

CATALOG ESSAY

Encounters Ray Smith

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In his enormous sensuous paintings, Ray Smith reformulates the confrontational murals of the great Mexican mural painters, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The highly politicized public murals of the Mexican Renaissance based on a deep commitment to Mexican culture and social revolution are transformed by Smith into the giant enigmas of our contemporary political and spiritual reality. Smith interweaves the sophisticated and complex intellectual and spiritual traditions of central Mexico with artistic devices taken from Anglo-European modernism to create troubling mixed metaphors with layers of symbolic and hieroglyphic meaning.

Although inspired by the enveloping presence of the great muralists, Smith departs, in execution and technique, from their methods. They worked in fresco, embedded in public walls and moved only with great difficulty. Smith works in a studio. He uses oil (sometimes combined with liquid wax or other materials) on small wood panels that collectively create the giant scale of the complete work, but also provide the possibility of moving it. His use of panels invokes the technical process of the small altar rather than the public mural. Finally, the muralists used a simple vocabulary of realistic forms that could be readable to the masses, as a way of educating them to the history, goals and benefits of the new society. Smith speaks in elliptical references. Interpretation of the paintings must encompass spiritual, political, historical and emotional layers. Even as the paintings appear very present, obvious and physical because of the huge scale, seductive surfaces and paint handling, and illusionistic figures and animals, they evade obvious narrative reading.

Smith's own background is embedded in the mixed nationalities of the Mexico-United States border area. His forbears came from Basque-Mexican background, some of them first settling on large land grants from the King of Spain before 1810. His forbears played a role in the war against the French Intervention, 1862-1867 and also in the Mexican Revolution, 1910 - 1920. His great great grandfather shipped guns on the Rio Grande during the Civil War. A later generation moved after the Mexican revolution of the teens to the United States side of the border, but as Mexican citizens. Smith's mother married a Texan and became an American citizen, but she returned to Mexico City after Smith's birth, where he was raised.

He attended high school in the United States. Deeply aware of his twin roots, Smith negotiates between the cultures of Mexico and the United States (in its Anglo-European base). The layers of fantasy and metamorphosis in his imagery are pure Mexican reality, where the spiritual world is as real as today's lunch, ancestors still walk the earth and animals and humans are spiritually linked.

In *Rapto des Frutas*(Rape of the Fruits),1990, a farmer of African descent wearing a lush Caravaggeschi blouse, holds a plate of exotic fruits in the foreground. Already in this seemingly straightforward motif Smith layers European art historical associations, as with the fruit dangling Bacchus figures of Caravaggio, with Mexican references in the agricultural worker (quoted from a mid nineteenth century Mexican painting) who presents the fruit as an offering to us, the padrone, much as workers still offer fruits to the governor of a province in ritual dances in some rural Mexican towns. From Bacchus to agricultural rituals is not a long stretch, in fact, as the original bacchanalia were in the time of the wine harvest. Yet, the intent of this figure offering us pineapple and melon, is masked. Smith states that his work uses "double speak," that any one meaning is never complete, but always means something else. This is not simply metaphor, where one form stands for

another, it is more fluid in its sphere, moving between physical, spiritual, emotional, past, present, future simultaneously. Such a placement for his discourse is comparable to that of Mexican fiction such as that of Gabriel Garcia Marques or Octavio Paz, in which meaning is embedded in a labyrinth of connotations and references. Nothing is fixed or static.

The enigma of the farmer in *Rapto des Frutas* is compounded by the fourteen birds of prey that hover around him, each with a colored light bulb over his head. The birds include owls, eagles, falcons, hawks, crows and osprey, taken illustrations in encyclopedias, but they exist in some strange intermediate space, on, or near, bare, unnatural tree branches. The light bulbs over their heads, large and small, red, yellow and blue, are like modern spiritual haloes (although they are probably also a pun on the comic strip emblem for an idea). Smith was impressed by the transformation in Mexican Catholic churches when they changed from votive candles to votive electric lights. The light bulb represents a prayer, a spiritual offering, an idea, and also a part of the artists own persona. The birds may have spiritual references, but they can also be read in terms of political emblems, eagles can refer to the United States for example and the preying on Mexican land by various nations. Although Smith stated the farmer had stolen the fruit from the birds, it is equally possible that the birds are trying to steal his fruit as plunderers. In the third layer of the painting, as a background titled up in a Cezannesque perspective, is a hard edge grid that could be read as cultivated fields, or as color fields, another pun between art, agriculture and history. Smith has also identified the birds as preying on elitism which could be presented by the abstract fields. Thus each image exists in many dimensions, metamorphoses and acts on its setting, even as it elusively escapes any fixed interpretation.

