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The Fire Next Time, 1968,
oil and sand on canvas, 30 x 36"
Collection of the artist.

**Dreams
Myths
and Realities**

Nancy E. Green

**THE WORK OF
VINCENT SMITH**

58 - Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art

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In a 1973 *New York Times* review, critic John Canaday suggested that a group exhibition of Jacob Lawrence, Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, and Vincent Smith would be of interest, for "...both their unity and their individuality would be as apparent as their Blackness would be triumphant."¹ Over twenty-five years later, Canaday's endorsement and his insistence that he would "put Mr. Smith at the top of the list" of these four artists reverberates in Smith's endurance as an artist and chronicler of an age.

Smith is a survivor, a man who has spent his life relating the narrative of the African-American experience on canvas and paper, a visual poet and storyteller. Smith's world is peopled with both the mundane and extraordinary, and he captures the pulse of his Black community with tightly composed images, vibrant with color, texture and the natural rhythm of his line. It is a formidable body of work, tantalizing and compelling, showing richness of Smith's creative achievement.

At an early age, Vincent Smith absorbed a strong sense of the many strands of his Black cultural heritage. His paternal grandfather owned a large farm and quarry in Barbados and his father worked on that farm and in the oil fields until emigrating to the States with his wife in the 1920s. Born in 1929 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Vincent Smith was raised in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in a neighborhood often familiarly depicted in his early paintings. As a child, his family attended the African Orthodox Church. He studied music and played alto saxophone and piano, and although he did not continue his lessons, this experience would translate into a lifelong love and appreciation of the rich strains of jazz and blues, be-bop, dixieland, funk, and doo-wop.

In his mid-teens, Smith dropped out of school, travelling around a bit, working a couple of weeks repairing tracks on the Lackawanna Railroad, followed by a year in the Army stationed in the South, an eye-

opening experience which sparked his early involvement in the Civil Rights movement. It was in 1952, while he was working for the Post Office, that a friend invited him along to visit the Cézanne retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Just as Cézanne had inspired the Cubists nearly fifty years before, the experience literally changed the course of Smith's life. As he remembers, "I came away so moved with a feeling that I had been in touch with something sacred."²

Soon after, Smith quit his postal job and began to paint in earnest. He briefly attended classes at the Art Students League under Reginald Marsh, an association that infected the young artist with some of his teacher's nonchalant and enthusiastic approach to the city. Smith also began dropping in at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where he informally sat in on classes and met Walter Williams, with whom he later shared a studio in Manhattan. In the summer of 1955, Smith received a scholarship and attended the Skowhegan School in Maine where he met Ben Shahn, Sidney Simon, Willard Cummings, and Marguerite and William Zorach. That same year, he was awarded a scholarship to enroll officially in the Brooklyn Museum Art School. At that time, Smith remembered, the Brooklyn Museum was one of the few museums in this country to show the sculpture of African artists. This made a moving impact on Smith and the result was his painting *Fang Woman with Children* (1955), one of two paintings on an African theme that he did during this period.

The early fifties was a heady time for a young artist living in Greenwich Village, and Smith developed influential relationships with many other aspiring Black artists and writers. Besides Williams, he also became friendly with Richard Mayhew, Cliff Jackson, Harvey Cropper, Sam Middleton, Earl Miller, Al Hicks Amiri Baraka, as well as musicians Charlie "Bird" Parker, Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, Randy Weston,

Black Power Conference, 1968, oil and sand on canvas, 16 x 30", Collection of the artist



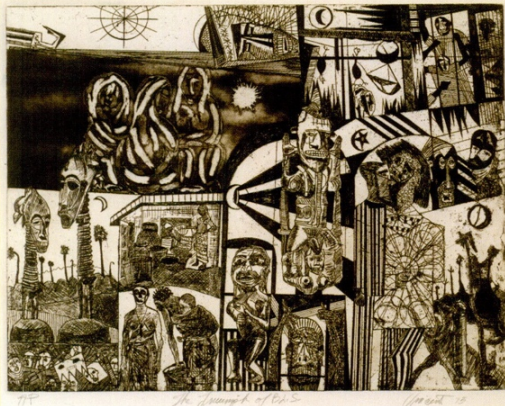
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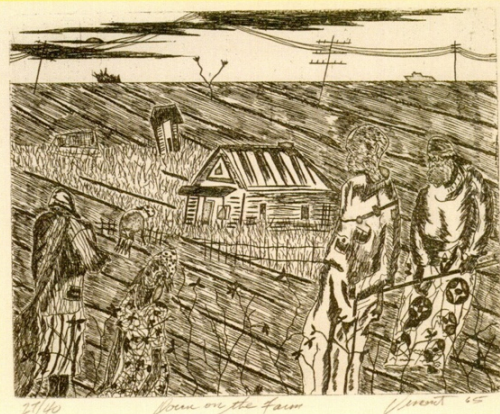
The Triumph of B.L.S., 1973, etching, 13.75 x 17.875",
Courtesy of G. W. Einstein Company, Inc., NY.

