

# ALEXANDRE

## Vincent Smith



**Vincent Smith: *For My People***  
**January 8 - February 26, 2022**  
**291 Grand Street, New York**

Alexandre is pleased to present a solo exhibition of paintings by Vincent Smith (b. 1929, Brooklyn, New York; d. 2003, New York, New York), *Vincent Smith: For My People*. The exhibition will include sixteen oil paintings ranging from 1954 to 1972, depicting the celebrations and struggles of African American life in New York City throughout this socially and politically turbulent period. Throughout his decades-long career,

Smith served as narrator of the experiences of the communities of Brooklyn and Harlem in which he lived and reveled.

While struggling to support himself in his early years as an artist, Smith lived a bohemian lifestyle, attending jazz clubs most nights of the week alongside his famed musician friends, and training his eye as a careful documenter of the everyday. Later, he became involved with the fight for equality in the civil rights movement. Out of this environment was born Smith's drive to create a true expression of his people and times, rendered in his own singular modernist language.

Common subjects included neighbors, building supers, revolutionary activists, and scenes of the streets and the lively jazz world. The palettes of these paintings are most often led by deep browns, reds, and blacks, punctuated with elegant bursts of bright yellows, oranges, and crimsons, appearing almost as if the artist has lit his gritty darkened canvases from within. Driven by a combination of influences that Times critic Holland Cotter, in his review for the artist's first exhibition with the gallery in 2003, described as "a little reminiscent of Rouault's expressionism, but applied to a Social Realist art inflected with references to African culture," these works recall the composition of African masks and sculptures Smith studied throughout his career, as well as the work of the Mexican muralists and German expressionists. Smith was also guided by his friends and contemporaries Jacob Lawrence, Walter Williams, and Gregorio Prestopino.

While deeply engaged with the mainstream aesthetics of his time, Smith utilized a very personal visual language of stylistic forms that consistently prioritize the artist's role as narrator. The expressive dark walls of apartment buildings serve as shorthand for the narrative distance between the known and the unknown, the communal and the private. Smith often defined, in a bold and straightforward manner, the boundary between what the painting will and will not reveal to us, playing with the viewer's perception of the story he put forth in a deliberately self-aware fashion. As written by David C. Driskell,

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Smith often “symbolically intervene[d] to alert the viewer as if relating a gospel truth, constantly calling upon his audience to verify and compare their own experience with his.”

In this way Smith expressed the unbridled joy of the everyday energy of the New York City streets in his early works from the 1950s, such as his much lauded *Saturday Night in Harlem* series. In the '60s, these scenes gave way to narrative social commentary, documenting the unrest and turmoil as well as the peaceful community organizing of the growing civil rights movement, as seen in works like *For My People* (1965) and *Martin Luther King* (1967). His paintings continued upon this style in the '70s, becoming more active and aggressive with the introduction of sand and cloth to his repertoire of materials and collage to his technique.

Largely overlooked in the field of American painting of his era, Vincent Smith's work reflects his desire to change the white-washed art historical narrative through documenting the dynamic nature of life in African American communities in New York. He continued this work throughout his long career, facilitating dialogue between African American artists of many disciplines, and helping to curate exhibitions of their work. As Smith said of his career, “I remember that Bird [Charlie Parker] once said to me, ‘Vince, stick to your vision; don't let nobody turn you around,’ 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.”

Vincent Smith (b. 1929, Brooklyn, New York; d. 2003, New York, New York) was an artist, teacher, and informed student of art history. His work is in numerous public collections including: Art Institute of Chicago; Brooklyn Museum; Detroit Institute of Arts; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Newark Museum of Art; Rhode Island School of Design Museum; Smithsonian American Art Museum; Studio Museum of Harlem; Whitney Museum of American Art; Yale University Art Gallery, as well as many prestigious private collections. Smith attended the Art Students League (1953), Brooklyn Museum Art School (1953/1956) and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (1955). Exhibitions include Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ (2001); New York Public Library (1999); Bass Museum of Art, Miami (1998); Middlebury College Museum of Art (1998); Art Institute of Chicago (1996); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1995); de Young Museum, San Francisco (1994); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1992); Baltimore Museum of Art (1992); Henry Street Settlement, New York (1990); Museum of Modern Art, New York (1988); Terada Warehouse Exhibition Hall, Tokyo, Japan (1987); Howard University, Washington, DC (1985); Larcada Gallery, New York (1977), Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York (1977); National Arts Center, Lagos, Nigeria (1976); Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME (1974); Studio Museum in Harlem (1974, 1969); Whitney Museum of American Art (1971), and the Brooklyn Museum Art School Gallery (1955), among others.

**General inquiries:**

[inquiries@alexandregallery.com](mailto:inquiries@alexandregallery.com)

**Press inquiries:**

[team@danamannix.com](mailto:team@danamannix.com)

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