

ALEXANDRE

Art in America

and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, in Cambridge, members of the Pan African Liberation Committee protested Harvard's holdings in Gulf Oil stock and charged that the university had been complicit by association with the Portuguese government in the slaughter of Africans in Mozambique and Angola.

With such matters on his mind, Smith (1929-2003; see obituary, p. 150) produced a faithful caricature of Uncle Sam as Porky Pig in the woodcut *Sam's a Pig* (1972). Arms thrown wide underneath an American flag, the figure seems to echo the cartoon character with an unexpressed "That's all, folks!" In *Before the Mayflower* (1972), "Sam" is a central figure in a patriot's haberdashery of red, white and blue, as he bursts through the upper reaches of the easel-scaled canvas, out of a brilliant impasto, painted wet-on-wet. Scattered about its surface are collaged images of particular interest to Smith, which he culled from print media: a black musician, soldiers, a mother nursing a child. As a recurrent element, Smith included the stylized form of an African mask, like the somber kings of Rouault.

The trace of the artist's hand was only implicit in the 1950s. In *Street Scene* (1952), from the "Saturday Night in Harlem" series, flames burst through the windows of buildings in the background. The painting demonstrates a clarity of line and composition that scarcely hints at Smith's later, more highly worked paintings. The fine choreography of Smith's players in *Pool Room* (1954) is informed by a careful

Vincent Smith at Alexandre

The woodcuts that in some ways introduced this 20-year survey of Vincent Smith's prints and paintings have the gothic clarity that can distinguish the medium, and are coeval with his color-fraught paintings of the troubled year of their making, 1972. While Nixon ordered the Watergate cover-up

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Vincent Smith: *Coal Duck*, 1972, oil, sand and collage on canvas, 48 by 68 inches; at Alexandre.

impasto of white shirtsleeves and inflected with colorful balls on the green fields of the table and the rays of a hanging lamp.

In his day, Smith mixed with a Greenwich Village stew of writers, artists and jazz musicians, and was involved in the civil rights and black arts movements. By the time he made *The Soul Brothers* (ca. 1969), he had reached a wild maturity in his work. Here he foregrounds his subjects on an intensely modulated field of fiery hues, framing them in an urban landscape with a finely wrought architecture of painted lines.

A single figure dominates the roughly 4-by-6-foot painting *Coal Duck* (1972). A black Everyman, he wears a medallion on his chest and a tunic collaged of brightly flowered fabric under an open garment spattered with the action of its painting. Smith incorporates the grit and detritus of city streets in the form of sand and collage, and applies an unrepentant palette to his surfaces to give them life. He explained the code: "coal" is cognate with black, and "duck" shorthand for "sitting duck," by which he meant that he was giving voice to an expression that a black man is a sitting duck in the white man's world. —Edward Leffingwell

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