Max Roach, and, later, Lester Young. As Smith recalls, "We were a strange group because people didn't know what to make of us. They were used to Black musicians and performers, but the visual arts were sacred territory. Most people I came into contact with never knew a Black painter, nor had they hardly ever heard of one. At the time Jacob Lawrence and Charlie White were the only known Black artists. Beauford Delaney was known, but only in the Village. But we hung out and we hung in – in lofts, ballrooms, and in cold water flats. We used to sit in the Riviera Café, Pandora's Box, and Rienzi's and have marathon sessions rapping about art, politics, literature, religion, aesthetics, and women. We'd also drop in at the Whitney Museum and at the Hans Hofmann School which both used to be on West 8th Street. The abstract painters hung out in the Cedar Bar, but we preferred the Five Spot Café, as that's where they played jazz at night."³

Smith's goal has been, from the very beginning, to depict the Black contribution to American culture. He smoothly brings together the worlds of North, South, and the Caribbean with the heritage of Africa. His work is iconographically rich, fusing these strands into a tightly intimate portrait of life within Black communities. "My approach has been very spontaneous and sort of inventive, instinctive, intuitive,"⁴ Smith has said, though he concedes that he learned to orchestrate his compositions from studying Jacob Lawrence. His narratives segue smoothly between African-American and African experience, connecting the personal with the universal, surface design and color with texture.

The works from the 1950s are an amalgam of his newfound identity with the Black cultural milieu with his childhood roots and the community that nurtured him. His subjects are the jazz cafés, pool rooms, storekeepers, families, lovers, and street scenes he met and knew firsthand. In choosing mentors Smith has naturally been attracted to artists sharing an interest in similar issues of isolation, identity, and survival, and it is not surprising that the German Expressionists Otto Dix and Max Beckmann and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco have found an echo in his work. His strong graphic sensibility and intense color and symbolism align him with these predecessors. Also apparent is the unmistakable influence of African sculpture, but as Smith contends, "I don't have to take them literally from African sculpture. It's right there in the street. To me it's not stylized. To me, you still know it's a person."⁵

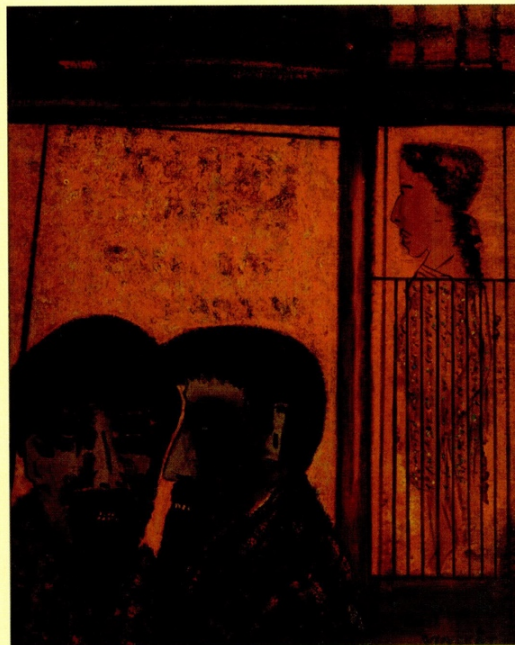
In work from the early 1960s Smith often used the device of a window or a doorway as an entrance to the canvas, removing himself (and



Down on the Farm, from Eight Etchings, 1965, 20 x 16" (sheet),
Courtesy of G. W. Einstein Company, Inc., NY.

thus the viewer) by one step from the intensity of the action taking place. This encourages the viewer to place himself at the elbow of the artist, witnessing events as they unfold. These glimpses into the lives of others stem, Smith admits, from a time when he often rode the elevated train through Brownsville, catching small snatches of other people's lives from his window seat. In Smith's hands these moments achieve a plateau of grace, presented with dignity, empathy, and insight.

In the mid-sixties things began to shift. Many of Smith's friends and cronies moved to Europe, hoping for a less hostile environment for their work. There was a new vehemence in the Civil Rights movement and, for those artists who remained, these issues became paramount. The non-aggressive approach of the fifties gave way to explosive responses to the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King's death, riots, and the poverty of the ghettos. Smith's work came to reflect these struggles; his view was



The Soul Brothers, ca. 1969, oil on canvas, 31.125 x 24.75",
Courtesy of G. W. Einstein Company, Inc., NY.

