

Updated February 1, 2020

Vincent Smith: Five Brooklyn Paintings from the 1970s
On view through March 7, 2020



Vincent Smith, *The Soul Brothers*, c. 1969, oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 24 3/4 inches
31 1/4 x 24 3/4 inches

Alexandre Gallery is pleased to present the exhibition *Vincent Smith: Five Brooklyn Paintings from the 1970's*. This focused show will include five paintings that depict tenements and streets during this tumultuous period in Brooklyn. Using his mature style of layering the canvas with rough sand-thickened paint and collaged elements to create stucco-like surfaces in bright deep brick reds and blacks, Smith captures the rhythms and intricacies of the city in his signature expressionist social realist style.

Vincent Smith (American, 1929 – 2003) pushed for the creation of art that served a lasting social purpose. A Brooklyn native, his work is visually inspired by his love of music and the lively jazz club scene which he was immersed in as a young man in New York, as well as the African art he discovered on his travels abroad later in life. Primarily serving as a visual document of the racial upheaval, violence, and poverty that were taking place around him in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, his work is known for its expressive, abstract figures, and highly emotive, dark, patterned backgrounds. At times, however, other works of his can be playful, even comedic celebrations of the energy, music and people of the urban black world that Smith knew well, and formed the bedrock behind much of American culture. As an artist, teacher, and

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

informed student of art history, Smith's work is a reflection of his desire to share his experience of black culture with the world—thus changing the white washed art historical narrative.

He continued this work throughout his life, helping to curate exhibitions of black artists and facilitating dialogue between black artists of many disciplines.

Nancy E. Green, senior curator of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, writes the following about Smith's work:

In all his work, Smith takes us along on a journey; his narrative segues smoothly between the African-American and African experience. Using iconography interpreted as both personal and universal, his observations are poignant and unflinching.

Smith's mission from the beginning had been to depict the black contribution to American culture. He smoothly melded the world of North, South and the Caribbean, with the heritage of Africa. His works are iconographically rich, fusing these strands into a tightly intimate portrait of the reality of life within black communities. These five paintings of Brooklyn are prime examples of this expression. However, his use of extravagant color and gesture imparts both joy and hope into scenes that could sink easily into despair and self-pity. His experiences with Africa inspired experimentation with his canvases as he used bolder colors and mixed sand and pebbles into his paint, adding texture to his works. Smith remained eternally optimistic with a belief in the triumph of his subjects over all obstacles.

Smith did not decide to become a full-time painter until 1953, after being powerfully inspired by a Cezanne exhibition he attended at the Museum of Modern Art. Previously, he had dropped out of high school to travel the country—hopping trains and working on the railroad in the south, before joining the army, and later returning to New York City to work for the postal service. He would go on to take classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and Skowhegan School of Painting in Maine, ultimately earning his college degree from the State University of New York, Saratoga, at the age of 50. Smith had more than twenty-five one person shows and participated in more than 30 group exhibitions since the early 1970s. His works can be found in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Studio Museum in Harlem, and Minneapolis Institute of Art, among many other institutions.

For further information please contact the gallery at 212-755-2828 or at inquiries@alexandregallery.com