against the ragged edges of neighboring hues, opening up variations within color, combining surface tension in association with variations of texture. Similarly, in *Tiptoe Down to Art* (p. 125), also from 1950, Smith works with a dominant orange in relation to black and white shapes, creating coherent balance through a clear juxtaposition of the variant forms. In each case, the organization of the picture plane retains aspects of an earlier work, *Alone With the Killer*, 1948 (fig. 37), in which dominant yellow and black shapes suggest a European style of composition. As one of Smith's earliest serious abstractions, *Alone With the Killer* is more related to Miró than to the open fields iterated in the fifties works by the New York Chromatic Expressionists, namely Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt, and Still.[3]

Smith's signature brushwork in the early abstract paintings suggests a process of searching for a solution rather than simply accommodating a style. These paintings relied largely on the artist's ability to alter pictorial space through color as a means toward heightening the expressive content. I concur with the critic Allan Temko in an essay written for Smith's survey exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1975, where he suggests that Smith was never seduced by mediocrity or the kind of "mindlessness" often associated with the stylization of much Bay Area gestural-style painting from the late fifties into the early sixties.[4] One reason for this, I would further argue, was that Smith's sense of intimacy as a painter was inextricably bound to the act of painting. His manner of painting was a discreetly private affair and thus separates his point of departure from that of other colleagues, including those associated with "The School" in the Bay Area, including some of the painters connected with the "second generation" of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Whereas reclusion and self-determination were not necessarily in contradiction among leading abstract painters in San Francisco, painters such as Richard Diebenkorn (at the time, still on the verge between figuration and abstraction), Frank Lobdell, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, and Ernest Briggs, more attention was paid to media deliberations in New York, where in certain utterances stylistic consistency held sway over individual artistic intentions, particularly if those intentions failed to conform to the secularity of urban culture expected by the great metropolis where these pressures prevailed.

My first occasion to see the abstract paintings of Hassel Smith occurred at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1968. I recall his abstract gestural paintings vividly—with great verse and sensuality, also with a defiant attitude toward structure. At the time of this exhibition, Smith was still considered a Bay Area painter despite his residence in Bristol, England.

Much later, after seeing these paintings, I became aware of the artist's eclectic and itinerant lifestyle and his shifting of styles, ranging from realism to gestural abstraction, then back to a looser style of figuration. (At the time, he had not yet embarked on his concrete hard-edge paintings, which began within a year after the Santa Barbara exhibition.) Smith's early approach to abstract painting began in the late forties while teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, then under the inspired leadership of Douglas MacAgy. Smith's *Untitled #100* (1949) was one of the artist's first successful all-over compositions, arguably indebted at the time to the work of visiting East Coast painter, Clyfford Still. There was little doubt that Still's exhibition at the California Legion of Honor (1947) awakened Smith to the possibility of making large-scale chromatic abstract painting.[5]

In *Untitled* (1949), Smith reveals his propensity for working with light and dark tones. Ironically this painting suggests an aggressive manner of seeking form that would eventually become uniquely his own. In *Untitled* (1949), his visceral pursuit of focusing on a shifting center of interest becomes evident as he makes clear his interest in building and rebuilding a surface in order to avoid preconceived notions of form. This way of working distanced him from the prescribed orientations employed by painters both in San Francisco and in New York. Even so, throughout this period, some paintings appeared paradoxically upfront and distant, even strangely hesitant at times, while in others, such as *The Little Big Horn*, 1952–53 (p. 121), an inexorable confidence rings apparent, perpetually on the crest of some preconscious mystery, filled to the brim with excessive energy. The tensions within the field of this painting may refer to the defeat of General Custer under the brilliant military tactics of the Lakota warrior Crazy Horse at the Little Big Horn in South Dakota, 1876. In addition to his passion for painting, Smith retained an equally determined commitment to teaching and theory, which made him a popular teacher in the numerous schools where he taught.

There are three definitive periods during Smith's career when he broke from representation in painting into an extended exploration of a new abstract language. The first began with a series of Abstract Expressionist paintings that began in the late forties and that continued to evolve throughout the fifties into the early sixties. The second was a series of geometric canvases, which he called "measured paintings," that evolved in the late sixties and continued into the early eighties. In these paintings, Smith employed a Constructivist technique of hard-edge shapes and lines in various colors, working in acrylic instead of oil, with compass, ruler, and T-square. Some have chosen to interpret these paintings as being influenced by the Russian avant-garde painters of several decades earlier, which in Smith's case was entirely possible. These pristine geometric-style paintings began within three years after he had accepted a prestigious teaching lectureship in Bristol, which continued strong through 1980. The third was his heroic return to Abstract Expressionism in the mid-eighties through 1997 with a stylistic touch that appears lighter, without the density of layering used in the earlier paintings made during his teaching years at the California School of Fine Arts.

