

ALEXANDRE

Revisiting Vincent Smith's Affluent Visual Inquiry

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Visit the quiet and passionately inquiring mind of Vincent Smith and what is gently revealed is an impressive and dynamic display of black history, memory and creative workmanship in a very unique visual experience. Undaunted by the difficulties one encounters in a racially repressive society in which many African Americans often struggle daily to live above the poverty line, Vincent Smith, like his life long friend, Jacob Lawrence, has chosen art as the vehicle through which he speaks to the world airing his concerns about our humanity as well as our inhumanity to each other. Smith's art examines, chronicles and visually comments upon an important segment of American history thereby singling him out as one of the few remaining American artists whose work is truly social commentary in nature.

But Smith's art is not bound by the usual rules or even formula of what one expects from an artist who devotes a considerable amount of time to creating works of art that comment upon society. Smith's art is as much about process and the creative use of the materials of painting as it is about content. The way the artist looks at the subject the wishes to paint is so often guided by the style in which he works. However, with Smith, there is always stylistic consistency commensurate with a personal process in painting that seemingly belongs entirely to him. 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 subjects. In recent years, African themes have emerged in the artist's oeuvre that reinforce Smith's interest in the African diaspora, but the memorable compositions of the 1960s and 70s stand out to me as a monument to the artist's import in art.

Over the last four decades, few things have changed stylistically or image-wise in the way Smith designs the subjects he presents. Compositions such as *Waiting*, 1968, *Attrition*, 1972, and *Coal Duck*, 1972, bring us face to face with the social circumstances of a nation, indeed, a people who are poor, hungry, deprived and limited by the seemingly unchanging social order. With the creation of a colorful painterly format of heavily encrusted surfaces that make textured tapestries within the work encouraging, among other things, our desire to experience the art by touching it, Smith brings a world of discovery to painting.

In addition to being heavily textured, some of the works, including *Before the Mayflower*, 1972 and *Girl with Flowers*, 1972 are collaged with textiles and paper, a device Smith uses in a very personal way. *Fire and Brimstone*, 1968, is a handsomely crafted work that encourages a constant dialogue between the viewer and the august preacher whose right hand is raised so as to emphasize the sacred or perhaps, the social message he reveals. This straightforward way of presenting a subject effectively framed within a limited architectural space shows the artistic kinship Smith's work has with that done by artists William H. Johnson and Romare Bearden. Neither of these pioneering black artists influenced Smith's content as much as his way of seeing and learning how to frame things in a way that is visually engaging. The close kinship that Smith's artistry shows with Bearden and Johnson is not an isolated case. African American artists throughout history have found comfort in being able to look among themselves for inspiration

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and encouragement. In the same manner, Smith's textured compositions in which a roughened surface is seen are somewhat akin to the handsomely crafted painting of his friend, Walter Williams. Smith makes the experience of crafting the surface treatment of a given work an inviting, and indeed, a very vital part of the visual inquiry associated with his work.

The figural dimension of Smith's art is bold without being overpowering. It is expressionistic without the impuissance of action painting. Most importantly, Smith's work is a passionate inquiry into the nature of things and we see it from the hand of a visually affluent artist.

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