APEX: ARVIE SMITH

“My post-Obama work captures the celebration, the amazement, the hope, although the idea that blacks are seen as inferior continues. Obama’s election invites African Americans to say: “I can be president. I see and feel the audacity of hope; the encouragement that yes, I am in no way inferior nor am I a second class citizen. I am somebody.”

Blacks depend on the largess of the dominant culture for recognition. In life, we filter everything; before we speak we must consider the consequences of our words. No black person feels secure in their position. Through art there is freedom. I expose the slights, discrimination, and condescension. I speak unfettered of my perceptions of the black experience. By critiquing atrocities and oppression, by creating images that foment dialogue, I hope my work makes the repeat of those atrocities and injustices less likely.”

Smith was born in 1938. Growing up, he was called “colored”, not Black. Aunt Jemima was proudly emblazoned on pancake packages and Shirley Temple was tap-dancing with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. Later, there were riots in the African American neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles where he once lived, and a fleeting dawn of multi-cultural acceptance in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury where he resided for a time. Smith’s paintings mine a lifetime of oppression, struggle, and hope.

“My grandparents raised me in Texas. He was a college history prof in an all-black college. She was head teacher and principal for a separate-but-equal grade school. The KKK burned down my ‘uppity’ grand uncle’s farm. Great-grandmother was a slave in North Carolina. Great-grandfather stowed away on a ship from Jamaica and made a home in Texas. At 13, I was sent to South Central LA, where my mother worked three jobs to create a home for my siblings and me. I had never been in a world where children disrespected their elders. As a gang member, I was able to protect myself and my siblings. Gang membership offers black males a sense of fraternity and a sense of being in the absence of a father figure—then and now.”

Smith earned a BFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1985 at age 47. He studied printmaking in Florence, Italy.
and subsequently earned an MFA at the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art. He has long “paid it forward” by introducing youth to art through programs at Portland Public Schools, Self-Enhancement, Inc., Caldera, the Hyalite Project and the Hayden Project. He serves on the Board of Ko-Falen Cultural Center, Mali, helping to advance the vision of fellow artist, Baba Waugé Diakité.

Strange Fruit, the exhibition’s shocking centerpiece, borrows its title from the Abel Meeropol song made famous by Billie Holiday in 1939. It depicts the lynching of a young black man by two muscular robed and hooded KKK members. An American flag peeks from the right top corner of the canvas, while below the “platform” other Klans member look on. The composition evokes depictions of the Crucifixion and the swirling folds of the Klan members’ robes resemble the marvelously carved drapery of the famous Winged Victory of Samothrace. Here, though, is the victory of dominance, extreme violence, and blatant disregard of justice. Smith’s painting, like holocaust memorials, forces the viewer to recall the horror of genocide, bigotry, and oppression.

As recently as the 1960s, supposed sexual infractions by black men against white women led to vigilante “justice” and lynching. Taboos regarding sexual relationships between people of color and Caucasians are often explored in Smith’s work. His women are sex objects in numerous guises. His paintings are tableaux where women perform and are obsessions, temptresses, slaves, and possessions. Glorifying sexual conquest in defiance of centuries of repression, black men embrace white women in Bojangles Ascending the Staircase and Highstakes, behavior that not too long ago could have life-threatening consequences.

As Smith points out, times have changed, but not enough to ensure true equality. There remains an important role for these works: they remind us of what was “normal” for past generations. Commercialized caricatures of African Americans like Little Black Sambo, Al Jolson in black face, Stepin Fetchit (Andrew Perry), and Aunt Jemima often play roles in Smith’s narratives. In Hands up Don’t Shoot, Aunt Jemima holds up stacks of pancakes while imploring “don’t shoot” in a cheerfully brutal reminder of what the artist says: “is every single day, every single day in our neighborhoods and my “tight rope” (the title of his May 2015 solo exhibition at Mark Wooley Gallery in Portland), [is] one that ethnic and racial minorities walk every day.”

As an artist, Arvie Smith is above all an alchemist, restoring potency to images that have been appropriated and often drained
of meaning by pop culture and journalism. Slyly re-contextualizing such images amid torrents of vibrant, swirling color and with humor as a catalyst, Smith cauoles us to confront realities we would rather ignore. His paintings attract and repel us at the same time; they make us want to laugh and want to cry. We are, at the least, embarrassed; at best, profoundly ashamed. For what is the appropriate response to unmitigated, casual oppression?

What is the appropriate response to murder?

— Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson
The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art

1, 2, 3 Arvie Smith quote, A Painter’s Life: Piercing the Armor of Race, Mark Wooley, Mark Wooley Gallery, May 2015, Portland, Oregon
BIOGRAPHY

Arvie Smith (American, born 1938) earned his MFA degree from the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore in 1992, where he was teaching assistant to Grace Hartigan, and his BFA degree from the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon in 1985. He studied painting at the Studio Art Center International and attended Il Bisonte International School of Printmaking in Florence, Italy, 1983-1984. His work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions including: Mark Wooley Gallery, Portland, Oregon; Beppu Wiarda Gallery, Portland, Oregon; Sylvia Schmidt Gallery, New Orleans; University of Oregon, Eugene; Temple University Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; School33 Art Center, Baltimore, Maryland; 55 Mercer, New York; Brockman Gallery, Los Angeles, California; Oregon Biennial, Portland Art Museum; and Fremont Fine Arts Gallery, Seattle. Smith’s paintings are in collections including: the Reginald Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture, Baltimore, Maryland; Petrucci Family Foundation, New York, New York; Nelson Mandela Estate, South Africa; Multnomah County Courthouse, Portland; Oregon State University, Corvallis; City of Tualatin, Oregon; Transitional Housing Program, Baltimore, Maryland; Regional Arts and Culture Council, Portland, Oregon; and Portland Art Museum, Oregon. He has held residencies at the Reginald Lewis Museum of Art and Culture and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; Self Enhancement Incorporated, Portland, Oregon; and Caldera, Sisters, Oregon. Smith has had a distinguished teaching career and is Professor Emeritus at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, and has taught at the University of Oregon, Eugene; Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore; Oregon College of Art and Craft, Portland; and Studio Art Center International, Florence, Italy. He is represented by Galerie Myrtis, Baltimore, Maryland.

APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum’s 120-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art, The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Exhibition Series Sponsors.

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions: Height precedes width, precedes depth

House of Cards, 2016
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches
Collection of the artist

Hands Up Don’t Shoot, 2015
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
Collection of Nancy Ogilvie

Bojangles Ascending the Stairs, 2014
Oil on linen
78 x 68 inches
Collection of the artist

We Be Lovin’ It, 2009
Oil on canvas
60 x 40 inches
Collection of the artist

Black Pigment, 2007
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
Collection of Dan and Priscilla Wieden

Dem Golden Slippers, 2007
Oil on linen
60 ¼ x 66 inches
Gift of Donna Hammar
2010.80

Trail of Tears, 2006
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches
Collection of the artist

Luciana Dancing with Angels, 2002
Oil on canvas
65 x 50
Collection of Mura Lundy

High Stakes, 1993
Oil on canvas
69 x 96 inches
Collection of Chelsea and Aaron Lorenson

Strange Fruit, 1992
Oil on canvas
92 x 70 inches
Collection of the artist

COVER: Strange Fruit, 1992
Inside Flap: Trail of Tears, 2006