

Hendrik Smit Possibly the Last All-out, Balls-Out "Action Painter"

Having put aside his brushes some time back, the Dutch painter Hendrik Smit paints directly with his hands. Unlike so many other things in today's novelty-driven, publicity-hungry art world, this is not a gimmick or a bid for attention on Smit's part, but a serious attempt to involve himself in a more intimate and visceral manner with the act of painting. And it succeeds admirably on evidence of the paintings Smit exhibits regularly at Monserat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, New York and the even larger number of his paintings available for viewing on his website: www.hendriksmit.nl.

Indeed, Smit's use of his hands rather than brushes gives his abstract canvases a unique gestural thrust, a signature style unlike that of any other artist at work today. On first acquaintance with Smit's dynamically rhythmical compositions, with their dramatically splashy, surging, rhythmic forms and brilliant primaries often juxtaposed with fleshy pinks and other complementary hues, one is innately tempted to make comparisons to de Kooning for the most obvious reasons: both are Dutchmen through and through (anyone who ever spent time with de Kooning, as this writer had the good fortune to do once, a few years before his death, can attest that he never lost his accent); both work on a heroic scale putting the full force of the body behind their strokes; both are brilliant colorists and employ bold forms that vacillate between the lyrical and the brutal; both show an acute awareness of and reverence for the great European tradition from which they sprang, even while challenging its orthodoxies. Where Smit differs significantly from de Kooning, however, is in his absolutely extemporaneous way of working. According to his longtime friend and art dealer, Allen Stone, who was an executor for his estate, de Kooning "would try out a 'spontaneous' passage on vellum many times until he achieved the desired effect, then he would meticulously reproduce that passage on canvas." The same was true of Franz Kline, another Abstract Expressionist often mistaken for an "action painter," who made small ink sketches on the pages of a telephone

book and actually traced them onto his large canvases with an opaque projector. Smit, however, improvises his paintings from scratch in the manner of a jazz musician. In this regard, even though they show no stylistic similarities, Smit's working process can be more readily compared to Jackson Pollock's drip tech-



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nique (as Christine van Stralen of the Art Projects Bureau, Almere, the Netherlands, called it in a text reproduced on Smit's website) put him "right inside the painting," where Pollock always claimed he wanted to be, as well as for its radical departure from traditional practice. It helps, of course, that Smit is more skillful with his hands than most other painters are with their brushes, articulating heroic forms, smeared and manipulated with his fingers, that veer across his large canvases with breath-taking velocity and force, trashing like drunken cobras, like the splayed entrails of eviscerated mastodons, or (while it is impossible to imagine Smit ever stooping to such cheap theatrics) like the painting nude models that Eves Klein used to roll across unstretched lengths of canvas laid out on the floor. One can only apologize for the luridness of the imagery that Hendrik Smit's expansively energetic compositions inspire in the writer straining to come up with similes to match the visual impact of his paintings -- especially since the artist himself takes great pains to avoid

recognizable imagery or even the slightest allusion to anything outside the sphere of his adamantly abstract canvases.

Speaking of spheres, some of Smit's most spectacular recent paintings are a series of tondos, the round shape of which makes their dimensions appear limitless and emphasizes the swirling expansiveness of their forms, that -- if the artist will once again forgive the writer for "Rorschaching" actual images onto his determinedly nonobjective compositions -- suggest brilliantly colorful landmasses and bodies of water on the surface of a global orb (at least the most ambitious of subjects, if a subject must be suggested to help the reader visualize some of the superficial characteristics of these paintings).

Taking the body of Smit's work as a whole, rectangular and in the round alike, what the vitality and immediacy of his oeuvre projects most insistently is the ongoing struggle and ultimate triumph of the creative act, as the artist attacks the canvas with paint-smeared hands (only occasionally does he resort to the palette knife to further articulate certain areas), creating cataclysmic shapes that appear almost as though wrested from within it rather than imposed upon it -- so inevitable and organic do their sinuous permutations appear.

To again quote Smit's fellow countryman and spiritual ancestor de Kooning, "There's no way of looking at the work of art by itself; it's not self-evident -- it needs a history, it needs a lot of talking about; it's part of a whole man's life." And surely this is true of Smit, whose work can only be understood as a continuum of gestures that, from one canvas to another, give us for not the literal content of the man's life, the imprint of his character conveyed with emphatic energy. After viewing Smit's website this writer was put in mind of something he once heard a well known British rock and roll singer exclaim to his fellow musicians as they came offstage, dripping sweat and grinning after a particularly rollicking performance: "That gig was really balls-out, mater!"

"Balls out" seems a most appropriate accolade for the paintings of Hendrik Smit.

Ed McCormack