

Josh Smith

Spectre

24 Grafton Street, London
September 15–October 31, 2020

34 East 69th Street, New York
September 15–October 24, 2020

Appointment bookings available
on davidzwirner.com



Josh Smith, Untitled, 2020 © Josh Smith.
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present concurrent exhibitions of new work by the New York–based artist Josh Smith. On view at the gallery’s London location—the artist’s first presentation at David Zwirner London—and at 69th Street in New York, the shows will feature a new group of paintings depicting empty streetscapes from a series that the artist began in March 2020. Reflecting on the experience of creating these new works during the 2020 pandemic, the artist wrote the following text.

Mid-March, in the studio I was spending the new entirely free days messing around and wondering why I was doing painting at all. Maybe then I stopped painting entirely. I definitely started walking the neighborhoods around me. Never before would I or could I do this. Normally, taking long walks was not something I could justify squeezing into my days. Also, normally, it is far too loud and busy. Worst of all, the air is filthy. If you leave a window open here, there is a layer of black soot on the windowsill at the end of the day. It does not make sense to walk anywhere for no reason here. It’s gross.

Where I live and work, people should not live. This is not a place for a happy life. This is an industrial area, which gradually turns into hardy residential neighborhoods. Around here there tends not to be many people out at all. When a person would appear on the horizon, we would each take pains to avoid each other.

The first group of 10 paintings was a surprise. I was not expecting to make anything. Then these paintings came. The air was so clean. Without all the cars and the people, I could look up and see where

I was. It was soft and not threatening. What I saw calmed me down. I had not felt like that for 20 years. The colors, the edges, the relationships of things, appeared with clarity.

I paint in my studio as a way to deal with all sorts of things. Also, if I am stressed out or am avoiding doing something, then I erroneously believe spending time painting is the only thing I can justify doing. Previously, I mostly worked at night. It takes a toll. Then when COVID hit, because I have had so much solitary free time and no looming deadlines, painting became a light and easy activity. I changed. I was a new person. I was working happily in the daytime. Like a kid would.

A few more weeks passed, which I spent using up the remaining 5-by-4-foot stretchers I had in my studio. (I had 20. The first 10 were featured in the online presentation High As Fuck, and the next 10 are in London.) The paintings in London were made on fresh canvases, while the first 10 were painted over unfinished paintings I had around my studio.

The other large work in the London exhibition came later.

Next, I had a stack of 12 7-by-6-foot stretchers. This is a big size for me, and I am not used to it. It occurred to me that these might be easy to scale up. Making large work is not my strong suit and normally it does not feel natural to me. There is too much effort involved and the result is far away. With everything I do with art, I need to make a step. Whether I go forward or backward, I need to change something. With nothing at stake I decided to scale up the idea. With this type of subject it worked right away. I did 6. Each one asked for another and then pulled it along. They came out great. The scale was immersive and I was excited. These 6 paintings will be exhibited Uptown, in New York, in September.

So then there were 6 more at that size. By now it is July. I pulled out the other 6 and lined them up in a single row along a wall. At 7 by 36 feet, the edges were nearly touching. To try something new, I decided to make the edges of each image line up enough that the six canvasses could read as one. It was daunting what was in front of me. I started thinking about whether or not this was worth attempting. Also, it was a lot of work, and at this point the thought of the labor was tiring me. The other thing that had happened is that it became harder and harder to go outside. The pollution and the people were back. Outside suddenly was as bad as or worse than it always was. The world outside was no longer inspiring me. I was once again being propelled by what I was doing in the studio. This was difficult and crippling to feel my freedom and happiness constricting again. I will come back to this set of paintings after the next chapters...

To try to reset, I left the studio and spent a long weekend working on monotypes. Working with Maurice Sanchez is always beneficial for me. The print shop is where I go when I am out of gas, need a change of scenery, or when I crave being around someone nice and hardworking. I like print shops. A healthy print shop projects an open-ended and inspiring situation. There, it does not take days or weeks to create a painting. Maurice is standing at the press waiting and I want to finish so he can do his job. It is the same as painting except that I work flat and paint on toothy sheets of acetate, which are mounted to Plexiglas. Plus, I can finish stuff.

