

'...we were making it up from day to day...'

A conversation with Hassel Smith

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Hassel Smith's career as a painter now spans more than fifty years. As a young man in college, a troublesome language requirement caused him to switch majors from chemistry to art history. The studio practice classes required of art history majors in turn introduced him to painting. During the forties, he taught at the San Francisco Art Institute (then known as the California School of Fine Arts) concurrently with Clyfford Still, the period Thomas Albright would christen "The Golden Years." Smith was an early, ardent champion of Abstract Expressionism in the Bay Area, and, as reassessment of the era continues, his position as one of the most influential teachers of the postwar years grows increasingly apparent; his students included Sam Francis and Roy DeForest, among many others.

After he and other faculty members were ousted in 1952 by a new conservative administration, Smith lived for a time in Sebastopol and then Los Angeles, but by the mid-sixties had settled in England as a faculty member at Bristol Polytechnic. An outspoken man with firm commitment to leftist political ideals, he is remembered in the Bay Area as a high-spirited, independent-minded artist.

Smith returned to the Bay Area recently for the opening of a retrospective exhibition at the John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, and to speak in the lecture series that accompanied *On Painting: The Work of Elmer Bischoff and Joan Brown* at University Art Museum, Berkeley. He expects the visit to be his last to the States.

Artweek *Did you come from a family that had an interest in art?*

Hassel Smith I was born in Michigan. My father was an executive in a large company. My parents were both college graduates. In fact, they went to Northwestern University and in due course, so did I. My mother had tuberculosis, so my family moved from Michigan to Colorado to California in order to aid her health. My father continued to work for the same company as their sales and advertising manager. I went to San Mateo High School and graduated in 1932.

My parents were the sort of people you'd expect them to be with that sort of economic position and education. They were middle-class people, pretty well-to-do, actually. Liberal politically—they belonged to the Friends Service Committee and helped care for the property of Japanese-Americans who were relo-

cated during the War. But they knew nothing about art.

AW *You began your association with the San Francisco Art Institute in 1936, as a student of Maurice Sterne's. You've often spoken of Sterne's impact on your work. What did he teach you that made such a difference?*

could think about that had profound implications.

But during the Chicago World's Fair during the early thirties, they had the greatest show of modern painting since the Armory Show, which I'd attended. When I went to see these paintings, I thought they were absolutely marvelous. I

has been reviewed so often that it's no longer really necessary to spend a lot of time on it but ...

AW *Did you serve in the military?*

HS No, I filed as a conscientious objector. My number came up within about an hour after the draft began. However, after my physical I was declared to be 4-F. I went to work for the California State Relief Administration, with a caseload of single men on skid row. That was a revelation to me. I was rather naive politically. Later, I worked for the Farm Security Administration in the migratory labor camps in the valley. By that time the United States was in the war and I wanted to involve myself in an enterprise with a human aspect. Those people were starving. These experiences intensified my political feelings.

AW *After the war you began your teaching career at the Art Institute. How did teaching affect your work?*

HS I learned from the people I taught. I remember thinking that I'm telling these people to do things which I profoundly believe in, but I'm not doing them myself. I thought I should put some of these things into practice myself, and I did. I told Thomas Albright that on one occasion and he pummeled me in the press for it. He didn't understand what I was talking about.

AW *As a young artist, what was your measure of success?*

HS One hardly knew. I always just intended to be a painter. Mind you, I got started in 1936. There was no market, certainly no market in San Francisco. We were making it up from day to day.

AW *Albright's Art in the San Francisco Bay Area has become the standard reference for this period of Bay Area art history. Is there anything you would add or subtract from his version?*

HS I think he did a pretty good job. I was surprised—he was never one of my favorites. But his version is fairly accurate.

AW *There used to be an annual fundraiser for the San Francisco Art Association called the Artists' Ball, which was the occasion for a famous installation, The Museum of Unknown Objects. It has been described as one of the first assemblage/installations in the area, and perhaps the beginning of a chain of influence that blossomed as California assemblage. Did you participate in the 'museum'?*



Hassel Smith, three-dimensional collage, 1989.

HS The department at Northwestern had been very small—there were just four people on the staff. But art departments weren't that common, not as they are now. The staff was quite good. They were committed modernists, which was rather surprising. However, when I met Maurice Sterne, he made painting and drawing appear to be an intelligent activity, and I'm afraid that some of the more conservative members of the staff had no capacity for doing that at all. In 1936, California School of Fine Arts students were drawing from casts. It was a very, very conventional program, except for Sterne. After talking to him, even very briefly, you saw that painting was a serious matter. It was something that you

had no reservation, no difficulty in accepting them.

AW *What were the big questions for you at that time?*

HS It can be put very simply. Working with Sterne, you realized that the relationship between a three-dimensional reality and one's effort to represent that reality in painting or drawing involves profound and metaphysical propositions. I continue to be very concerned about that.