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clear-eyed without self-pity, sentiment, or blame. The facts, laid bare in his work, speak eloquently of the times. He recorded the strife and the turmoil side by side with non-aggressive solutions in paintings such as *For My People* (1965), *The Fire Next Time* (1968), and *Black Power Conference* (1968).

During this volatile decade, Smith was an active member of the Black Arts movement, spearheaded by Amiri Baraka. Moving away from the familiar domestic subjects of the fifties, his images were now largely of the disenfranchised – political prisoners, the unemployed, and the poor, as well as narratives of racial conflict and discrimination. In his portfolio series of *Eight Etchings* (1965-66) Smith captures the *Zeitgeist* by rendering scenes of terror and pain drawn from his own experiences while traveling through the South in the late 1940s and early 1960s. There are also scenes of New York and its own brand of racism rampantly apparent in the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants. The mask-like faces of the figures provide an anonymity in an unsympathetic world.

Smith's art attests to a mind that avidly collects and assimilates. The influence of Cézanne was merely the first splinter that opened up avenues to the German Expressionists, who themselves were greatly influenced by African art. Largely self-taught, Smith had early on searched out information on African American artists at the Brooklyn Public Library. "As a young art student in the early fifties, the only book I could find about the African-American's place in art history was James Porter's *Modern Negro* (1943). This book became my Bible. The people in it were larger than life to me. Sometimes I wondered, if these legends really existed."⁶ He developed an affinity with artists discussed in this book – Aaron Douglas, whose murals Smith saw at Countee Cullen Public Library in Harlem, Archibald Motley, Charles White, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Lois M. Jones, and Jacob Lawrence. He was very impressed with James L. Wells's prints and lithographs and Smith's own *Self Portrait* (1951) was modeled after Fred Flemlister's *Man with Brush* (1940).

In time, the lack of information and documentation on twentieth-century artists led Smith to do his own research and to curate exhibitions of his contemporaries; most notably he was curatorial consultant on *An Ocean Apart: American Artists Abroad* (1982) at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and curator of *Unbroken Circle: Exhibition of African-American Artists of the 1930s and 1940s* (1986) at Kenkeleba House, with Dr. David Driskell. From 1986 to 1988, he dialogued with forty-five artists, mainly painters and sculptors, but also musicians, poets, and playwrights, on *Vincent Smith Dialogues with Contemporary Artists* on WBAI FM Pacifica Radio. He has held discussions with many other artists during his travels, and has over 1,000 letters from artists from all over the world and recently his thirty-year correspondence with Jacob Lawrence was included in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. In this way Smith has documented and archived African American art history of the twentieth century for future generations.

So much of this work informs Smith's own art, yet he never becomes derivative. His use of extravagant color and gesture is revelatory and imparts both joy and hope into scenes that could easily sink into despair and self-pity. Smith remains eternally optimistic with a belief in the triumph of his subjects over all obstacles. It is this optimism that kept him in the United States as his friends departed for other countries. It is also this optimism that sings from his canvases, that first entices then enfolds the viewer in its relentless upsurge of energy.

For Smith, as a chronicler of Black culture, the story shifted again in



Fetish Market, from the African series #1, 1974, mixed media on paper, 20 x 24", Collection of the artist.

the seventies. With the deaths of King and Malcolm X, some of the intensity receded from the civil rights movement and the focus became the African heritage of America's Black population. Between 1968 and 1999 Smith made five trips to twelve African countries, as well as travels to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Europe (including two artist residencies at the Cité-des-Arts in Paris), and these experiences that would shape his work. In a 1974 letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, he described his second trip to Africa: "I stayed in Nairobi five days and then took the bus through the Masai country all the way down through Arusha to Moisho which is on the Tanzania border. I was able to observe the Masai people at close hand as they traveled on the bus – stopping here and there in the bush and also in the barren country on their way somewhere. I noticed they were very fast walkers. They start off with a long stride. They carry sticks and a long horn-shape flask which I found out contained blood and milk." Paintings such as *Elmina (Slave) Castle* (1972) and *Before the Mayflower* (1972) reflect this intense experience of travelling through the land of his forefathers.

Smith journeyed on to Dar Es Salaam where he met with a friend, Babatunde Fodayemi; he also saw Kondo Rock paintings in the National Museum of Tanzania and he saw old slave castles and ruins in Bagamoyo. On this visit he traveled to Fort Jesus, in Mombasa. Sites such as these would become the subjects of paintings, such as *Fort Jesus* (1984), upon his return to the States. In Harar "we saw the Hyena Man feed wild hyena at night and we saw and walked among the Somali people who are nomads and traveled down from Somaliland to central Ethiopia with their camels."⁷ The visual wealth of such imagery seeps into the crevices of his paintings and prints.

