THE FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS OF HASSEL SMITH

Peter Selz

Throughout his long career as an authentic painter, Hassel Smith interspersed abstract and figurative painting. In fact, figurative elements can be detected in many of his abstract canvases, while rapid line and energetic gesture, essential aspects of Action Painting, prevail in his figurative work.

During the ascendancy of American painting in the post-World War II era, abstraction was the dominant mode. But Willem de Kooning refused to accept a separation between these two modes of painting. In 1950, the year of his signal non-objective painting, his *Excavation*, he also produced his "paintings on the theme of women." When he exhibited these at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953, a cry of "Betrayal!" was heard in New York. A similar resentment was felt in San Francisco at the same time when David Park, followed by Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn, returned to figurative painting. This Hassel Smith regarded as "a violent turn backward … a failure of nerve."[1] It was the Clyfford Still show at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1947 that he considered a "revelation," which was instrumental in turning Smith toward abstraction, and soon Hassel created canvases that the critic Allan Temko called his "thunderbolt" period.[2] For some time after that experience, Smith avoided recognizable images and he became a leading artist of West Coast Abstract Expressionism. When Douglas MacAgy took over as the brilliant helmsman of the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in 1945, soon to be joined by Clyfford Still's dominant presence, San Francisco became a center of Abstract Expressionism. The school's faculty and its mature students on the GI Bill were first-rate painters who worked in this progressive style, which in New York was chauvinistically called "The Triumph of American Painting."[3] During these critical years, there was no room for representative painting. A mural that, in 1930, Diego Rivera had painted on a large wall of the school, and which represented the construction of a building, was covered up. "It's got Rivera's big fat bottom hanging out over the scaffolding and it's really not very edifying, so one of the first things MacAgy did was to cover it up … I guess there was something symbolic about it."[4] Out with the old, in with the new.

An aesthetics of spontaneity was essential to Action Paintings on both coasts, "but San Francisco art was less encumbered than New York with historic reference … it had less art-culture to build on … their work was wilder, less refined, less organized, less intellectual, less concerned with Surrealist metaphor. It was more sensual, more organic, more directed toward nature, which after all was in much closer proximity."[5] It must be added that there was no operative art market in the Bay Area, leaving the artists free to do as they liked, and Hassel Smith went through a long process of maturation to become one of the great protagonists of West Coast Action Painting.

51 // **THE CLOWN,** 1938
Lithograph on paper, 19 x 7¼ in. (48.3 x 18.4 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

Unlike many of his colleagues, Hassel Smith was well informed not only about modern art, but also about art's history, especially the painting of the Italian Renaissance. At Northwestern University he studied art history and English literature as well as chemistry and became proficient in the sciences as well as the humanities. His study of chemistry became important to him later in his career when he experimented with the newly emerging acrylic pants of both dry and liquid states to achieve the desired brilliant translucent colors. Of decisive importance during his years at Northwestern were his visits to the great collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. The experiences of studying the paintings at that Museum, as well as watching a dance performance by the Diaghilev Company of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, gave him unforgettable experiences about the power of art. There was also his visit to the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago, where he was introduced to the work of Cezanne, Picasso, Mondrian, and other modern painters. Prior to that he had been exposed to Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish as contemporary American artists.[6] In 1937 Smith graduated cum laude from Northwestern; he was awarded a scholarship for graduate study in the history of art at Princeton University. This did not come about, but, in his later teaching, there were frequent knowledgeable references to the old and modern masters.[7]

In the summer of 1937 he enrolled in summer classes in painting at the California School of Fine Arts and, having studied with Maurice Sterne, he decided to devote himself to drawing and painting, forsaking academic research. At the school he was admitted to Sterne's elite painting and drawing class and Hassel frequently spoke of Sterne, "whose approach to drawing from the model (nature) was a revelation."[8] Sterne, born in Latvia, studied in Moscow and New York, and though he was recognized as an important artist in his lifetime, seems to have been forgotten. But in 1930, he, together with Burchfield, Demuth, Feininger, Marin, and O'Keefe, was included in the Museum of Modern Art's first exhibition of American painters,[9] and three years later he was honored by MoMA's "first retrospective for an American artist." In an article in *The New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford called him "one of the most distinguished painters of his generation."[10] His painting can be characterized as conforming to the Renaissance tradition, perorated by his study of Cezanne. Smith recalled many years later, "I have no hesitation in saying that, to whatever extent my intellect has been engaged in the joys and mysteries of transferring visual observation in three dimensions into meaningful two dimensional marks and shapes I owe to Sterne."[11]

