Vincent Smith: *Riding on a Blue Note*
Monoprints and Works on Paper on Jazz Themes

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Vincent Smith, painter and printmaker, creates work that transcends specificity of time and place. A native New Yorker, born in Bedford- Stuyvesant in 1929 and raised in Brownsville, Brooklyn, Smith is a student of life and art. His work, shown in over forty solo and numerous group exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and Africa, confirms his world view as a student of history. "New York City, the south, the Caribbean, and Africa are sources for a style and iconography which is both personal and universal..." The people in Smith's works are deceivers and deceived, victims and survivors, lovers and the unloved, and in this exhibition, one of the more powerful protagonists of black culture—the blues and jazz musician.

Smith's imagery ranges from the anecdotal work of the 1950s when his urban scenes included schematic figures in densely populated neighborhoods (*The Saturday Night in Harlem* series, 1954-1957, or *The Café*, 1953), to the more generic and symbolic pieces of the 1960s, '70s, and 80s. Work from the 1960s and early '70s mirror the Civil Rights Movement and the politicization of black America (*Attica*, 1982, *Do Rag Brother*, 1967, *Blood On the Forge*, 1972, and *Before The Mayflower*, 1972). After Smith's trips to East and West Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, his art conveys a more sonorous mood, a quietude attained when one visits "home" (*Shrine of Shango*, 1975 and *Ode To Kilimanjaro*, 1981). In the 1980s his imagery becomes increasingly symbolic, evolving into personal symbols and pictographs combined with more texture and schematic compositions (*Dry Bones Series*, 1982).

The abstraction and expressionism of post-World War II painting merge in Smith's depiction of an American figurative genre. His is the world of black folk, the New World progeny of African people. For over thirty-five years Smith has portrayed a universal humanism revealed within the context of modern black life and culture. Typically occurring in urban communities, Smith reveals this life through the reexamination and reexperience of his life on canvas or paper.

An exhibition by Charles White at the ACA Gallery (1946), and the reading of James Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (1943) in which Smith first saw the work of Jacob Lawrence, gradually shifted Sith's thinking about a career as a visual artist. In 1952, he viewed the Paul Cezanne retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. "I was 22 and working in the the Post Office when I met a painter named Tom Boutis. He invited me to go to the Museum and I came away with the feeling that I had been in touch with something sacred. For a year afterward I haunted the libraries reading everything I could get my hands on about art, literature, philosophy, religion, existentialism—you name it—I touched on it somewhere. That same year I resigned from the Post Office and decided to be a professional artist."

Smith observed and studied art everywhere in New York City—at galleries, museums, artist's studios, schools, private collections—and vividly remembers seeing the expressive works of Charles Alston, Hale Woodruff, Archibald Motley, Ruffino Tamayo, and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and David Siqueiros. He recalls seeing the Aaron Douglas mural at the New York Public Library at

135th Street and also becoming interested in German Expressionism especially painters Emil Nolde and Otto Dix.

Simultaneously, Smith read art histories and critical literature about African American art, history and culture. These subjects were studied under Dr. W. Alphaeus Hunton and read alongside standard African American art texts including Alain Locke's *Negro Past and Present* (1936) and *The New Negro* (1941) and writings by Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, W.E.B. DuBois and Chester Hinds. At the same time Smith "didn't see anything (in the visual arts) that reflected the black experience or contribution to American culture.

In 1953 Smith studied briefly at the Art Students League under the tutelage of social realist painter Reginald Marsh. He spent the summer of 1955 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture where he met noted artists Ben Shahn, Mitchell Siporin, William and Margarita Zorach, Sidney Simon, Willard Cummings, Albert Patterson, and Henry Varnum Poor. During the same year, he received a scholarship from the Brooklyn Museum Art School (he had earlier attended informal classes) where he met Walter Williams, Raphael Soyer and Ruben Tam and frequented the Museum's galleries of African art. During the same year, Smith met Jacob Lawrence who became a close friend and to whom he later dedicated a painting, *Jake's Poultry Market* (1965).