In his African work Smith weaves a powerful tapestry of rich, dense color filled with exotic figures, animals, and plant life exuding a joyous response to life itself. The smell and feel and heat of the African landscape is palpable, the texture of village life tangible. Unlike the restless explorations of the sixties images, Smith's African subjects are modulated by a pulsating rhythm and harmony inherent in the place itself.

This use of African themes and stylistic elements was not new to Black American artists, but for Smith and his generation it was a rediscovery. During the Harlem Renaissance they first appeared in the work

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Artist in Paradise, from 'Saturday night in Harlem' series, 1954
oil on canvas 48 x 36". Collection of the artist.

of young Black artists and were continued during the Works Progress Administration, but as government support for art projects waned so did the careers of many of these artists.⁸ To Smith's generation fell the responsibility of reinstating their heritage and doing it with a virtuosity that could not be dismissed by the establishment.

Smith's work provides a conduit, carrying the lyrical thread of African art through its permutations in Southern, Northern, and Caribbean folk painting to reflect the total Black experience. His art and his message is one of inclusion, universalizing the experience of Blacks the world over. For Smith, his travels in Africa solidified an already well-developed spiritual and ethnic bond with the birthplace of his ancestors. His arrival there was a moment of epiphany and his response was both intuitive and wholehearted. "I wanted to feel the mystery of walking in ancient civilizations. I wanted to get a feeling of the whole panorama and splendor of Africa...what a tremendous feeling – it was like going back in time and space."⁹

One tangible result was the *The Dry Bone Series* (1982-1984), a group of multi-media works created by Smith within both a New World and African context. The glowing orbs can reflect both the intensely burning sun in Africa and a hot autumn day in the Bronx. Figures silhouetted within a horizontal frieze link to the primordial themes on Dogon (Mali) granary doors but also to the crowded life of the New York streets.

Africa inspired experiments with the canvases themselves as Smith began to add sand and rope for texture and meaning, with reference to the magical *N'kisi* objects of the Kongo culture. In this culture, these objects—made up of everyday materials such as string and rope, symbolizing the native peoples; irregular shaped patches of sand, reminiscent of ancient footsteps; dry pigment, implying rock surfaces and weathered stone; and fabric and nails, and can dictate human actions

and therefore contain great power. The tactility of the surfaces lends a complexity to the composition, distilled into an emotional energy. The result feels wholly African, gorgeous in its richness of color, joyous in its visual import. Adeptly, Smith offers us the whole experience of the African diaspora. Thus, through surface modulation and color choice, his images achieve a sculptural quality not normally associated with paint on canvas. Extracting images and forms from their familiar, at times mundane, environment, Smith reconfigures them in an abstract motif, infused with new or different significance, thus heightening the visual drama.

Another notable impact on Smith's work in the 1980s was the effervescent energy of jazz. He translated the smoky crowded energy and seductive women of the jazz clubs into dense, gestural expressions in monoprint, a technique he began using in 1983. For Smith, listening to jazz and blues summoned up the richness of Black culture. The immediacy of the moment of sound is captured in the spontaneity inherent in the monoprint process – quick, energetic and improvised, like the music itself. Smith emulates the sound and the movement of the musicians and also the atmosphere by generally choosing black paper to print on and oil and printer's inks that almost bubble on the surface. Smith smoothly negotiates his way between the division of high and low art. "My monoprints are diffused washes of color like waves of sounds. The lights on the stage flicker and cause the movements on the faces and clothes to take on strange shapes and colors, causing shadows and other ghostly effects like masks, or mosaics. Heightened by the excitement of the music, the atmosphere becomes like a phantasmagoria or another world. People cry out and holler, and strange grunts, even curses, come forth, but this particular scene has its roots in Black folklore and culture. Listening to jazz and blues is like being caught up in a séance or Juju."¹⁰

Music has always been an essential component of Smith's life. Playing piano and alto saxophone as a child and listening to his father serenade his mother on the piano, Smith found that music was always integral to his sense of self. Jazz reflected the essence of the Black movement, the sounds indigenous to Black culture, a unique identity whose popularity expanded in the 1960s and 70s. Jazz, like Smith's art, encompasses and ties together the Black cultural experience of the both the North and the South while also reflecting the strains of Africa. The musicians themselves are emblems of the cultural power of the Black diaspora.

