

# ALEXANDRE

## Black New Yorkers:

### Oil, sand and Vincent Smith

By HERB BOYD

*Special to the AmNews*

Weeks have passed since the reception for Vincent Smith's exhibit at Alexandre Gallery, but last Saturday was a miniature version of what had occurred back in early September. The unassuming Smith must have been reminded of that earlier gathering, as he was buoyed by the presence of former Schomburg Center curator Victor Smythe, artist Ed Clarke and Mary Anne Rose, the widow of artist Herb Gentry.

"The boy has some talent," Clarke cracked, surveying the paintings in the gallery's largest room. It was a remark only a longtime friend with an abiding respect could make. Then the two friends clutched hands and began reminiscing about times past.

With this done, it was time to retreat to a nearby office where the artists could sit down, sip coffee and exchange gossip from the artistic circles they have been part of for decades. "I'm busy these days assembling my papers," Smith said, discussing the arduous task of writing his memoirs.

Such a book would entail a genealogical glance to Barbados, coming of age in the African Orthodox Church, music lessons, a stint in the Army before a visit to a Cézanne retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art seduced him to the world of easel, canvas

and brushes. "During the day I painted and at night I went to the jazz clubs," Smith told senior curator Nancy Green of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University two years ago.

"Eventually, as my savings from the postal job dwindled, I had to get a part-time job in a paper factory," Smith continued. "But I was on a mission."

That mission took him ineluctably to the works of Jacob Lawrence, (to whom he has been compared), Charles White, Archibald Motley, Hale Woodruff and his good friend, Walter Williams. "Walter and I got a loft in the Village that we shared with another artist, and the musician Duke Jordan lived next door. That's when I first met Charlie 'Bird' Parker."

Bird, the legendary musician, advised him "to stick to his vision" and not let anybody turn him around. What turned him around artistically was the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Black liberation struggle. Soon, he was a participant-observer in the movement for social and political change, and these themes populated his early works. Not only was his expressive art visually compelling, Smith was also chronicling the turbulent '60s, most tellingly captured in his rendering of the "Black Power Conference" in 1968.

Though fully engaged in the

movement, the Brooklyn-born Smith still found time to venture abroad – Latin America, the Caribbean and several trips to Africa. He recalled a 24-hour train ride in Burkina Faso where it was "very sandy, red clay that gets in your hair, your teeth, your fingernails."

Some of this grit stayed with Smith, and you can find traces of it in his paintings. "Even when he created the compositions in the 1960s that combined urban discord with portraits of Black mothers, leaders, poets, musicians and politicians, Smith's personal process of layering the canvas with sand-thickened paint and stucco-like surfaces drew us into the picture visually as much as the subject," wrote noted art critic David Driskell.

This grainy, rough texture is evident on "Coal Duck," though the surface is softened by the admixture of cloth and a collage motif.

One visitor to the gallery, during a conversation with Smith, 73, asked how he managed to get light to emanate from behind his images. "There is a certain kind of paper I use," he replied, "and you can see this in my 'Dry Bones' series." The process is evident, too, on "The Super" and "Attrition," both of which are on display at the gallery.

There's still time to see the exhibit of Smith's selected works from 1952 to 1972, which closes Oct. 11 at the Alexandre Gallery in the Fuller Building, 41 E. 57th Street (between Madison and Lexington). Call (212) 755-2828.



Vincent Smith with "Coal Duck." (Herb Boyd photo)

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