

HASSEL SMITH: PAINTINGS, 1954–1975

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

Surely no other artist this late in the twentieth century could sardonically entitle an Abstract Expressionist painting of 1963 *Magnasco you madman, I love you*. From the great Genoan, of course, the route goes on to Goya, through the Venice of Guardi, and onward to Daumier. But even more significantly, on the back of the same canvas, behind its furiously brushed and scraped orange surface, scornfully underpainted in blue and green, Smith has written: "A note to the critics: this is a very characteristic painting, as you could see if you weren't so blind. It in no way resembles the painting of Arshile Gorky."

Thus Smith disdains the posturing of the New York star system: and he has unflinchingly forged his art over the past four decades in much the way that William James—another foe of vain pretensions—felt compelled to formulate his radical thought "in the teeth of stubborn and irreducible facts."

From the late thirties onward, Smith's paintings have therefore been "crises in a continuity of form," as Douglas MacAgy defined them in 1961, adding that "the crisis, not the form, is framed." This was written during Smith's "thunderbolt" phase of Abstract Expressionism, when his dynamic gestural strokes, like calligraphic lightning, forked through roughened masses of color.

Crises in a continuity of form. The artist depicts Jacob's wrestling bout with the angel, but he does not resign his intelligence in the struggle, as he would in a de Kooning catharsis. He fights with mind as well as heart, unlocking the secrets of each in painting after painting, so that a sequence of paintings must be seen to understand what is actually going on, and how much is being given. The method is literally the reverse of both Rothko's and Reinhardt's, who stormed very different and difficult fortresses, and then held tight.

Today, in a way that neither MacAgy nor Smith anticipated, the "framed crisis" continues; but it has evolved to a higher and purer plane in the magnificent liberated "geometric" paintings of the seventies. Objectivity has replaced subjectivity as the dominant force, but the artist's commitment has stayed the same, both as personal declaration and—in Smith's phrase—"social metaphor." The artist's chief strength, as at the beginning, remains the strength of intelligence.

Hassel Smith, Jr. was born sixty years ago, on April 27, 1915, at Sturgis, Michigan, in a solidly middle-class family that had no particular interest in art. By the thirties the family had settled in comfortable suburban surroundings in San Mateo, on the peninsula south of San Francisco. After graduating from Northwestern in 1936, where he majored in art history, he returned to the Bay Area to enroll at the California School of Fine Arts.

69 // **LEDA AND THE SWAN**, 1959
Oil on canvas, 70 x 44 in. (177.8 x 111.8 cm)
Location unknown

70 // **UNTITLED**, 1959
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm)
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Stanton Sobel

No one yet foresaw the spectacular rise of the CSFA after 1945, but San Francisco was already an exhilarating place for an artist, with its inexpensive flats and studios in North Beach and on Telegraph Hill, close to the school; and the nearby Italian restaurants with their good, cheap food and wine—all combined to create a half-Mediterranean mood of *dolce far niente*.

Yet this idyllic scene was only part of a broader perspective of California during the slump, when something close to class warfare broke out in the great dock strike, and Okies poured into the agricultural valleys. After finishing his studies at CSFA in 1938, Smith became a state relief worker in San Francisco, later joined the Farm Security Administration as a caseworker in the torrid Central Valley.

Of the late thirties and the war years following, few of his paintings survive. So far as he is concerned, there was little that he might now wish to save. But 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 absurd too acute, and his appreciation of Dada and Surrealism—especially their political connotations—too keen for him to have settled for crude social cartooning. When he finally hit his stride as a representational painter, in the mid-forties, it was as a mordant satirist, as well as a highly amused observer, of essences of American life. The value of these paintings, however, is not their literal imagery, even though Smith was among the first to notice how funny an ice cream cone can be, but rather the gusto and freedom of the painting itself, the enlargement of scale (long before it became a Pop device), and hallucinatory distortion of space.

