

Beverly A. Smith's Happy Marriage of Nature and Transcendence

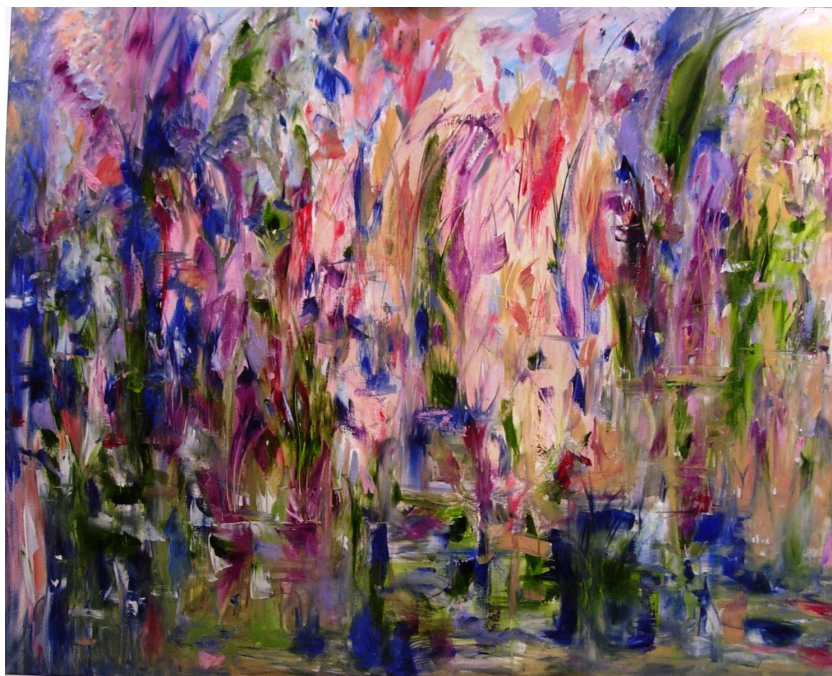
It stands to reason that the art of Beverly A. Smith is so brilliantly saturated with sunlight, since she lives and works in Sarasota Florida. In fact, the painting that she calls "Sarasota" could be seen as her signature work, given its exuberant chromatic explosions of yellow and verdant green strokes, which fill the canvas with a sun-drenched sense of energy.

Like other female abstract painters before her — most particularly Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell — Smith presents a lush, positive, and life-affirming answer to the miasma of male angst that hangs heavily over so much contemporary art. A delightful effusiveness is what animates Smith's work in particular, with its veritable showers of luminous color. Indeed, even though she is still too young for her career to have begun at the time that the critic and Abstract Expressionist advocate Harold Rosenberg coined the phrase "action painting," that designation seems tailor-made for her.

For what Smith conveys in her compositions, most of which are done in thick impastos of oil paint applied to the canvas with a palette knife rather than brushes, is the spirit and emotional energy of nature, rather than its outward manifestations.

And while the sunlight that saturates her present paintings is most immediately that which warms her days in Sarasota, she actually grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, and only moved to Florida about three years ago. Learning that she has been inspired by the marshes in Falmouth or Edgartown, Cape God, also goes a long way toward explaining the total effect of a painting such as "Tip Toe Marsh," one of her most exhilarating oils on canvas. For in this, one of her most representational canvases in its own unique way as well, one can clearly discern the brilliant blue waters and high grasses that make up such wetlands, with their porous limestone bedrock and dense, moist vegetation. In Smith's paintings, the tall grasses appear as though scraped into the surface of the pigment with the tip of the palette knife or the handle of the brush, giving an extra tactile dimension, as well as greater chromatic subtlety, to the picture by

revealing the layers of yellow hues beneath the green, lending yet another luminous coloristic element to the picture. The entire painting — but especially the cerulean blue water of the marsh — shimmers with a kind of succulence and reflectiveness that makes one think of Monet's water lilies,



"Acceptance"

albeit laid down on canvas with looser strokes that are more expressionistic than impressionistic. The vigorous manner of execution of the scored and scratched grasses provides a lively contrast to the pure yellow splash of sunlight that illuminates the entire upper right portion of the composition so brilliantly. Indeed, that Smith adheres more to the spontaneous energy of Expressionism, rather than the quasi-scientific calculation of Impressionism is what imbues her paintings with their emotional content.

Perhaps this emotional component of her work comes across most clearly in "Acceptance," a composition that appears to mingle elements of both joy and melancholy in its palette of pinks, blues, and greens, laid down in vigorous strokes in a mostly vertical direction. This canvas could be said to be less representational than "Tip Toe Marsh," in that there is not as much sense of the lay of the land or the flow of the water as in the previous painting. Rather, we are presented with a juicy configuration of forms pressing forward on the two-dimensional space of the picture plane that convey a feeling more clearly than they suggest an image, an experiential — and therefore emotional — impression that resonates and hints as to the possible meaning of the title.

By contrast, somewhat more tumultuous emotions appear to be evoked in the painting that Smith calls "Restraint," where a whirlwind of strokes in somewhat uncharacteristically darker tonalities swirls over the entire surface of the composition with a stormy energy. Indeed, here, Smit

demonstrates that, unlike many abstract painters who settle on a trademark style in order to make their work more uniformly marketable, she is not willing to restrict her palette or to endlessly repeat the same motifs for the sake of achieving stylistic consistency. Rather, apparently subscribing to the belief that "style is character," she trusts in the authenticity of her emotions and the strength of her own character to carry the work forward, trusting that the perceptive viewer will be able to discern for him or herself the deeper consistency that she strives for in all the varied facets of her creative oeuvre.

That Smith, while working primarily from nature, also gives free reign to imagination as well, can only be surmised from another somewhat anomalous composition that she calls "Bedouins II." For although one always risks being misled (not to mention misleading the reader) when one takes the title of any abstract painting too literally, in this work the small forms, partially obscured here and there within an expansive vortex of pinkish pigment, could indeed suggest the slow progress of desert nomads making their way through a sand storm.

At the same time, however, to search for too many specific meanings in the work of a painter such as Beverly A. Smith is to miss the larger point of her ambitious artistic project. For it is the autonomous aesthetic attributes of paintings such as these that provide the viewer with deeper and more relevant riches of enjoyment. And it is the manner in which the artist activates her materials to recreate the experience of the visual world, rather than merely copying its superficial aspects, that finally lends Smith's paintings their truly transcendent appeal.

— Byron Coleman

Beverly A. Smith,
New Century Artists Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, March 1 - 19.