

Josh Smith painted forty-seven paintings directly on the wall to create *On The Water*, his exhibition at Deitch Studios.

There is a feeling of the uncanny when one enters the space. One senses that there is something off, not quite right. There is a brief period of perceptual adjustment when the viewer begins to realize that the five by four foot rectangles, spaced evenly around the walls like standard canvases, are not actually canvases. They are paintings painted right onto the wall.

Josh Smith wanted to create a show of paintings that looked like something else. The intention was to make “art without an art object” and to take the commodity out of the art. There is nothing in the exhibition to covet or to buy. The work is only to be looked at. He wanted to “bring painting down.”

The work has a lightness and a sense of weightlessness. It also has an immediacy and a feeling of directness. The forty-seven works were completed in just three and one half days. The space between the paintings is important and Smith recalls that the most difficult part of the project was restraining himself from doing too much.

The paintings have a fluidity that reflects the flow of water on the river, visible through the gallery windows. The paintings seem to float. The paintings are in fact all water based. They are painted with India ink and gouache, which is like an opaque watercolor. Smith describes his use of gouache and the bright palette of many of the works as “concentrated vibrant watercolor.” Unlike in oil painting, the colors do not get muddy. The colors remain sharp and crisp. In Smith’s words, “there is no power loss.” He emphasizes that “everything that went into the paintings is still there.”

“Painting is like talking for me,” Smith explains. “It is how I communicate.” He thinks of his five by four foot painting size as a standard template, like the stack of composition paper on a writer’s desk. “The size of the paintings fits people well,” he says. Smith thinks of himself as his first viewer and claims to remember everything that he makes. In the Deitch Studios installation, one can see a whole room full of paintings at once. The viewer can see how the paintings are made, and Smith asserts that the viewers could actually make the paintings themselves. The process is deliberately demystified. Smith says that he has been criticized for making too much work. In fact, he thinks that he does not make enough work.

Josh Smith is known for three themes, all of which are explored in the Deitch Studios installation:

The Signature

Smith looked for something with the meaning stripped out of it. “Josh Smith” is a bland name, and an ideal armature for painting.

The Leaf

The image is derived from an actual oak leaf that the artist keeps in a cigar box in his studio. He has painted it several hundred times. The leaf is softer and more “figurative” than the signature. With the leaf and the fish, he is trying to “show more heart.”

The Fish

The fish can be painted in three or four lines. “You cannot paint it wrong.”

Josh Smith has drawn on his print making background and his study of the work of Picasso, Duchamp, de Kooning, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Polke, Wool, Oehlen and Kippenberger to create a new approach to abstraction. His “simple” work opens a fresh and complex set of possibilities for painting.

On The Water is a collaborative project between Luhring Augustine and Deitch Projects.

Deitch Studios offers artists the opportunity to create a body of work in the space and then present it for a period of several months. It is located in a large warehouse space directly on the East River at the end of 44th Drive in Long Island City. It is a ten to fifteen minute walk from PS 1 and the Sculpture Center.

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