Love Hunger 1989-1991 has a more obviously violent character. It draws from Picasso's surrealist phase, an on-going discourse in Smith's work who has

done several paintings that re-define the famous **Guernica** into *Guernimex*, using his personal vocabulary of figural references. *Love Hunger* quotes the tortured female heads of Picasso in the 1930s, when the artist moved from one complex female relationship to another. Smith's painting conveys the violence, destructiveness, and obsession of love as well as referring to its nurturing.

La Grande Vache (The Large Cow), 1991 addresses emotionally more ambiguous references, which need to be read layer by layer before the overall content emerges. The large or grand cow of the title is the flat skin of a calf repeated as an abstract black pattern on the ochre/yellow background. This flat background of blackened skins functions as a decorative pattern, a reference perhaps to the decorative painting of the 1970s, but created here from an animal form that has been reduced to a (literally) shadowy outline. The decorative quality encompasses two figures in red who dance in a tight embrace, one holding a flashlight, the other a handful of masks on strings. These figures, lifted from a Picabia painting, invoke, the Dance of the Nations in the "New World Order." The masquerade of the simplicity of the cold war has been replaced by the reality of an interdependent world. Other masks, in some cases quoted from artists such as Ensor or Picasso, in other cases invented by the artist as a reference to the carnival of nations, appear throughout the work.

The dominating motif is the huge toad that squats in the foreground, with a map of the world painted on his body, his immense eyes gazing fixedly at us. He is inspired indirectly and subliminally, by the huge and unique pre-Columbian frogs in the Dallas Museum of Art collection which Smith saw in the late 1970s. The toad is the artist, and the world, the guardian and the guarded, it projects forward into the room, as if it is about to leap from the wall of confusion and de-masquerade. It is almost in our world, but it is unable to move. Some types of toads in Mexico have powerful drugs in the glands of their neck. When added to beer they have the effect

of an hallucinatory drug. When eaten they can kill you. This toad can be either a source of power or a harbinger of death. As the nations dance in crazy grip, the toad remains inert. The stasis of the toad/earth is countered by the intense dance of the (perhaps violent) figures.

Several frogs, positioned as if for dissection, actively reach out amphibious appendages to move on the surface of the masquerade. Frogs appear after a rain and are a sign of fertility. Here they appear active and full of the possibility of new life. *La Grande Vache* quotes from European art, Picabia, Picasso, Ensor and others, but in an obviously emblematic way in order to suggest the layers of illusion in our society, and the bizarre myth of the "new world order" which is, in fact, a new chaos. Smith's ability to see European artistic icons with ironic detachment, based on his early development within the Mexican culture, allows him to quote its paintings as a vocabulary of forms that can be reinvested with newly ambiguous meanings.

Other paintings in the exhibition combine more straightforward quotations from European art, as in *Pintura Francesca I* 1993 in which the female nude obviously invites us to think of Ingres' *Turkish Bather*. She is colonized by multicolored frogs, that sit on her head, crawl on her back and collect around her in an abusive/repulsive invasion of her body. There are two orders of reality, that of the frogs, and that of the nude. While they appear to interact, the nude is a foreign presence within the frog's environment. If the frog's are seen as an emblem of Mexico (and our initial reaction to the frogs as an "ugly" presence on the "beautiful" figure, is much like our reaction to Mexicans as foreigners) , they become a reference to the colonial process, but there is ambiguity in the relationship, who is victim, who is victor. The frogs' environment is inhabited by an alien presence, but that presence is not destroying them.

Erotica Neurotica II 1992 is calm and domesticated by comparison. The background is a deconstruction of Leger's large mechanical bourgeois nudes into

separate blocks of color overlaid with an outline of a figure who is holding the familiar motif of a light bulb as an emblem of spiritual modernism. Around the figure, signifying domesticity, sit many placid dogs of various domestic types that people have (in the United States) as household pets. Rather than conflict, (which appears in an earlier version of this same subject) the mood is calm. The two vocabularies of the painting, the modernist and domestic realism, co-habitate peaceably. Smith seems to have come to terms with his complex bi-cultural roots and to present here a type of resolution. As he stated, the relationship between the several worlds here is as comfortable as "one big huge lap dog."

Ray Smith's work, as presented in this exhibition, provides layered emblems of the contradictions and tensions between cultures and nations, as well as the possibilities for peaceful co-existence and cross-fertilization. In the ambiguity and contradictions of these paintings, using vocabularies from two hemispheres, is a contemporary variation of the murals of the Mexican Renaissance. Rather than promoting the clear agenda of a new revolutionary society as Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros did in the early twentieth century, Smith invokes the changing values and shifting realities of the post-modern world at the end of the century.

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