Unfortunately, there has been room in this exhibition only for three relatively late figure paintings, *Tarquin and Lucretia* (fig. 68), done between 1962 and 1964, *Untitled* (fig. 71), also finished in 1964, and *Supper Club*, 1965 (p. 101). These show how far Smith would carry this side of his art long after his principle motive turned to abstraction, but the *Tarquin*, especially, is one of the funniest paintings of the century. Spoofing not only the history of art, but ancient and modern history seen through an awful bedroom, Smith has lightly poised his teenage ravisher, with his toy knife, above the substantial, receptive lady in the slanting bed, its purple blanket askew as the color itself, taunted by horrid flesh tones in the coverlet, and flung out into the momentous space, past the nose of the preposterous hound standing witness, the whole dynamic composition stopped almost obscenely by the walls, red and orangish red, and the hellish yellow and blue picture frame, with flesh again in the center.

Even when later paintings are explicitly non-figurative, they appear sometimes as palimpsests of rejected representational imagery. This is true not only of the monumental *Leda and the Swan* of 1959 (fig. 69), the survivor of a whole series of representational Ledas which have been mostly obliterated, but also, even more violently, in the *Untitled* of 1962, in which head, shoulders, haunches, and part of the leg—almost a hoof—of a nearly recognizable female figure, blackish blue, breaks out of a field of angered creams.

But the violence is checked by Smith's overall irony in these paintings of the sixties. Intimation of arrested rage, or anguish, if never fully erased, are thrust aside at will by the artist, sometimes in a single jubilant stroke, expressing the positive joy that accompanied his crucial decision—on the whole, immensely fulfilling—to go Abstract Expressionist in 1947.

So much has been said about the brief golden age of the school between 1945 and 1950, before MacAgy's dismissal and Still's resignation, that only refinements of the story are still possible. Even these can be significant to the history of art, however, when dealing with teachers of the stature of Still, Smith, Corbett, Diebenkorn, and Park, visitors such as Rothko and Reinhardt, and gifted students such as John Hultberg. In particular the relationship between Still and Smith, forty-one and thirty years old respectively in 1945, deserves more study, even though

68 // **TARQUIN AND LUCRETIA**, 1962–64
Oil on canvas, 68 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm)
Collection John Fitz Gibbon

it was explored with fine sensibility by Mary Fuller McChesney in the interviews she published as catalogue to the Oakland Museum's CSFA show in 1973.

Smith in retrospect has spoken almost lightly of the way he switched to Abstract Expressionism virtually "overnight." The fact is, however, that Still's first revolutionary show, at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1943, occurred four years before Smith's conversion. He had plenty of time to consider it. Furthermore, without discounting Smith's undeniably genuine praise of Still as "probably the greatest painter alive," it is worth noting crucial differences between the two men and their work.

Certainly Smith would never have painted the way he did in the late forties had he never encountered Still. In contrast to both Corbett and Diebenkorn, who quickly developed highly individual Abstract Expressionist vocabularies of their own, Smith in some early abstractions seemed almost to reiterate Stills portentous leitmotifs including the torn and jagged forms of the "ripped curtain" effect which enabled Still, with apocalyptic force, to open enormous vistas in modern painting.

Yet when this is said, the mood, technique, and philosophical basis of Smith's work differ so markedly from Still's that—from the late forties onward—they can be compared only for purposes of contrast. There is no similarity, for example, between Smith's deft, elating brushwork, happily enlivened by swift improvisation and witty line, and Still's almost brutal application of paint, often heavily worked with the knife, to produce the somber browns and blacks, and morose reds, of his cosmic oratorics.

The "messianic" side of Still, of course, could not be more different from Smith's humane philosophical premise. If Still's Goethean compositions of the forties and fifties may now appear increasingly Wagnerian (not such a bad compliment as it might seem), Smith's Abstract Expressionism of the same period suggests the impromptu generosity of jazz. Smith, indeed, entitled an exuberant painting of 1963—a gusty off-center field of contending reds, punctuated by earthy browns, billowing to ragged edges of black and white—*Lu Blows Again*, after the great horn player Lu Watters, to whose Dixieland Smith happily gyrated at places like the Dawn Club and Hambone Kelly's.