In the 1990s Smith returned to the *Dry Bone Series* and continued to work with monotype. Critic Michael Brenson pinpointed the essence of this work, noting "Mr. Smith loves to paint... He puts great care into his surfaces, whose lush, sometimes dappled, occasionally glistening textures establish the emotional pitch. In the mottled wall of *In the Yard* the surface seems to be a wall of memory and sound... At the same time that Mr. Smith reaches out to many cultures and styles, he struggles to distill form and feeling. In *Festival of Homowo*, the sky erupts above huts wrapped in sand, and the entire landscape has a sweeping, elusive simplicity. This is an artist who is almost nomadic and yet who also seems to know exactly who he is."¹¹

At this time, Smith also began an ambitious mural, a five foot by fifty-seven foot oil and collage on canvas titled *Jonkonnu Festival* *Wid/The Frizzly Rooster Band*, installed in the lobby of the Oberia D. Dempsey Multi-Service Center in central Harlem. The figures are composites, summing up Smith's experience and perceptions. This project was followed by two mosaics (13 inches by 20 feet each) in the subway on 116th Street and Lenox Avenue.¹² *Minton's Playhouse* and *Movers and Shakers* pay homage to the history of Harlem; *Minton's Playhouse* epitomized the excitement and popularity of the improvisational jazz

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style that exploded in the 1940s in the Harlem nightclubs. In *Movers and Shakers* Smith uses brilliantly colored tesserae (glass tiles) to give animation and depth to the subject of sixteen Harlem visionaries, surrounded by historic and modern buildings that serve to anchor Harlem's cultural and economic life. He also received an important commission from lawyer and financier Reginald F. Lewis, CEO of TLC Beatrice Holdings International, a longtime friend and patron of Smith's. Lewis asked Smith to do his portrait for the Reginald F. Lewis International Law Center at Harvard University. The portrait was dedicated after Lewis's death by Mrs. Loida N. Lewis and family and the artist in October 1998 on the 30th anniversary of Lewis's entrance into Harvard

In all his work, Smith takes us along on a journey; his narrative moves smoothly between the African-American and African experiences. Using iconography interpreted as both personal and universal, his observations are poignant and unflinching. "I remember that Bird (Charlie Parker) once said to me 'Vince, stick to your vision; don't let nobody turn you around.'"¹³ Smith has indeed stuck to his vision: "What sustained me was the fact that I was doing something significant, that I was hopefully making a contribution to the African-American community and the world."¹⁴

Nancy E. Green is senior curator at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University.

Notes

¹ John Canaday. "Art: Vincent Smith's Expressive Style," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1973.

² Vincent Smith as quoted in "A Painter Looks Back," *National Scene Magazine Supplement*, Volume XI, Number 10, November 1980, p. 12-13 picked up in 44 newspapers.

³ Sharon F. Patton. *Vincent D. Smith Riding on a Blue Note: Monoprints and Works on Paper on Jazz Themes* (New York: Henry Street Settlement, 1989), unpaginated.

⁴ Sharon Fitzgerald. "Vincent Smith: Sage, Bohemian, Prince," *American Visions*, Volume 14, Number 3, June/July 1999, Cover and pp 22-27 illustrations and cover.

⁵ Quoted in "Vincent Smith: One-Person Show," *Amsterdam News*, 1969

⁶ Vincent Smith, *Unbroken Circle: Exhibition of African-American Artists of the 1930s and 1940s*, Kenkelaba House, New York, unpaginated.

⁷ Vincent Smith. Unpublished letter to the National Endowment on the Arts, March 19, 1974.

⁸ See Dr. Peter Mark, "African Influences in Contemporary Black American Painting," *Art Voices*, January/February 1981

⁹ Sharon F. Patton. "Vincent Smith: Images and Evocations," *Black American Literature Forum*, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, Spring 1985, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp 26-27.

¹⁰ Excerpt from the artist's writings to David C. Driskell, September 10, 1987 as cited in David C. Driskell, "Part I: An Overview," in *Vincent Smith: Combinations, Permutations, and Transformations: An Overview*, p. 8. Art Galleries of Ramapo College, 1988, pp 4-8.

¹¹ Michael Brenson. "Review/Art," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1990.

¹² See "Timelines" *Metropolitan Transit Authority*, New York, 1999.

¹³ The artist quoted in Sharon F. Patton, "Riding on a Blue Note: Monoprints and Works on Paper by Vincent D. Smith," *Voices of the African Diaspora*, Vol VIII, Number 2, p. 17.

¹⁴ Marsha Miro. "Social Commentaries," *Detroit Free Press*, September 29, 1991.

Jonkonnu Festival, 1996, offset lithograph, 26 x 34". Collection of the artist.



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