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Paul Anthony Smith, *Funeral #2*. 2012, unique picotage on pigment print, 32-14 x 35-3/4".

Paul Anthony Smith, Asking Who is Present and Who is in Charge?



ZieherSmith
516 West 20th Street
212-229-1088
New York

Paul Anthony Smith. Transcience
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By BLAIR SCHULMAN

All of a sudden it seems, in a rush, there are lists and surveys to allegedly initiate both the novice and the arts professional (I loathe that term) into finding categories for artists. I saw at the list that tells us the 14.23



Paul Anthony Smith, *Tarmac #2*. 2013, oil on canvas, 72 x 60".

ambidextrous calligraphers from Middle Village, Queens, we ought to know. While this categorization helps the gallery and the collector, I do not believe that it helps the artist. It becomes so exacting that it could become difficult for artists' to cross frontiers, experiment, or fail. Congratulations for an artist one day and it might be their albatross the next.

Paul Anthony Smith was recently placed on such a list. He is someone, in my opinion, who defies categorization and I applaud that. His work is evolutionary and organic, grows and blooms over time. Right now, his images are examinations of status and hierarchy and there is something both grand and infinitesimal to be gleaned in all of them. Whether he maintains the darkened skin tones of his subjects against bright relief in oil painting or altering their original facial expressions using "picotage" (more on that in a moment), these works show us what lies deep beneath the surface. Past the eternally wandering grandmothers or the working stiff, Smith unearths the dynamics of their true character.

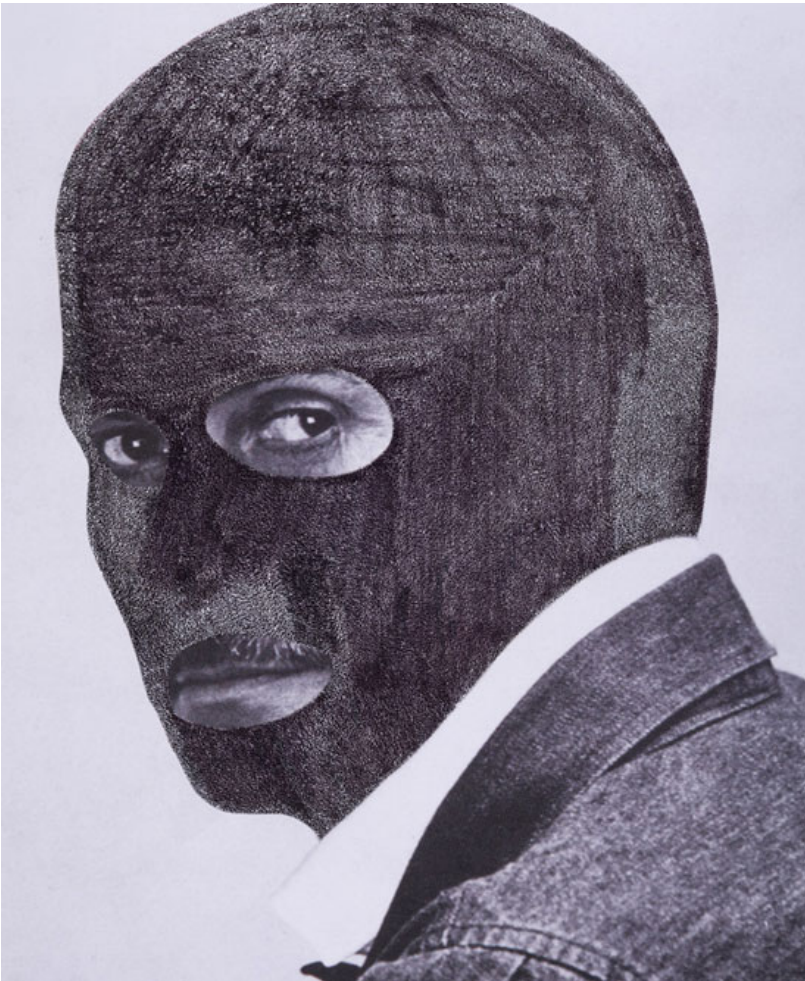
Smith acknowledges his Jamaican roots in this body of work in his first solo exhibition at the ZieherSmith Gallery in New York City. However, he spares us from historical renderings that might otherwise drop us into family photo albums. In praise of his research and not just overt documentation, Smith takes us into his world without pomp. Vain glory is tossed aside; he captures the essence of where he comes from and leaves it at that.