Clyfford Still's very greatness resides in his magisterial denial of ordinary humanity. Ennoblement of man, through struggle, is the core of Smith's art. They have always been very different painters.

After the break-up of the CSFA, Smith found himself on his own in more ways than he had anticipated. He was not only out of a teaching job, but had little hope of getting another. This was a double hardship for a man who had been so generous a teacher, encouraging the independent development of so many younger artists, including Roy De Forest and Joan Brown. He also had severe family problems at his time, including his first wife's illness and death.

Luckily, Smith was able to buy a small apple orchard in Sebastopol in 1953, where he built a studio beside the house and lived for ten years. Throughout this "thunderbolt" (fig. 70) period of great compositional and lyrical power, with wonderful flying phalli, or something very much like them, spurting ambiguously through wide bursts of color, Smith worked with growing elation and success, culminating in a show at Houston which deeply impressed Charles Gimpel, the London dealer, and another successful show at the André Emmerich Gallery in New York.

All this coincided with a deeply happy second marriage. Smith and his wife and their children left for England in 1962, where they spent a year, mostly in the charming Cornish village of Mousehole. A show at Gimpel Fils established his international reputation; and with one of his major paintings now hanging in the Tate Modern, Smith felt fully at home in Britain.

It was only a matter of time until he would return. Meanwhile, there were teaching stints at Berkeley and, more importantly for Smith, at UCLA, which evoked altogether remarkable—and, so far as I know, unequaled—figure-paintings of Southern California: poolsides, empty streets, billboards, freeway overpasses, bubble cars, a bus of tourists, ladies in beehive hairdos, high heels, and funny underwear, with odd dogs—all literally as funny as Hell. Neither Pop nor neo-Realism, to say nothing of the neo-Impressionism of Diebenkorn and his followers, could approach the intensity of these harrowing social visions, set in bleached, slanting light, with the artist himself—or his ghost—seemingly uncommittal beneath a phantasmal palm or at the edge of a three-walled room, from which, as from Sartre's existentialist trap, there may be No Exit. No one has come closer than Smith to capturing the neurasthenic meta-reality of L.A.

But it was to England now, as soon as he got a job in 1966 at the art school in Bristol, where he bought a staunch old townhouse, with a calm white room in which to paint. England, with its congenial pubs and national eccentricities, was blessedly free of technocratic illusions of superpower. It was a place where the artist could gather his forces, and, as he had in 1947, strike out in a new direction.

Although art is fundamentally everywhere and always the same, nevertheless two main human inclinations, diametrically opposed to each other, appear in its many and varied expressions. One aims at direct creation of universal beauty, the other at the aesthetic expression of oneself... The first aims at representing reality objectively, the other subjectively... The only problem in art is to achieve a balance between the subjective and the objective.—Piet Mondrian, 1937

Compass and ruler: strange devices for Smith, who—except for purposes of invectiveness—never had much use for the Suprematist square of Malevich or the circle of Lissitzky, to say nothing of Gabo's Constructivism and the "Pure Plastic Art" of Mondrian. Unlike friends such as Edward Corbett, who was strongly influenced by Mondrian and Malevich in the forties, Smith's predilections then, like Clay Spohn's, had been Dada and Surrealism. Yet now, in Bristol about 1970, Smith was laying out patterns on canvas with tape measure and protractor.

He had undertaken to sum up—or, rather, to restate completely—the whole objective side of modern painting from the subjective standpoint. It was inevitable that someone should renew the quest, begun as early as 1912 by men such as Delaunay and Dove, to establish "the primacy of the person"—the phrase is Lewis Mumford's—in what Malevich insisted must be supremely impersonal art. For if the heroic purifying impulse in modern painting, sculpture, and architecture had germinated from vast impersonal forces of industrial civilization, this was at once its glory and its menace. Either it could humanize the Machine Age, or it could mechanize man. Certainly a kind of mechanical painting, stamped out as if on an assembly line, with color rolled on by the square yard, had commenced to supplant the high integrity of earlier impersonal art.

