

The Synthesis of Violence and Grace in Hendrik Smit's Paintings

A certain visceral directness which, by and large, has been absent in much contemporary art for quite some time, comes to the forefront in the work of the Dutch painter Hendrik Smit, whose work is featured in the year-round salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

This viscosity may have to do with the fact that Smit, whose work is in important public and private collections in Europe and the United States, often dispenses with brushes and paints directly with his hands. From photographs that one has seen, he appears to be a big man, and this is reflected in the scale of some of his canvases as well as in the expansiveness of his strokes.

There is also a muscularity to Smit's forms and a raw vibrancy to his colors that can remind one of his fellow countryman Karel Appel, although Smit delves more deeply into abstraction than either Appel or any of his colleagues in the Cobra group, all of whom remained tethered to the figure in one way or another. Although Herbert Read



"Escape no. 9"

to the more abstract canvases of that other "flying Dutchman" de Kooning, although Smit has his own sense of gesture, his own intrepid approach to color. What impresses one most about Smit's compositions is the balance that he achieves between violence and grace. One can't help thinking in this regard of the slow-motion massacres in the films of the American director Sam Peckinpah, given the balletic beauty of Smit's painterly gore-spattering—particularly in his entrail-like skeins of glistening cadmium red and alizarin crimson in combina-

tion with fleshy pinks, strident yellows, verdant greens, and deep, nocturnal blues. once wrote of Appel that his work gave the impression "of a spiritual tornado that has left these images of its passage," this seems even truer of Smit's compositions, in which all vestiges of the known world are swept away by the pure force of the untrammelled gesture.

Indeed, the velocity of Smit's strokes and the voluptuousness of his paint surfaces is closer in spirit

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Admittedly, one may be doing a disservice to the actual character of an essentially gentle man by leaning too heavily on the metaphor of violence. Yet the brute force of Hendrik Smit's painterly attack lends his canvases an immediacy akin to Chaim Soutine's bloody sides of beef, an inescapably jarring effect that accounts for much of the visual impact. At the same time, Smit's manipulation of thick pigment with his hands and fingers results in a sumptuous tactility, an elegant physicality that is hard to resist.

Although the term "action painting" has fallen into disuse in recent years for no better reason than that we rarely encounter such immediacy in works of art anymore, it can be applied most accurately to Smit's compositions, with their bold forms and calligraphic strokes projecting an exuberant sense of movement. Standing before these paintings, one is swept up in their rhythms, which appear to be occurring in real time. The vigorous gestural forms read to the eye as ongoing events, rather than frozen remnants of motion, and one gets caught up in the abstract drama of form and color that Hendrik Smit conjures so convincingly.

—Peter Wiley