

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present American artist Josh Smith's first exhibition at the gallery.

Josh Smith is known for an oeuvre that is as diverse as it is distinctive. Encompassing oils, drawings, prints, posters, artist books and sculptures, some of which are representational, others of which are abstract, Smith's output varies widely but is always possessed of an innate coherence. No matter what he paints, or makes, his work is always recognizably 'his'. It was this, in part, that inspired one of his best-known series, the so-called 'name paintings'. This involved Smith painting his name onto canvases, constantly varying the colours, manner or technique, as a wry comment on the traditional importance of the artist's signature on a work of art and the concept of a 'signature' artistic style.

Repetition and variation are key themes within Smith's oeuvre, and find their origins in his early training as a printmaker. In this exhibition, he presents a series of vivacious and expressive depictions of fish that, in colour and mood, evoke a number of painterly traditions while also remaining resolutely contemporary. Smith often paints fish, not because they hold any special significance, but because they are such familiar creatures as to require little further analysis. This last point is key to understanding his approach, which revolves around demystifying art as a way of penetrating to its very essence, namely the technical challenge of applying paint to canvas, and the choices that this entails. By painting subjects that do not require a great degree of interpretation, he compels the viewer to look at how the works are painted, to absorb their colours, texture and atmosphere, and to consider the ways in which an identical subject can change on a technical level. And yet Smith always leaves a window open for interpretation — fish have appeared in art since time immemorial and, depending on the viewer, can conjure up a myriad of social, political, religious and economic connotations. Likewise, these seemingly 'commonplace' fish are anything but characterless — thanks to their human-shaped eyes, each is possessed of an individual, palpable and wholly unique personality.

All of Smith's work has an urgent quality to it, but while his canvases might appear to have been executed in haste, they are ultimately the product of a deep psychological engagement with the difficult task of making art in a world awash with images. With regard to the latter, the artist is something of an agent provocateur: he creates work that deliberately bucks prevailing trends and speaks, instead, of a more fundamental engagement with what it means to be an artist and, furthermore, to engage with the world on a purely visual level. Smith's primary language is art, and what he has to say is not off the cuff, but a carefully constructed essay that, more often than not, has been months in the making. Of the endeavour that lies behind the work, both mental and physical, Smith has explained: "Sometimes, the paintings are around for years. In the way I work, there is no

difference between making and looking. I think they're really the same thing, actually. The making takes a second, and the looking takes much, much more time." And it is precisely this — the visceral and energetic, constantly self-renewing impulse to create, coupled with his unadulterated love of painting and the time devoted to it, that makes Smith's work so fresh and alive.

Josh Smith (b. 1976, Okinawa, Japan) grew up in Tennessee. He lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Josh Smith*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany (2016), *Josh Smith*, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rome, Italy (2015), *The American Dream*, Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2011) and *Hidden Darts*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria (2008).

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