To Hassel Smith, fifty-five years old in 1970, it was worth tackling the problem again. What followed, after a difficult experimental period in which he was often thwarted, were the astonishing "geometric" paintings—based on Euclidean forms, but in every way transcending "puristic" or "reductive" geometry—that proclaim the full range and power of his mature art. The new idiom developed slowly, but by 1972 Smith had paintings that he wished to keep, including *The Search for the Source of the Nile* (fig. 72), which had taken the artist to a terrestrial paradise diametrically opposed to Gauguin's.

The mysterious splendor of the painting depends as much on mastery of color as on the wonderfully free interplay of controlled forms. Within rectangles, triangles, and circles of differing dimensions, and parts of circles, which drift across the canvas in a loosened

72 // **THE SEARCH FOR THE SOURCE OF THE NILE**, 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 88 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm)
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Muchmore, 1981

71 // **UNTITLED**, 1964
Oil on canvas, 72 x 24 in. (182.9 x 61 cm)
Location unknown

rhythmic dance, the acrylic colors (which Smith would use henceforth instead of oils) are incessantly modified and strangely muted: dark bars of green running behind flat circles of lighter green, whitened blue, eloquently brushed romantic orange, against which the underpainted tan emerges almost as tawny sand. All seem to have been exposed to a solar brightness, and then stilled. Each variant of color is explicitly fixed within its geometric context, according to strict formalist code, as if Smith had been reading Albers.

But this is irony. What appeared fixed is fluid. The hard edge, of course, is not that hard, or even a truly minimalist boundary. It carries everywhere a suggestion of indiscipline. The ruled line is charged with subtle restless energies. Circles go off-center. Sudden breaks in symmetry intensify the color, which is not at all systematic, but close to ecstasy, especially in the serpentine form flowing upward in a succession of eccentric orange curves—the sensual snake in the Garden—whose seemingly regular, but ultimately unregulated shape sets the whole composition in motion. Objectivity and subjectivity have coalesced in a dynamic balance of high intellectual decision and unpremeditated impulse.

Another pivotal painting of 1971–72 is *From Rags to Ragas and from Ragas to Riches*, its title inspired by Ravi Shankar, in which dancing movement resembles actual musical notation. Here is still more intricate interaction of circles, squares, and triangles of varying sizes, sometimes combined to form arrows or directional signals, or plus and equal signs in exuberant spatial equations. It is a virtual lesson in harmonics, in which themes are divided and subdivided in endless rhythmic sequences that have begun outside the frame, and must leave it again, going off the canvas in an increasingly dense pattern at the lower right.

These related paintings go far to show Smith's main direction in the seventies, but it always takes a group of works to reveal this artist's full intentions at any given time, and he had other options to explore. Almost simultaneously he was trying several essays in curvilinear form, including three monumental paintings, all untitled, and all done in 1972. Strangely organic in tone and texture, but given gigantic scales, they could connote cosmic events or immensely magnified microorganisms. Smith jests that they were done at the same time as the moon shots, but as modern paintings their only subject is themselves, which is formidable enough.

The first develops tremendous rotary force as its cloud-like central mass of overlaid pinkish circles, spinning out of a flesh-toned core like the Over-Soul of the Space Age, looms in a bright yellow field, with a small yellow circle poised slightly above it. There is nothing quite like this in the rest of Smith's work; and the same can be said for the other two mystical exercises in which forms like huge eyeballs drawn from their sockets (or breasts?) rise massively on either side, and then bend gently together, with a slow heavy grace, across the tops of the paintings. Of the two is the richer in its red and golden tones, the more allusive to living tissue in its strange whitish pink; but both are painted with sheer, wash-like delicacy that is unusual even for Smith. They also share a semi-surreal illusion of three-dimensionality, hitherto excluded from his non-figurative paintings, which—given the Brobdingnagian scale—sounds a note of horror.