However, these days were not good. Each little painting took me over an hour to make. Usually things move fast over there. My disappointment made me tighter and tighter. As time passed each painting and print became muddier. Anxiety prevented me from relaxing into what I was doing. The relatively compact scale of the prints did not offer the expansive aura that the large works on canvas did. What I was seeing as each impression was being pressed out was manic, tight, and stressed-out. This was the

antithesis of how these NY paintings began. What I was feeling those days was sadness and actual fear that what I had gained as an artist and as a person had disappeared. I no longer felt good. I was back to being good old depressed, stressed-out, and confused Josh. After weeks of thinking about it, it is even more devastating.

Fortunately, the monotypes ended up explaining how the paintings in my studio were pivoting. They ultimately added another facet to the whole group of work I was making. I realized that this was a new period with these paintings. I was able to gain some looseness. Now they were coming from inside and projecting a different emotion. I accepted this and relaxed into it. Hopefully, I can display some of the monotypes in both the NY and the London exhibition.

When I returned to the studio I did feel better. At first, I was mostly relieved just to be out of the print shop. That ended up being a long weekend of hard work. Then the benefits of my days with Maurice started to come. Embracing the change that was taking place in the paintings was the key. It was a matter of learning to appreciate, rather than attempting to override, the darker, more congested mood that was emerging. I let it go the way it was going naturally. This was freeing.

Now I would pull paintings intermittently and work on them on the easel. Each painting rotated between time on the easel and then time back in the line with the others. What was developing was a sort of city. In case the composite painting failed, I wanted to be assured each painting was strong individually as well. Therefore, each painting functions on its own or in the group. In the end I felt that the 6 individual canvases coalesced into one large painting was the more powerful statement.

This large painting (in 6 parts) will be shipped to London, to be exhibited on the top floor, I believe.

Suddenly, within these times there are three exhibitions. The online exhibition in the spring, and then these two shows in the fall in London and New York. It all feels strange. The online show was inherently different and out of my comfort zone. It was performative and somewhat extroverted. It was not so much a painting exhibition as it was a work of online art theater. The first 10 pandemic paintings were almost props. They were not displayed in any sort of way (they were on my roof and on the internet only). The two September gallery shows are unusual because in real life, I will not be too involved with them. Definitely not going to London, and the Uptown New York show is also a bit inaccessible. The strangeness is good. I need and crave change. For now it's good.

—Josh Smith, August 2020

Josh Smith is a New York-based painter who also works with collage, sculpture, printmaking, and artist's books. Since the early 2000s, he has developed a prolific and expansive body of painting that employs specific visual motifs as a means of exploring the potentiality of the painted surface.

Smith was born in 1976 in Okinawa, Japan. His father was in the US Army, and his family moved frequently, eventually settling in East Tennessee, where the artist mostly grew up. His work has been presented in numerous solo exhibitions at museums and arts institutions in the United States and abroad, including the Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany (2016); Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di

Roma, Rome (2015); Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2013); The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2011); Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva (2009); De Hallen Haarlem, The Netherlands (2009–2010); Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok), Vienna (2008); and SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York (2004).

Smith's work has also been included in important group exhibitions, such as *Forever Young – 10 Years Museum Brandhorst*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2019–2020); *Trouble in Paradise: Collection Rattan Chadha*, Kunsthall Rotterdam (2019); *Artistic Toolbox: 1989–2017*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2017); *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, which opened at the Museum Brandhorst, Munich, and traveled to the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok), Vienna (2015–2016); *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014–2015); *The Painting Factory: Abstraction after Warhol*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2012); *ILLUMInations*, the central exhibition at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011); and *The Generational Triennial: Younger Than Jesus*, New Museum, New York (2009).

Smith's work is held in numerous international public collections including The Broad, Los Angeles; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok), Vienna; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Smith has lived and worked in New York since 1998. The artist has been represented by David Zwirner since 2017. These concurrent presentations in London and New York are his second solo shows presented within the gallery's spaces. His first exhibition, *Emo Jungle*, took place at the gallery's 519, 525, and 533 West 19th Street locations in New York in 2019, and is accompanied by an exhibition catalogue published by David Zwirner Books that was released in September 2020. *High As Fuck*, the artist's Offsite exhibition, was presented from May 21 to June 21, 2020, on David Zwirner Online.

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