On a theoretical level, I understand the paintings of Hassel Smith from a structural point of view, that is, a clearly defined and impassioned investigation into the language of modernist aesthetics. In the fourth section of the *Tractatus* (1922) the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein states, "Form is the possibility of structure."[6] The use of the term "structure" refers to the manner of ordering the parts of language that constitute the whole. The implication is that form functions as a kind of resolution that transmits meaning. Thus, form is dependent on structure as structure is the prerequisite for form. In applying this proposition to the paintings of Hassel Smith, I am suggesting that the artist conceived the parts of a painting as a means to speculate their transformation into form. This does not dismiss the role of intuition, but only further intensifies its necessity. In contrast to being an absolute—in that Wittgenstein considered his writings propositional, not final—I would further emphasize the process of what was happening in the painting at each interval along the way. Each painting constituted its own structural challenge independent of the resolutions of form realized in other paintings.

In terms of Hassel Smith, I understand a kind of matrix between the diverse sequence of his development as a painter and the synchronic formal elements that cross over and pull these elements together. When seen from this perspective, his abstract paintings, particularly from his "measured" period (1969–85), offer several examples. In such works as *Untitled* (1975), a near quadrilateral optically filled with dots spread over an orange field; or *Untitled* of 1979 (fig. 64), in which the surface is developed in yellow, orange, red, velvet, and blue discs; and still later in 1983, in a painting titled *I Hear You Knocking, but You Can't Come In* (p. 179) (based on a rock-and-roll hit from three decades earlier), Smith positions the red, gray, and yellow discs between two vertical stripes. Whatever style, color, composition, or subject matter he selects, the elements collectively become essential to his structural matrix. This notion obviously evolved over time through Smith's acute visual investigations as he consistently moved from structure into form, seemingly with greater incisiveness as he advanced from one period to another.

64 // **UNTITLED,** 1979
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

This unlikely dialectical approach came much later, most likely after his resignation from the California School of Fine Arts in 1952. Despite what may have been perceived as a setback at the time, his resignation, along with other painters on the faculty, may have proved beneficial to Smith on two counts: one, by leaving "The School" it allowed Smith to relinquish his academic dependence on figuration, which was not only reinforced in the presence of his teaching colleagues, but was possibly still linked to memories of his apprenticeship with Maurice Sterne; and two, it afforded Smith the opportunity to liberate his recent direction in abstract painting from the formalist grip of Clyfford Still and proceed forward on his own terms. Within a year after Smith's move to Sebastopol (where he built a studio in 1953), his confidence as an abstract painter becomes evident. Here he lived and worked for nearly a decade, completing such extraordinary paintings as *Untitled* (1958)—balancing a sequence of meticulously floating organic forms within an open gray field—recently shown at the David Nolan Gallery in New York in *Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction, 1946–1963*, in early 2011. One solidly impressive aspect of this painting—along with others from this period, including *Untitled #14*, 1960 (p. 133), and *Untitled* (1963)—is the completeness that resides within the parameters of the surface. Although the transfiguration of these elements derives from the gestural sweep against the surface, the final completion holds a tension resolved through a sense of stillness unique in the history of Abstract Expressionism, whether from San Francisco or New York. Between 1953 and 1964, during a part of which he resided and painted in England, Smith had several important exhibitions that extended beyond the Bay Area to prestigious galleries in Los Angeles (Ferus Gallery), Houston (The New Arts Gallery), New York (André Emmerich Gallery), Milan (Galleria dell'Ariete), and London (Gimpel Fils). In addition, Smith found both a significant critical response and marketing attention given to his work, even though he primarily pursued a style of abstract gestural painting.