Whether or not he considered them dead ends, Smith seems not to have followed up these troubling excursions, even though he remained very interested in circular forms. *Homage to SFBM* (fig. 73), started in 1971, but not finished until 1973, shows heavy reworking typical of the artist at many stages in his career, which in this case, however, may indicate serious indecision. He has eliminated so much through overpainting, indeed, that the heavy yellow surface is nearly a pure field. Nevertheless it provides a fascinating insight into his method. The oblong plane—one of the few departures from the big square format in the seventies—is lightly decked with small, widely separated magenta and lavender circles. They reply far across the canvas to still smaller groups of red and blue dots, which on second glance can be recognized as “beads” strung on invisible lines. There is a strong underlying “felt” structure

74 // **UNTITLED**, 1973
Acrylic on canvas, 45¼ x 69 in. (116.2 x 175.3 cm)
Location unknown

75 // **UNTITLED**, 1974
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 68 in. (172.7 x 172.7 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith

beneath: the ruled grid; and from now on it both governs and liberates his art in what may well be the greatest paintings he has done.

To Smith, the grid is a “navigational device,” guiding him to a destination unforeseen at the start of the painting, and in fact originating at some unknown source outside the frame, just as it must continue to some equally unknown point beyond it, perhaps infinitely remote. This is a parable of human experience, but it is also a definition of the role of the artist in modern society.

The modular grid has been compared by Smith to a “prison” which, in these paintings, has been created by the artist solely to make possible an “escape” from its arbitrary authority. The artist does not reject geometric order, but only its life-denying capacities.

These, of course, have imprisoned the whole mechanistic side of modern art, with its calculated gadgetry and rehearsed tricks that are only illusions of liberty. For the artist to win veritable freedom against such odds, he must “accept the rules” of abstract order, and “patiently play the game,” which might find an analogy in the strategies of chess.

But of course it cannot be a game, since nothing in life can be more serious than the building of a free city of the intellect, for which Smith cleared the ground in an important painting of 1973 (fig. 74).

Here, again, the artist has extensively overpainted, so that a superbly active orange field is filled with “ghosts” of a vanished environment. But he must also have seen the chance early to create the stunning proportional arrangement that evolved logically as he grappled with the underlying realities of the grid. Lean channels of yellow and blue, and barely touched strips of sized canvas edged with yellow, changing to red and black as they intersect, travel horizontally and vertically with remarkable confidence and ease, deftly impelled by five small triangles upon which the painter has lavished all his craft: lavender and black, blue and green, and at the very top, black again, pointing the way to freedom for the whole moving pattern.

It was all coming together now; and suddenly in late 1973 and 1974—as Smith turned once more, as he had often in the past, to the supreme form of the square—the search was rewarded by four triumphant masterpieces, which are perhaps the happiest paintings of his life. He had found that if he adopted the 68” x 68” square as a standard format, the 16” square module which he had been using would be compelled—no matter how many times it might be subdivided—to descend in a lordly diagonal sequence that would expand, and ultimately leave the canvas in majestic multi-dimensional movements, unfolding much as Schoenberg's twelve-tone music first presented all the elements of the scale singly, then in larger combinations, until they could be discerned as a unique and astonishing entity which, as in all “universal” abstract art, also opens a limitless perspective of new entities beyond.

Smith gave these paintings the names of their fundamental compositional patterns—“2-1-3-2-1” and “1-2-3-4-1”—as a sign of aesthetic truth. But that was what the long search had been for, and not just the brilliant achievements of the latest paintings, which may lead to more profound paintings tomorrow. On such integrity and intelligence—so rare in modern art as in the modern industrial world—the City of Man will be built.

⁹ Allan Temko's essay originally appeared in the catalogue *Hassel Smith: Paintings, 1964–1975*, published by the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1975. © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, California, 94103. All rights reserved.

73 // **HOMAGE TO SFBM**, 1971–73
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 48 in. (172.7 x 121.9 cm)
Collection Estate of Hassel Smith