52 // **SELF-PORTRAIT,** 1944
Pastel and watercolor on paper, 17¾ x 12 in. (45.1 x 30.5 cm)
Collection Charles Strong

At the time he left the California School, he created a highly original lithograph on graphite paper: *The Clown*, 1938 (fig. 51). Rendered in velvety blacks, it is a dramatic image of a figure in a clown's funny hat and facing his audience with a mysterious object in his hand. During the late thirties and early forties, Smith, using a loaded brush, produced a series of impressionist plein-air paintings of the Bay Area landscape. It is clear that from the very beginning, the facture, the physical act of painting, was of paramount importance to Smith.

In 1941 he received the Abraham Rosenberg Foundation Traveling Fellowship from the San Francisco Art Association to go to Angels Camp in the Mother Lode of the Sierra foothills, where he produced drawings and paintings of the California landscape. He then got a job with FDR's Farm Security Administration's Migratory Labor Program, working first in Bakersfield and then at Arvin, close to the desert. There he depicted the life of the jobless, disenfranchised farm workers. He made a series of pencil drawings—realistic and compassionate—of the fieldworkers. He made compelling drawings depicting men and women picking cotton and other crops and carrying heavy loads. These trenchant drawings have the kind of straightforward quality that also appears in the work of the FSA photographers, notably Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, and Ben Shahn. Right-wing politics intervened, however, and in 1943 the FSA, called "un-American" and "bureaucracy gone mad" by Republicans, was voted out of existence. Smith's drawings, mostly done on the spot, avoided the political program of the Social Realist painters. He never considered his work as "message," political or aesthetic, and was always preoccupied with the physical act of seeing his objects and making pictures.

53 // **PEACE WORKERS UNITE DEMOCRACY,** 1947
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

After Congress phased out the FSA, Hassel was transferred to the Forest Service, worked as a timber scaler in Oregon, and produced an early *Self-Portrait*, 1944 (fig. 52), a gouache on paper, painted with a quick brush on a sheet of paper. In this, the first of many self-portraits, Hassel, wearing a farmer's hat, looks at the viewer with bold self-assurance through small but watchful eyes.

The critic Allan Temko was correct in writing that "it is an error to assume, as Peter Plagens has, that he was some sort of rudimentary 'social realist.' For Smith's humor is too irrepressible, his sense of the abstract too acute, and his appreciation for Dada and Surrealism—especially their political connotations—too keen for him to have settled for crude social cartooning."[12] His life among the indigent farm workers turned the artist, born to an upper-middle-class family, into an intrepid member of the Communist Party, but he did not want to make paintings with a direct political program. This would explain his dislike for the great cycle of murals in San Francisco's Coit Tower, done by excellent painters under the PWAP (the precursor of the WPA), which adapted Diego Rivera's style to the landscape, industry, and radical politics of California. For Hassel Smith, however, art was a matter of indeterminate contingency. He would even have agreed with Arshile Gorky, who called Social Realism "poor art for poor people."[13] Like his older contemporary Stuart Davis, who combined radical politics with radical modernist painting, and in line with the earlier artists of the Russian avant-garde, he felt that radical art could be part of revolutionary social transformation without engaging in polemics. When the occasion called for it, Smith would produce a painting like *Peace Workers Unite Democracy*, 1947 (fig. 53), which depicts a large crowd of faces demonstrating in front of a very red factory, with a woman holding a large poster: "Peace Workers Unite Democracy." A year later he made a linocut illustration for a 1948 edition of the *Communist Manifesto*.[14] All throughout the forties and fifties he produced collages that make us think of the Merz collages Kurt Schwitters produced in Germany in the 1920s, yet there is no indication that Hassel was familiar with these Dadaist canvases. Smith's collages often had political implications. There is, for example, an oil and collage (fig. 54), done in 1945, in which a large man's head, seen from the back, looks at newspaper clippings referring to a fleet of B-29s firebombing the large Japanese city of Nagasaki that year. The word "peace" in very large letters appears in a 1955 collage and clipped words such as "victory," "jail and gallows," "victory peace," "power," and "Shall Americans die in Asia" in his collage called *WOW!* of 1959 (fig. 47). Smith clearly preferred newspaper clippings rather than his own brushes to send his signals.

