

ALEXANDRE

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THE TWO SIDES OF VINCENT SMITH At The Studio Museum

By DIANE WEATHERS

The works of two Vincent Smiths are currently on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem. One is a creator of monuments — large oil paintings that literally erupt with color: reds, greens, yellow, oranges. Rich earth tones seep out of the canvas — like molten rock seeps out of the earth — and surround the images and forms of those to whom homage is being paid.

The other is Vincent Smith the print-maker, whose etchings are more like cartoon line drawings. A stickler for subtle details, he fills in obscure corners of space with the many symbols and props of the various performers in the Black ritual. Signs in windows proclaim “meat cheap” — “2 rooms-cold water-\$65.” Brothers stand on corners and rap.

Two Vincent Smiths: the former is flamboyant and loud — downright boisterous, while the latter is a quiet doodler, given to understatement, caricatures, and just simply documenting what's going on. Both are seemingly different facets of the same man, but both are equally as potent.

Vincent Smith is recognized as one of this country's more important contemporary artists. Among Afro-American artists, he ranks in a class along with a few others who've been around for a while and gotten their share of knocks, yet in spite of it all have been able to do somewhat more than just hold their own as artists.

The show at the Studio Museum will run thru March 3rd, and features 72 works including watercolors, drawings and pen and ink studies, some of which were based on Smith's recent visit to East Africa last summer. His works in other media however, seem to lack some of the excitement and momentum of his larger oils and etchings. All those who were fortunate enough to see his one-man exhibition last spring at the Lacarda Gallery, probably remember leaving the show with emotions charged and spirits soaring. This last show consisted primarily of his oils. It was nothing short of a religious experience.

While not as strong overall as that past exhibit, there is still much to be found in both the message which Vincent Smith articulates and the technique and style of particular pieces. His subjects are often revealed through windows, doorways and other “openings” — a motif which the artist confesses stems from his at one time being a peeker into folks' windows while riding on el trains through Brownsville.

In both “The Super's Daughter” (oil) and “Death House U.S.A.” (etching) the feeling is that the artist is deliberately giving us a partial view of his subjects which in a sense tempts the viewer to subconsciously peer past the window, past the doorway and the openings in order to see more.

The technique that Vincent Smith uses in his oil paintings is particularly

fascinating. In “Coal Duck” for instance, an epic painting which “hits” you as soon as you enter the museum's west gallery, swatches of fabric, canvas, and scraps of metal help define his strong Black male subject. He mixes paint (again those intense brilliant colors) with coarse sand or gravel, along with small bits of found objects. The result is a work which appears almost organic — something you might find “growing” in a tropical rain forest (what him doing messing with mother nature anyway?)

“Coal Duck” is a strong and captivating work and is certainly a proper tribute.

Vincent Smith is “about” paying tributes to unrecognized heroes, and making visual statements about the villains, the good guys and all of the other participants in the sometimes painful but often joyous drama of everyday living Black.

As an artist, even though an accomplished one, Vincent Smith is still growing and experimenting, and readily admits that he needs more time to fully and totally state what he is trying to say.

Just looking back at the work he has already done is in itself reason enough to be proud to be around the same time he is. He is an artist and craftsman with tremendous vitality. Just thinking about him makes tomorrow more exciting.

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