

The Highlights - Josh Smith at Luhring Augustine

Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007

In another attempt by yet another young artist to question taste, Josh Smith paints. He paints a lot. Dozens and dozens of paintings. And every painting is the same size. Previously, every painting bore his signature. Josh Smith was once referred to as "the guy who paints his name." You almost didn't have to see the paintings to know what they looked like. We felt like we were being duped. If Mondrian boiled landscape down to pigment stretched taut across a frame, is Smith up to something of the same with the tiny signature down at the lower right? The paintings still contain this same self-referent, but now the letters of his name have been relegated to the gestural marks of abstract expressionism. Nothing new here either. Franz Kline did it. Jasper did it. What I found of particular interest is that the paintings remain within language. They never quite make the leap from signage to painting. They began as texts and remain as texts, despite their attempt at something else. It would be tempting to call the paintings cynical. The ebb and flow of creative drive has been mapped and hung out to dry on the walls of Luhring Augustine. Each brush stroke is surrounded by quotation marks. Academicians, now rise.

Yet something else is going on. In a Warholian gesture, each of Smith's paintings is the same size (save the "palette paintings" which he allegedly cleans his brush on, then sells). The only thing that differs is the palette. Constructed almost entirely with the same-size brush as well, all in one shot, muddy as the Nile, the show offers a painting for many different tastes. If you don't like a lot of color, take one of the monochromatic ones. If you don't like busy, you will find yourself happy with this nicely understated Josh Smith. The show is also entirely overhung. There is a question as to whether he has been switching out his paintings in an effort to achieve the best hang, or possibly, as a way to move them.

What I find of most interest is that it is almost impossible to slip into an old modernist conversation about which paintings work better than others and why. I tried, but there are just too damn many to look at. (Just when you think you've finished, there's another room in the back). Issues of taste, good painting/bad painting, color, light, etc. are all downplayed in favor of the Josh Smith experience. You just don't have the time, Smith seems to be whispering over your shoulder, to be analyzing just this one. Keep moving until you find one you like immediately without knowing why. Buy it. Buy it. Buy it. Smith seems to be calling for an end to the taste question altogether by simply painting over the top of it.