Throughout these years, Smith immersed himself in the avant-garde culture of New York City. "I started hanging out in the village with Tom Boutis, going to parties, and meeting other painters, writers, musicians, and the like." In 1953, he shared a studio with Walter Williams on 26th Street; Duke Jordan, the pianist, had a loft on the same floor. During this time, he also met Harvey Cropper who brought Charlie "Yardbird" Parker to the studio. For the next few years Smith met numerous musicians and painters—Max Roach, Sam Gill, Ernie Henry, Gilly Coggins, Randy Weston, Willie Jones, Thelonious Monk, Art Blakey, Richard Mayhew, Sam Middleton, Clifford Jackson—who visited or "crashed" at the studio. A bit later Smith shared a brownstone with six other painters on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn near Pratt Institute. He became friends with sculptor Jimmy Gittens with whom musician Lester "Prez" Young often stayed. Events were exciting and exploratory. Many long-term friendships like the one with Charlie Parker, were established. "I remember, that Bird once told me 'Vince, stick to your vision; don't let nobody turn you around'."

"We were a strange group because people didn't know what to make of us. They were used to black musicians and performers, but the visual arts were sacred territory. Most people I came in contact with never knew a black painter nor had they hardly ever heard of one. At that time Jacob Lawrence and Charlie White were the only known black artists. Beauford Delaney was known, but only in the village. But we hung out and hung in—in lofts, ballrooms, and in cold water flats. We used to sit in the Riviera Café, Pandora's Box and Rienzi's and have marathon sessions rapping about art, politics, literature, religion, esthetics, and women. We'd also drop in at the Whitney Museum and the Hans Hoffman School, both of which used to be on West 8th Street. The abstract painters hung out in The Cedar Bar, but we preferred the Five Spot Café as that's where they played jazz every night.

In the 1950s the nucleus of this New York African American artistic community was small, informative, intense, but short-lived. Many contemporaries "disappeared" by either relinquishing their professional careers as artists or relocating to live outside the United States. They were Ralph Ellison's "invisible men." Amiri I. Baraka noted that by a decade later, "most of those blacks I met who were artists left this country, finally, never to return".

But Vincent Smith was a survivor. He was, perhaps, one of the most legitimately bohemian artists of these years. He had no money and was not just some middle-class juvenile playing at being an artist. He came from a Brooklyn ghetto and had to struggle against society and even against what it tried to make him into, in order to paint. At the time, he lived in a loft that had neither heat nor light. It was the bohemianism of necessity. When Smith did begin to paint consistently, he developed a style that was completely connected to the history and tradition of Afro-American painting.

A crucial element of the lifestyle of these years was jazz. Smith visited the clubs in Manhattan—uptown in Harlem and in Spanish Harlem, downtown in Greenwich Village, on the Lower East Side—and those in the Bronx and in Brooklyn. Several nights a week he heard the jazz greats and the "new sounds" at Birdland, the Village Vanguard, the Five Spot and at the Open Door where he did numerous sketches of musicians. There were also the anonymous funky neighborhood R & B clubs and gut-bucket cabarets featuring blues singers like Little Walter and Little Jimmy Scott and shake dancers, and the jam sessions in various coffee shops and lofts.

Smith's musical education was broadened with the sounds of Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Scoby Stroman, Marion Brown, Joe Knight, Ornette Coleman, Jimmy Owens, Julius "Cannonball" Adderly, Albert Ayler, Paul West, Andrew Hill, Freddie Redd, Sun-Ra and his Astro-Infinity music and the voices of Betty Carter and Nina Simone. However, the "voice" of the 1960s was John Coltrane, and Smith's etching of 1971, *A Moment Supreme* was based on a Coltrane composition.

