

of the sheet. A scintillatingly complex image composes from almost childishly simple means.

Gego toys with echoes of bodily presence, not only via the vigorous, questing quality of her line, in which the passage of her hand is palpable, but through the hints of iconicity that she insinuates just enough to let them register before dissolving back into abstraction. The landscape element is potent. Not-quite figurative moments occur, too. Another untitled intaglio from 1963 centers on a totemic, Klee-esque form; a drawing in red ink, likewise dated 1963, allows a buzzing series of horizontals to thicken at the center into another fingerprint, or an off-kilter rising sun, or an eye, or a blood spot. The infinite extension implied by the grid serves, in Gego's art, not as a mathematically rationalistic proposition but as a tensile scaffold for visionary speculation. *I SMILE—THEY GLIDE / I LAUGH—THEY BOUNCE / LEAP COMES WITH NONSENSE* reads an inscription in the artist's book *Lineas*, 1966. The title means *lines* in Spanish—although the phrases are written in English—and Gego's animated lines seem to be the objects of the preposition *they*. The artist and her lines are at play together.

—Frances Richard

## Kimber Smith

### JAMES GRAHAM & SONS

Kimber Smith might not be a household name, but his paintings from the 1960s and '70s are knockouts, some of the most formidable to be on view in our moment of near-ubiquitous abstraction. A second-generation Abstract Expressionist better known for his friendships with Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell than for his own work, Smith spent more than a decade in Paris, where he encountered Annette Michelson in 1964, who called him the “most serious and consequential” of his community of expats. Smith returned to the United States the following year. A few years earlier he had switched from oil to acrylic, and in the late '60s he would embark on a three-year affair with spray paint. But it is his works from the '70s (which comprise the bulk of this show) that best demonstrate Smith's capacity for working his medium—precisely by underscoring his refusal to do so, his willingness to paint only enough washy, brilliantly highlighted strokes to secure a composition amid otherwise empty space (as in the sparely monumental *Carnival*, 1974, and *Friday the Fourteenth*, 1979).

Hung together with more muted gouache-on-paper pieces (which often feature bands of circles or linear elements close to the borders, and generally redouble the shapes in the paintings, though in different configurations), the paintings evidence Smith's thoughtful approach. His plays of color and pattern are neither based on the grid nor do they arise from operations of chance; instead, they are rooted in deliberations about the forms' relationships to a painting's edges, say, or the translucent veils of color that Smith left to dry before the application of more paint. The latter consideration—and its avoidance of the durational process of applying wet onto wet (as exemplified by de Kooning's work)—is especially striking in *Egyptian Rose Garden*, 1976, where the tangerine cuts across the yellow laid down first. Elsewhere in the same work, one finds shades that do not so much mix as effect perceptibly distinct strata: color over color.

Smith's works feature a personal lexicon of symbolic shapes—orbs, triangles, rectangles, zigzags, and lozenges—the iconography of which he derived from the minutiae of his quotidian experience: For example, the omnipresent triangles (many limn the sides of panels, as in *Back from G H*, 1979) refer to the ears of his cat. The paintings nevertheless appear unburdened, and retain an improvisatory and even unfinished quality. The implied insouciance belies Smith's thoughtfulness, evoking latter-

day equivalents of Matisse's hedonistic, barely abstract thresholds. Indeed, though the paintings from the 1970s were completed in the wake of Smith's diagnosis of cancer, which precipitated his move to Long Island and ended his life prematurely in 1981, they remain remarkably un-marred by the histrionics that biographical fact might betoken.

To Smith's immense credit, his work has remained bracingly fresh as it has wafted across the years. The palettes are particularly convincing: They are sentimental and lush and acid all at once. And it doesn't take long looking at such efforts before the inevitable comparisons arise: to Mary Heilmann, Michael Krebber, and the list goes on. Like those artists, Smith seems to have anticipated much recent practice; his work is oriented toward a studied—even self-reflexive—casualness that admits its precedents even as it disregards the consequences of painting as though they mattered. But Smith deserves to be viewed as more than a bridge (a role Morris Louis famously attributed to Frankenthaler, claiming she was “the bridge between Pollock and what was possible”). This show argued that Smith is important as an innovator in his own right, and it easily convinced.

—Suzanne Hudson



Kimber Smith,  
*Egyptian Rose Garden*,  
1976, acrylic on  
canvas, 68 x 65".

## Phoebe Washburn

MARY BOONE GALLERY/ZACH FEUER GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn's *Nunderwater Nort Lab*, 2011, an installation that filled the main space at Zach Feuer, looks a good deal like a fort. The wide, cylindrical structure is ragged and slipshod, built from piled-up two-by-fours that appear to have been scavenged from other, previous incarnations. Holes, placed at regular intervals, offer glimpses of the walled-off interior, but those views are blinkered by cylindrical tunnels on the interior side. What can be seen within suggests the aesthetic of a hardware store or bodega: an assemblage of extension cords in bright colors, bits of colored paint, zip ties, coolers, neon stickers, pouches of Gatorade powder, and plants under clip-on lights. Faint sounds—of a knife against a cutting board, murmured conversation, and reggae music turned down low—are audible, and one can detect the smell of food, but it recalls less a homey kitchen than an institutional cafeteria.

The structure is thus secret but not hermetic, titillating you with its interior as much as hiding it. Its vibe is friendlier than the walled-off survivalist-camp setup might suggest—a mix of biosphere experimentation, the jury-rigged aesthetic of Burning Man, Andrea Zittel's self-sufficient systems for living, even a secret marijuana-growing bunker. Unlike Zittel's (and probably the biosphere's) careful and transparent parsing of particular problems of human existence (the most efficient way to eat, sleep, eliminate, and create relying on limited means), *Nunderwater Nort Lab* is a deliberately obscured view of an unknowable system; from a formal point of view it is an only slightly shattered monument, a teasingly cracked Torqued Ellipse. In earlier works, such as *Tickle the Shitstem*, 2008, Washburn set up a Rube Goldberg-style scheme that produced T-shirts bearing the gibberish word ORT and a