Hudson, Suzanne
"Josh Smith: Luhring Augustine"
Artforum.
Vol. XLV, No. 10. Summer 2007. P. 495

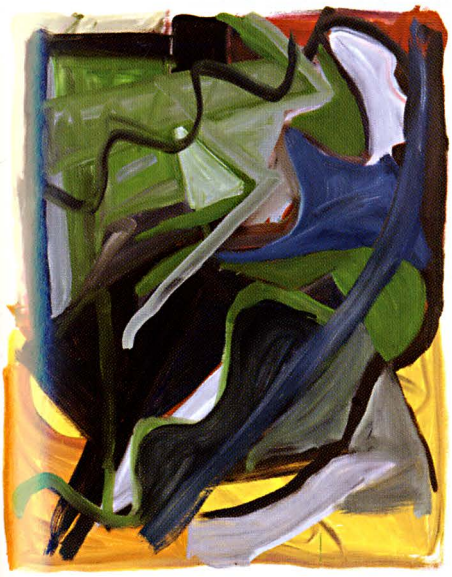
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Josh Smith

LUHRING AUGUSTINE GALLERY

Around 1957, Robert Ryman began using his name (at first RRYMAN and subsequently just RYMAN) as a compositional element in his paintings. When asked about this some decades later, Ryman explained that the signature was a traditional device, albeit not in the way he put it to use. Cleaved both from signification and subjective presence, these inscriptions read first and foremost as lines or curves, which is to say, visual incidents not unlike—or qualitatively distinct from—the surrounding passages of brushy facture. Akin to a word spoken so often as to void it semantically, RYMAN, repeated again and again, proposed a ubiquity meant to negate authority.



Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas, 60 x 48".

In one of those odd, too-good-to-be-true synchronies, another New York–based artist by way of Tennessee has recognized identity's malleability: Over the past few years, Josh Smith has manipulated his own name as a kind of cipher. *J*s careen across supports and "SMITH"s clump in a corner, willfully productive of a buoyantly meaningless abstraction. But for Smith's recent outing—his first at Luhring Augustine—he mostly jettisoned the autograph (hooked *J*s still surface residually here and there, but gone were canvases crammed full of letters). Telling was the show's title, "Abstraction," which evidenced a charismatic withdrawal relative to 2006's "Dial J for Josh" at Power House, Memphis. Likewise, it was far from clear that the related announcement (some canvases looked like the black-and-white poster while copies of it also became grounds for others) for the Chelsea show was indeed for Smith's exhibition. For an artist most frequently compared to the self-propagandizing Martin Kippenberger, such a move refocused attention from the name as guarantor of subjectivity to categorical signifier of "painting."

In this, Smith's foray into abstraction gains force, with strokes unmoored from connotation—representational or otherwise—in much the same manner as suggested by his play with nomenclature. Having tested the possibilities of SMITH, and just maybe pushed them to exhaustion, next up is the gesture. Signs of "art" abound here. In addition to unaltered palettes standing in for, and as, finished abstract paintings, there are surfaces so liquid they might still be wet and arrangements so familiar they all but shriek "generic modernism." Standardized scales and formats reveal Smith's training as a printmaker, with certain aspects serving as guides for multiple iterations—the dots, squiggle, diagonal line, and zigzag of one painting are deployed variously in other works. Similarly, a coil recurs, rendering canvases less sequential than interchangeable.

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Admitting the rapidity and profligacy of Smith's production is part of the point. The pieces are tossed-off, almost automatic, yet still organized according to the logic of the template. In "Abstraction," this industry came to a head, as viewers who returned might have found. Typically mimetic of their venue, Smith's hangs underscore context, and in the cool commercial setting here, his paintings were almost too well behaved, coming precariously close to that which they were presumably aping. That is, until midway through the show's run, when he switched out paintings and reconfigured the installation with new works, some painted since the opening—disorienting, to be sure. One had to try to remember what had been where and what was different, then ask why and how the before and after mattered. Whatever the answer (More to sell? Homage to Richard Tuttle? Rejoinder to *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith, who had written disparagingly of the "big-box" gallery phenomena only days before the reinstallation?), Smith's intervention coerced a temporal narrative from the objects at his disposal and promised that there would still be—even in aftermath—more to come.

—*Suzanne Hudson*