Music, particularly jazz, has always been a part of Smith's life. In childhood, there were piano lessons at age nine and alto saxophone lessons and playing the piano in junior high school sessions and neighborhood parties. The jukeboxes at the 1930s corner candy-store initiated Smith to different types of black music—rhythm n blues, bebop, jazz—and singers and musicians such as Erskine Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five, Ivory Joe Hunter, the Flamingos, the Orioles, Nat King Cole, and Fats Waller.

Poolroom jukeboxes soon replaced those of his more innocent youth and at seventeen, Smith's musical appreciation became more sophisticated. "I started hanging out with some very hip cats. We listened to Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Charlie Mingus, Milt Jackson, Sonny Rollins, Duke Jordan Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Sonny Stitt, Bud Powell, Cecil Payne, Jackie McLean, Art Blakely and Dexter Gordon." Smith and his friends, too young to patronize these nightspots, stood outside the various clubs on 52nd street such as the Three Deuces, the Famous Door, the Spotlite, Kelly's Stable and the Onyx Club, listening to the music and glimpsing artists-celebrities.

Smith's informal musical education continued when he worked briefly for the Lakawanna Railroad and frequented the "bucket 'n'blood" bars along the eastern seaboard and heard the funky earthy sounds of Tampa Red, Muddy Waters, Big Joe Turner, Howlin' Wolf, Big MaBell or Little Esther. This music sustained the roots and referenced the African basis of African American culture, and noted in its inimitable manner, the trials and tribulations of daily life and the perseverance of survival.

While in the United States Army, in 1948 and 1949, Smith heard the blues tradition in the down home, honky tonk roadhouses in Mississippi, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas heady with the full rich sounds of Gene Ammons, Buddy Tate, Illinois Jacquet and Arnette Cobb. Occasionally he would hear Sam Grady, an Army musician friend, play in Austin clubs. Smith recalls that the big open spaces of these rural southern roadhouses reminded him of the open compound clubs that he was to see in his later travels in

West Africa.

Upon leaving the Army, Smith returned to home base—New York City. He renewed his nightly visits to jazz clubs, a tradition that he continues today. Birdland, Minton's Playhouse, Café Bohemia, Slug's, the Five Spot, 8:45 Club, the Continental, the Kinston Lounge, Tony's Gran-dene, the Baby Grand, Smalls Paradise, the Putnam Central, the Coronet Club and Kimako's Blues People (in Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx and Newark) comprised his regular itinerary.

The T-Bone Walkers, the Billie Hollidays, the Charlie Parkers, the John Coltranes and countless others, were and are the oracles of black culture that inform and fuel the creative vision of Vincent Smith. Music, especially jazz, is the conduit through which the artist expresses his life; it is the key that unlocks the entrance to his past. "Music brings back all kinds of memories. It surges me on." Smith constantly listens to jazz when creating a work of art: it is an inextricable part of his being and impels him to create.

Paintings, ink drawings, watercolors, monoprints, and etchings dating from the mid 1950s, first show Smith's interest in musicians and singers and his various interpretations of this subject extend over a thrity-five year period. Whereas in the 1960s and the 1970s, jazz images were secondary to the African American rural and urban genre scenes and the African themes, by the 1980s music subjects monopolize Smith's world view. Even the artist's titles have the feel and brevity of song titles (real or imagined) such as "Those Were the Days," "I Want Some Pigfeet," "I Gotta Right to Sing the Blue," and "Scrapple From the Apple," Within the past six years, Smith has focused on the portrayal of jazz musicians and singers and the translation of their music into a visual aesthetic,. "It took me a long time to get to this realm with jazz... I'll take it to the end. I'll just ride it out."

Smith's musicians are "smokin." They lean and assume characteristic poses. Typically, one sees the jazz trio—trumpet, bass and tenor saxaphone. Sometimes there is the quartet—the piano, drums, guitar or trombone, but there is always the sax. Miles, Dexter, Clifford, Bird, and Coltrane emerge in the surreal light of smoke filled, jam-packed clubs.