65 // **UNTITLED,** 1963
Oil on canvas, 68 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm)
Location unknown

Smith was perpetually expanding his point of view as a painter, enlarging his creative potential and evolution, rather than trying to pull everything into a neat bundle. The decision to move between styles, as evidenced throughout the decade of the sixties, implies that Smith was less interested in the kind of signature style pursued by his Bay Area colleagues. Smith never agreed to paint in a single uniform direction or from a consistent point of view until the latter phase of the artist's career, while living and working in his Rode studio, near Somerset, England, which may, in retrospect, prove to be his monumental achievement. His passion to paint abstractly—whether gestural or hard-edge constructivism—does not discount the figurative impulse within the lines and contours of Smith's paintings that Walter Hopps discerned in his catalogue essay for the Pasadena Museum in 1961.[7] Professor Peter Selz reaffirmed this in a catalogue essay written for an exhibition at the Sonoma

Museum in 2002.[8] Nonetheless, prior to the late abstract period beginning in the mid-eighties, one may receive the impression that Hassel Smith struggled to define a larger domain for painting—a material, spiritual, and political network of paradoxes that Smith irascibly pronounced, initiated more than three decades earlier with his “Theories of Non-Objective Painting” course at the California School.[9] Even then, Smith believed that he could exist as a painter outside and apart from the critical deliberations put forth either in Clement Greenberg’s “formalism” or Harold Rosenberg’s “Action Painting.” This was the dialogue that identified the New York School of the fifties. In viewing the abstract paintings of Smith, we may arrive at a means to identify the artist’s inner-directed intonations as related to his structural propensity toward abstraction for which his work is largely, but not solely, known today.

Whatever subject matter he chose to paint, Smith transformed it formally and alchemically into something unbeknownst to his contemporaries. This is to suggest that painting for Smith took on the quality of alchemy—as cited earlier in this essay and, to some extent, in the metallurgical discourse of art historian James Elkins—as a painter who studied his surfaces and applied his pigments with great care and discretion.[10] Nowhere is this near mystical quality more evident than in *2 To The Moon*, 1961 (p. 137), an early abstract work now owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This is a painting composed of aggregates that involve a sense of startling brushwork that emanates from the right side of the painting against a bright yellow field caught within a quadrilateral. To this degree, the critic John Coplans once spoke of “the extreme manner … in which Smith develops the tension at the edge of the canvas … none of the Eastern painters, and that goes for Gorky, de Kooning and even Kline, developed it to quite the same extent.”[11]

66 // **UNTITLED,** 1996
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in. (137.2 x 137.2 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

Although Smith’s color had managed to retain a unique aspect, he became increasingly more interested in discovering fresh ways to employ his brush, as made evident in later paintings such as *Untitled*, 1996 (fig. 66), using broad swaths of umber, black, and white, and *Pigmentality*, 1997 (fig. 67), in which primary shapes and brilliant colors push outside the picture plane using a dialectical manner that is truly innovative, exhalative, and forthright. The sense of painterly virtuosity and completeness within these works does not sacrifice the gesture. It simply articulates the hand of a master painter—an alchemist in painting to the nth degree. In his late period, he pushes further then ever before with clarity and elasticity, with eloquent restraint and “emptiness,” as the structure of his work evolved into something previously unseen in the history of American painting.

67 // **PIGMENTALITY,** 1997
Acrylic on canvas, 34½ x 68½ in. (87.6 x 173.4 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

1) *Mariano Fortuny Madrazo: The Alchemist of Venice*, La Pedrera de Caixa Catalunya, Casa Milà, Barcelona, March 14 – May 9, 2010.
2) Oral history interview with Hassel Smith [by Paul J. Karlstrom], 1978 Sept. 5, 1978, pp. 7–8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
3) These artists were visiting instructors at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, then under the leadership of Douglas MacAgy (1945–52). By coincidence, they all represented the chromatic aspect of Abstract Expressionism in contrast to the gestural painters, i.e., Kline, De Kooning, Pollock, and Motherwell. Barbara Rose made this distinction in *American Art Since 1900* (New York, 1965), with the exception of Still, whom she places between the two.
4) Allan Temko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1954–1975*, exh. cat. San Francisco Museum of Art (San Francisco, 1975).
5) Regarding Clyfford Still, Hassel Smith says, “Well, I’ve said this many times and I’ll say it again: his influence on me was very great.” H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview, p. 17.
6) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York, 1922).
7) *Hassel Smith: A Selection of Painting, 1948–1961*, ed. and introduction by Walter Hopps, exh. cat. Pasadena Art Museum (Pasadena, Calif., 1961).
8) *Hassel Smith: 55 Years of Painting*, ed. and text by Peter Selz, exh. cat. Sonoma County Museum (Santa Rosa, Calif., 2002).
9) During a recent discussion at Nyehaus gallery in New York (October 29, 2011), Sonia Gechtoff, a former student at the school, shared her recollections of Hassel Smith as a rather strong-willed, pedantic, yet unforgettable and impressionable teacher.
10) James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York, 2000).
11) John Coplans, “Re-Discovering Hassel Smith,” *Artforum* 2, no. 11 (May 1964), pp. 28–31.