54 // **COMPOSITION COLLAGE NOIR,** 1945
Oil and paper on canvas, 20 x 18½ in. (50.8 x 47 cm)
Collection Patrick Sheahan and Shirley Betz

But words continue to be part of his pictorial realm. There is a large painting from the forties, *Untitled*, 1943 (fig. 26), which combines a large cocktail glass, a small painting, a car, and a clipping reading "Wheat Toast" in large letters pasted onto the canvas. In 1945 he made a painting in which the letters "FASHIONS" are spelled out next to a mannequin with no head and a dull-witted man standing on the side (fig. 59).

For several years prior to his conversion to abstraction, Smith continued to produce narrative painting, observing people at work, at play, driving, sitting, and walking around aimlessly. He made a painting of a tired truck driver leaning against a counter, with a huge water cooler at his side and yellow and red trucks behind him, or a painting he named *The Vanishing Indian*, 1947 (p. 93), an agitated hodgepodge with the dismembered face of an Indian looking at a messy cluster of unrelated and confusing images. The Indian's head is located above an assertive red sports car. On the upper right we see a recumbent naked girl on top of a large bus and a very big ice cream scoop with a sign of the cross on its cone. In the upper center are the Stars and Stripes. Yes, this is America! An image of America is also *Black Cat*, 1946 (p. 91), a North Beach bar where the artists hung out with San Francisco folks to talk, drink, and listen to jazz. Jazz was important and its syncopation is right there in his paintings. In fact, one of the most compelling pictures of this period was his *Louis Armstrong*, 1948 (fig. 55)—a riotous painting in black and white of Satchmo smiling with four big teeth, holding his saxophone close to his chest. Smith was able transpose the rhythm and beat and the loudness of jazz, the chaotic order of Armstrong's music, into oil on canvas.

55 // **LOUIS ARMSTRONG**, 1948
Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown
Location unknown

During this period Smith also first turned for his subjects to themes of classical mythology. *Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1948 (fig. 56), shows the Roman king's son as a perilous dark black mass hovering over a sexy half-nude Lucretia, gazing at the viewer with wide-eyed astonishment, hardly the woman who stabbed herself to countervail the dishonor. Shakespeare wrote a fine poem and, over the years, Smith made a series of pictures on this subject of less heroic interpretations. The 1948 painting was done a year after Smith saw Still's paintings. This experience was not a total epiphany. Hassel for a brief time continued producing figurative paintings. We notice a strong and short-lived influence of Picasso in works such as the terrifying *Nocturne*, 1948 (fig. 57), and the multi-faced *Untitled (Abstraction)* of the same year. And there was a small but powerful *Self-Portrait*, 1948 (fig. 28), in which he depicted himself as a very disturbed individual.

In 1945 Hassel Smith was hired by MacAgy to return to the California School of Fine Arts, now as a member of the faculty which included Clyfford Still, Clay Spohn, David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Jean Varda, Ansel Adams, and Richard Diebenkorn, with Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko as visitors. As mentioned, it was Still's solo show at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1947 that was the galvanizing moment for Hassel Smith, converting him to abstract painting. "It was conscious and overnight," he recalled, "I stopped doing one thing and started doing something else."[15] Starting in 1948, Hassel Smith became an outstanding Abstract Expressionist painter. Curiously, he rejected figurative painting at the very time when his colleagues Park, Bischoff, and Diebenkorn turned to representational work. And almost at once, he created his own mode of Action Paintings, so astounding that "many critics—Alfred Frankenstein, Thomas Albright, Allan Temko—described him as the single most influential painter in California."[16] (Sam Francis, having moved to Paris in 1950, was *hors de concours*.)

56 // **TARQUIN AND LUCRETIA,** 1946, overworked 1966
Oil on canvas, 28 x 34 in. (71.1 x 86.4 cm)
Location unknown

Hassel Smith had highly successful exhibitions of his abstract paintings. There were solo shows at the vanguard Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco in 1955 and the Ferus in Los Angeles a year later, followed by Gimpel Fils Gallery in London in 1960 and with André Emmerich in New York in 1961. He went to England and stayed in Mousehole, a fishing village in Cornwall, for a year before returning to California to teach at the University of California in Berkeley from 1963 to 1965, and in Los Angeles from 1965 to 1966, but then decided to accept an invitation to teach in Bristol, England. In the early sixties he returned to figurative painting, but there was nothing doctrinaire in his work. He would continue to produce abstractions such as one canvas, called *Mousehole, Cornwall*, in 1962 (p. 139), which, like many of his thunderbolt paintings of the fifties, disclosed organic forms, especially parts of the female anatomy such as buttocks and breasts, but also flying penises. One of the fascinating aspects of Smith's career is his avoidance of consistency, which, as Oscar Wilde pronounced, "is the last refuge of the unimaginative."