Saucy, seductive, sophisticated women translate the cries of life, the wail of the tenor sax. Smith's women are not timid. They posture themselves in utter self assertiveness. We see Bessie Smith, Etta James, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holliday, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald and Koko Taylor.

Through the monotype process, which he discovered about 1983, Smith exploits an expressionistic brushstroke unrivaled in any of the other media that he has used. He easily adapted the technique with its requisite quick, one time-only application of pigment (oils or printers inks) on a plexiglass plate. Gesture defines figure, and establishes space. Recent works shown in this exhibition particularly the black paper prints, are color passages and function like musical compositions. Undulating color streaks juxtapose staccato strokes.

Color is magical—transformative. The translucent acid greens, vermillion red-oranges and cadmium yellows, flow, more abruptly or squiggle across the paper surface. "That's why I like monoprints, especially on black paper...the color bubbles up and settles down, colors move and surge."

The monotype medium enhances the improvisational technique which Smith first adopted in the 1960s. In this ideal vehicle for translating dynamics on to paper, one sees the pulsating atmosphere of jazz, its improvisation and transformed melodic structure. The artist feels that painting (on the plexiglass plate) is like jazz. It is the improvisation and the working out of the compositions: the same tune is not

always played the same way each time." Brushstrokes of color and the interval of space (the non-painted surface) translate the audible impulse. He always bares on the pictorial surface the tension, the sonorous melodies, the riffs and the tonality of jazz.

Like the jazz artists he so admires, Smith decodes the Euro-America aesthetic; he alters it through repetition and shift thereby creating a black sensibility towards the mundane. It is interpreted and reinterpreted. His figures with their brilliantly polychromed African mask-like physiognomies and "styles" of attire, are transformed by the creative energy of the music. They move toward the viewer, spatially as close as they are in small clubs; the viewer becomes the audience. The monoprints in Riding *On A Blue Note* are Smith's most expressive works.

"My monoprints are diffused washes of color like waves of sounds. The lights on the stage flicker and cause movements on the faces and clothes to take on strange shapes and colors, causing shadows and other ghostly effects like masks, or mosaics. Heightened by the excitement of the music, the atmosphere becomes like a phantasmagoria or another world. People cry out and holler and strange grunts, even curses, come forth, but this particular scene has its roots in black folklore and culture. Listening to jazz and blues is like being caught up in a séance or Juju."

The 1989 mural commission in oil, titled Jonkonnu Festival Wid/The Frizzly Rooster Band for the Oberia D. Dempsey Multi-Service Center of Central Harlem, N.Y.C.) includes three jazz musicians and reaffirms the importance of music in Smith's recent work. These figures are a summation of the artist's experiences and perceptions. They possess Fauvist color, African mask-like faces, attenuated forms reminiscent of African sculpture and the elements of contemporary African American styles along with a Picasso like head and the dense space of Cezanne. The mural's expressionistic strokes and line, and its textured surfaces of collage, are found in Smith's earlier paintings and prints. Also there is the "heat": the intense, essential vibration of black music.

Riding On A Blue Note displays the synthesis of Smith's formal art training and musical interests, and the art and artists which most affected him. Above all it shows his connection with people belonging to the African diaspora. Jazz is the twentieth century presentation of a musical idiom that is an integral part of African American culture, ultimately deriving from traditional African music. Whether it is bebop, funk, doo-whop, blues, fusion, dixie-land, rhythm 'n' blues or jazz, it is the legacy of black culture, an indigenous American art form. Smith translates in order for us to visualize powerful and universal rhythms of the world—black music. "I've heard the music," he says," and I've heard the drums in Africa, too."

Vincent Smith's unfaltering pursuit of an artistic statements reflects his own experience as a black man in a black culture attempting to survive in a dominant western world. His work is imbued with a rawness atypical of most contemporary figurative painting and graphics. Substance is as important as appearance. In developing this inimitable art, Vincent Smith achieves a modernist black aesthetic.