After the War, I was back at the school and became a member of the staff with Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, David Park and Elmer Bischoff, and Clay Spohn. This



Hassel Smith, *Tourists*, 1964, oil on canvas, 18" x 48". (Photo courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis.)

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HS The Museum was Clay Spohn's project, but many people contributed objects. I made a menacing object by cutting the back of a bentwood chair. It exploded open, with sharp jagged wood everywhere. And Elmer Bischoff and I made an illusionistic room together for the Ball. We constructed various false ceilings and partitions in one of the studios. They were painted black and white and brilliantly illuminated so the space was very deceptive. You couldn't tell where you were. I'm not sure it's a first anything, really. The point is, there was Dada and then Surrealism, which were both highly regarded by young artists out here, along with a lot of other influences that one could trace that kind of work to.

AW Into this collegial situation came a disagreement when Park and Bischoff returned to a more figurative mode. Did you have intellectual reasons for concentrating on abstract painting?

HS I don't suppose I had quite realized what my feelings were at that time. Later, I began to get a sense of what the situation was for me personally. Painting objectively, that is, figure, landscape, still life, or anything of that sort, creates a situation which has no solution. What you're doing on the canvas is not and

never possibly could be the thing that you're working from. It's epistemologically impossible.

That caused an emotional and nervous reaction in me which was not agreeable. To the extent that you look at the places and things and people around you as subjects for painting you're not having a direct experience of the life around you. You're translating it into material for your painting which robs your life of the direct experience. I wanted not to put myself into that position. But I'm inclined to be interested in the whole situation more from a philosophical point of view than from what is often described as a spiritual point of view. None of those words seem very satisfactory, however.

AW Yet for a time you returned to figurative painting yourself.

HS You do different things at different times. When I did, it wasn't long before I began to have exactly the same feelings which had caused me to leave figure painting in the first instance. But I also differed from Park and Bischoff in my approach to the figure. I felt then and I continue to feel that I would rather have more specificity. Park's later paintings are particularly disconcerting to me because they're so generalized. The human figure appears as an ideograph. It never has any personality.

AW Given your leftist political views, did you think of using the figure as a way to communicate with a mass audience? Do you think the wish to reach a broader range of people might have motivated Park and Bischoff?

HS I think they did have feelings of that sort.

Not political. Neither Bischoff or Park had any specific political intentions, and there's a difference between them and myself in that respect. A number of my lithographs and collages—of which one is hanging in the Oakland Museum now—have a specific political message. I have been through various states of mind and conditions of being in which I have implemented my ideas differently. But my feelings about them have never changed.

AW Am I correct in thinking that you were asked to leave the Art Institute in 1952 because the administration disagreed with your politics?

HS As you know, Douglas McAgly was responsible for hiring all of us. When he left, the Board asked Ernest Mundt to assume the directorship and that was that. He was a member of the faculty with more conservative leanings, and had been sort of biding his time, I suppose. He called me into the office one day and said that my services were no longer needed. But he had a perfect right to do so. He wanted to put together a group of people he could work with, which is exactly what McAgly had done.

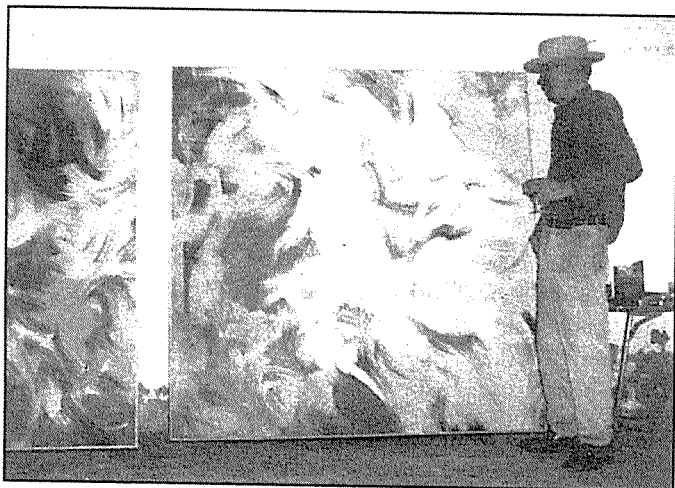
AW Then David Park and Elmer Bischoff resigned to protest your firing?



Hassel Smith, *Untitled*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 6' x 4'. (Photo courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis.)

HS Did they? I wasn't aware if that was the reason. I know that the group of faculty I worked with then dispersed rather rapidly to other school and places. I went on to teach at University of California, Los Angeles, but I was never really accepted there. At the time, there were some good people on the faculty with progressive ideas, but they didn't have power in the department. I felt quite on the fringe. Eventually, Bristol Polytechnic offered me a tenured position and I have been in England ever since.

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.



Hassel Smith in his studio.