57 // **NOCTURNE,** 1948
Oil on canvas, 32 x 28 in. (81.3 x 71.1 cm)
Sonoma County Museum
Gift of Ruth Miner, 1990

In 1960 he produced a semi-abstract landscape, *On the Eel* (p. 99), and two years later he added the figure of an Indian dancing on the sand in native headdress. At this time Smith returned to the theme of Tarquin and Lucretia, but now things become more lighthearted: the Roman prince, instead of a gross black hunk, is depicted as a nasty young squirt, brandishing his pocket knife, and the virginal princess is bare-breasted on her bed and quite receptive to her debaucher. A spotted dog is there to witness the proceedings. Clearly, Hassel Smith's figurative paintings are at a far remove from those by his more earnest Bay Area colleagues. He continued to make farcical compositions on classical themes in modern dress. He located his *Cupid and Venus*, 1965 (fig. 58), in a circus in which a large naked figure wheels a bicycle across the stage. Equipped with wings and bow and arrow, he must be Cupid, and the lady entering in a bathing suit from stage left is a modern Venus. Almost the whole square canvas is painted in reds and pinks. There are also several representations of Leda and the Swan. One, made in 1966, shows a naked Leda with outstretched leg, disporting herself on a grassy hill. A zany tree separates the expecting damsel from the white swan who stretches his long neck toward the tempting lady. In a more contemporary subject, *The Indian Love Call*, 1965 (p. 103), he placed two and a half (the lady on the left is cut off by the frame) dancing strippers on a stage. Against the backdrop is a kitschy romantic

58 // **CUPID AND VENUS,** 1965
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Location unknown

landscape: forest, waterfall, and harvest moon. Below the proscenium and facing the orchestra is a man with a disgruntled expression. It could well be a self-portrait of the painter as bouncer. These paintings were done during the time when younger artists, including William Wiley, Robert Arneson, and Hassel's former student Roy De Forest, were engaged in the totally irreverent and bawdy California Funk, which now seems related to Smith's endeavors.

That same year Smith painted *Supper Club*, a painting that evokes café and restaurant interiors by German Expressionists such as Nolde and Beckmann. Again Smith has the frame cut off part of the figure—here her face—on the right. One of the women sports a beehive haircut, popular in California at the time, and certainly favored in Hassel's repertory. Four individuals are crowded in a small room and the large orange back wall makes the picture adhere to its two-dimensional plane. In the early and mid-sixties, Hassel also painted a fine series of sexy nudes, probably modeled by Donna, his wife. He also painted cars—there is a red auto seen from the back driving into the California landscape that has the word "God" visible on its fenders. There are paintings of people riding and bouncing on buses, sharp-eyed observations of passengers, rendered with a fluffy brush and a calligraphic line, which include—as always—his gestural signature.

59 // **FASHIONS,** 1945
Oil on canvas, 14 ½ x 13 ½ in. (36.8 x 34.3 cm)
Location unknown

It was life on the West Coast, especially in Southern California with its smoggy landscape, its men and women in casual attire, its tall palm trees and large billboards that captivated his vision. These paintings, done mostly in soft pastel colors, render the phantasmal light-drenched atmosphere as well as the vulgarity of Hollywood. They are totally different from New York Pop Art, which placated the consumerist society. Instead they reveal a sense of sarcasm related to Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. There is *Aphro (Street Walker)*, which occupied him from 1964 to 1970 (p. 104). A composition like this is fraught with suggestive narrative. There is a trio of individuals in the lower right-hand corner with a man in a black shirt examining an unidentified object that appears to alarm the agitated man (Hassel?) in the blue polo shirt, who shrinks away with frightened gestures of eyes and hand. The girl in bouffant hair looks away, but, as in other Smith paintings, she is cut off by the frame. In the upper register, within a world of her own, we see the "Walker"—judging from her modest outfit, not a streetwalker—leaving the scene. Disconnected from these people, there appears the word "Aphrod," an ironic comment on the Greek goddess of love. The caricatured artist appears again in *Topless #1*, 1969–70 (p. 109), here as a jester and the presenter of the half-naked girls. The girl in the pink panties in the center is hiding a leash, which may be meant for the nice dog downstage. A woman in street dress and in front of the apron may be looking for the exit. She could be seen as signifying the artist's feelings about the shameless display of the dancing girls. The large yellow plain backdrop and the large green circular bubble behind one of the dancers seem to look ahead to Smith's geometrical work, the "measured paintings," which were soon to occupy his attention. A similar wide orange backdrop behind the two gesticulating females on stage in *Top of the Pops* (1968–69) also anticipates the formalist abstract work to come, as did a large painting, *Homage to Georges de la Tour* (1972). On a trip to Paris that year he went to see a retrospective exhibition of the French Caravaggesque painter at the Jeu de Pomme, admiring the seventeenth-century painter's superb evocations of light. In his own painting, we see a gray expanse done with a vigorous brush that serves as the ground for a number of circles. Evoking his study of de la Tour's unique placement of figures, Hassel has placed a beehive-haired girl and the head of a man (Hassel's) in front of a white circle, leaving the painting. A different smiling girl and the letters "MALIBU" are seen in the background of the painting *Talmadge at Fountain*, 1969–73 (fig. 60). This crossing above Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards in Los Angeles is near the house in which the Smiths resided a good many years earlier. But the artist painted large, flat, sandy-colored planes in place of the busy intersection and green lollipop circles signifying trees in the background—very different from the actual busy intersection. Clearly, these geometric forms done with ruler and compass anticipate the formalist work to come. As he often did, Hassel painted a self-portrait, here with a gesture of doubt, in the painting's foreground. He was ready for a new volte-face adventure.