The Tarmac series of large paintings depict men around an airport tarmac. Both the details of their faces and environments are deliberately abstract. The paintings are more about impressions and how use of color and shape works together. In this, I see the aforementioned status and hierarchy. This series is a perfect illustration of this idea. At a glance, one looks at these images of working men, either gesticulating or standing about, and senses immediately who does the talking and who does the listening.

When referring to this concept, I am reminded again of the late photographer Diane Arbus. I've mentioned this comparison before in previous discussions of Smith's work. The more I look at what he is doing and what Arbus has done, the more I am convinced there is a psychic bond between them. He is the calm to her storm. The nudists Arbus shoots in their living rooms or the Chelsea transvestite stashing her genitalia between her legs are the inversion of Smith's subtle, but dead-on, portrayals of family members and historic figures. Queen Elizabeth (*Queen*, 2013), is a great example. She faces slightly away from her subjects, protected by a Hardy Aimes greatcoat. The monarch is present, but she is not there. Smith exposes both sides for us; doing her duty for the crown but thinking of the heather at Balmoral.

In addition to his painting series, Smith also includes a large group (around nine) of unique picotage on pigment print. These images utilize Smith's exploration of picking away at the surface material. The pieces appear decorative, but to also give it a Buddhist spin, they display something honest with ourselves by removing the masks we show the world. This stark relief is both eerie and comforting, as if we have been invited to stare straight into their souls, the artifice stripped away.

This series of work started during his residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado. A term for this process had not been described, until returning to Kansas City when Smith had a studio visit from artist Garry Noland. They then coined the technique as "picotage" which, says Smith in an interview, is "a print making technique used for capturing fine print detail in black and white. Like a negative



Paul Anthony Smith, *man #1*. 2013, unique picotage on pigment print, 24".

print detail in block printing. I also associate the technique which I've previously used in the etching process. For me, it's a way of creating gradients and tones with the surface, making (varying) marks and gestures. It brings me back to my roots of drawing."

He uses a ceramic needle tool to laboriously pick at the surface of the paper to create a variety of pattern. During this process of picotage, he sometimes adds color, either before, during, or after the picking is complete. But Smith goes on, "I prefer to add color first rather than at the end. The colors are comprised of using markers, color pencils and pens."

One haunting piece (*Man #1*, 2013), comes forward as a masked man. Is it a friend of Smith's posing in a simple head and shoulders shot? Or is he one of the kidnapers from the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre? Smith completely debilitates logical conclusions to allow for extravagant and historical thinking. As Arbus herself once said, "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know." This use of picotage takes photography to yet another plateau.

There is something to be found in each of these works that highlights an emotional truth. One clearly sees the tribulations and satisfactions of the working man (*Tarmac #4*, 2013). Or a personal solitude when surrounded by nothing but the darkness (*Night Walkers*, 2013).

Smith understands psychology, pop culture and history. It is why he defies categorization and I expect him to one day switch gears and try something entirely different. I can't wait.



Paul Anthony Smith, *Woman*. 2013, unique picotage on pigment print, 29 x 24".



Paul Anthony Smith, *Shell*. 2013, acrylic collage on paper, 35 x 27-1/4".



Paul Anthony Smith, *Tarmac #3*. 2013, acrylic collage on paper, 48 x 34-3/4".



Paul Anthony Smith, *Man #3*. 2013, unique pigment print, 29 x 24".



Paul Anthony Smith, *Tarmac #4*. 2013, oil and spray paint on canvas, 72 x 96".