60 // **TALMADGE AT FOUNTAIN,** 1969–73
Oil on canvas, 69¼ x 69¼ in. (175.9 x 175.9 cm)
Location unknown

Hassel Smith, teaching and painting in Bristol, turned back (or ahead) to non-objective painting, leaning to Euclidian forms. He now proceeded like an engineer, using compass and ruler within a grid to structure his compositions. But even during this period the human form is not discarded. *Untitled* (fig. 61), a painting of 1970, appears like an abstraction of a female seen from the back. Then, in the mid-eighties, recapturing the vital energy of his thunderbolt period, he returned to gestural paintings of dynamic energy. But he continued to intermittently produce fine realistic drawings of human heads. Then in 1995, at age eighty, he produced a last astonishing self-portrait (fig. 62). Dressed in a scarlet shirt he appears as an anguished human being. This image of himself fuses outer appearance with psychological insight. It recalls the great portraits painted by Oskar Kokoschka before World War I, when the Austrian Expressionist created portraits evoking "anxiety and pain."[17] Hassel Smith, the eminent American artist who had so often commented with mordant humor on human life and its foibles and was able to infuse a sense of wit even into his abstractions, created a painting of himself facing what Paul Tillich had in mind when he wrote of truly authentic art coping with ultimate reality.

61 // **UNTITLED,** 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 48 in. (172.7 x 121.9 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

62 // **SELF-PORTRAIT,** 1995
Acrylic on board, 19¾ x 16 in. (50.2 x 40.6 cm)
Location unknown

1) Hassel Smith, Interview with Jan Butterfield, ca. 1976, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, n.p.
2) Allan Temko, *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1954–1975*, exh. cat. San Francisco Museum of Art (San Francisco, 1975), n.p.
3) Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York, 1979).
4) Mary Fuller McChesney, *A Period of Exploration: San Francisco, 1945–1950*, exh. cat. Oakland Museum (Oakland, 1973), p. 8.
5) Peter Selz, "Between Friends: Still and the Bay Area," *Art in America* 63 (November/December 1975), p. 72.
6) Oral history interview with Hassel Smith [by Paul J. Karlstrom], 1978 Sept. 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
7) Hassel Smith, California School of Fine Arts, March 1957. In the introductory essay to the catalogue he wrote about a large number of artists, from Ucello to Rodin, as well as Roman sculptors and Japanese printmakers, and, encouraging students, about "new additions constantly being dispatched to the celestial and subterranean species."
8) Hassel Smith, letter to the author, from Rode, England, December 10, 1997.
9) *Paintings by 19 Living Americans*, exh. cat. The Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1929).
10) Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 1934, p. 56.
11) Smith, letter to the author, from Rode, December 10, 1997.
12) Temko, *Hassel Smith*.
13) Arshile Gorky, quoted in Adolph Gottlieb, *Arshile Gorky*, exh. cat. Kootz Gallery (New York, 1950), n.p.
14) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto in Pictures*, illustrations by Robert McChesney and Hassel Smith (San Francisco, 1948).
15) H. Smith/Karlstrom, Interview.
16) Richard Candida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 107.
17) Oskar Kokoschka, quoted in Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley, 1957), p. 165.