

LUHRING AUGUSTINE

"Josh Smith"

Art Studio America: Contemporary Artist Spaces.

London, UK and New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2013. pp. 198-201.

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Josh Smith in front of his home and studio, a colorful clapboard redoubt in the woodlands of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, close to the Delaware Water Gap. The space is shared with his companion and fellow artist Megan Lang. "My art is my life," says Smith

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Josh Smith

You're a Tennessee man born and bred, aren't you?

I was born in Japan; my dad was in the military. I was moved around a lot, but I spent most of my life in Tennessee. In 1998 I moved to New York, and in 2012 I came here to Pennsylvania. I still have to go back to New York a few times a month.

What brought you here?

I was having a hard time in New York. My parents had a friend whose son had fixed up a house here and wanted to sell it. I bought it because it looked nice and it was in the woods. So this is where I ended up. It is a real retreat.

Where do you fit in the art world?

There are two types of artists: artists who just make art, and artists who want to exhibit and be involved in some sort of larger discourse. I'm probably more like the second type.

You were an art handler in the beginning. What did that involve?

In New York there is a whole industry (I'm sure it's the same in London) around packing, moving and handling art. I worked in a lot of different galleries; that's what young people do in New York. Then you make friends and you get other jobs, setting up for art fairs and working on trucks and going to people's apartments and setting things up. It is just freelance work.

I didn't quit working at a job until 2005 or 2007. I worked for Christopher Wool for seven and a half years. That was a great place to hide. I didn't worry about being a successful artist because I had that job. Three days a week and I could pay my rent and stuff.

So you were an art handler, you were earning enough to pay your rent from working, and yet you knew you were going to be one of the best artists in America?

I knew I was the best artist where I came from. Art was very easy for me. I didn't ever assume that I would be the best artist in New York. I knew I would work harder and be more critical and harder on myself than almost everybody else. And I always do the opposite of what everybody else is doing, which is fun. I moved to New York to be in a community of people who work hard and who are not complacent. Tennessee people try to have an enriching and comfortable life; it is probably not the best place to make art that has teeth. I grew up coming to New York.

What artists have inspired you along the way?

Rauschenberg, Warhol, tons of artists. The idea of being an artist in New York probably inspired me more than anything else. Working in a melting pot where there are all different types of people and there are oppressive forces and positive forces. When you have a good moment in New York, it is very meaningful.

You mentioned doing the opposite of what other artists do ... you are almost a contrarian, or am I wrong?

Yes I am. For my own peace of mind, if I want to make a living out of being an artist, I have to do something that I don't understand. I want to understand it more after it's done. While I'm working, if I start to understand what I'm doing, I'll put it away and work on something else. I want to make myself uncomfortable with my art. The turmoil is going to be there no

matter what. I see this in my family, even in my grandparents: they question a lot of things. My psyche is like a roller coaster. I'm afraid of the truth, but I try to curve it a little bit through my art, paint the wrong way a little bit, until it seems like it is right for me.

Is this why one of your constant themes involves writing your name on your work?

Well, I have to fill it up somehow. My name is a good one that fills up some space and conveys something. I have plugged it in probably five or six different ways throughout the course of my life as an artist who is trying to make something besides a painting of flowers or a landscape.

When you are learning to do a technical thing, you need an image. I didn't want to think of an image; I just used my name as the image to get me through school. It got me through printmaking classes, it got me through painting classes. I like the name-paintings. I find them the most confrontational things. They always give me pause and make me doubt.

How would you define your art, then?

I want each work to be a closed thing so that any time I put a painting on the wall it doesn't need anything else. I want it to be comprehensive. That's why I make a lot of works – so I can learn about what I'm doing and figure out what's bad and what's good. I have to do ten and then decide what's good. Then I have to either get rid of the other things or change the other things enough to make them good. I want my paintings to be read like image-poems or something.

You strike me as very gentle and calm, yet you have had a reputation as a bad boy.

I did a show at the Brant Foundation and they had a PR firm do the publicity. All of these newspapers interviewed me and made me into a bad-boy artist because I don't go to every single opening. If you're not a complete pushover and glamour-puss, you get labeled as a bad boy. For better or worse I don't have a lot of patience with certain things: fashion-y things, things that involve waiting in lines, dinners where there is no food. There are certain things that I just don't do.

I mean, this is the way New York works; this is how it is in every job. No matter what you do, there are functions where people go to network and stuff, and fortunately I don't have to do that. My career was not made by networking; it was built up really slowly. I am weary of that sort of scene. That is why I am not in New York anymore. All I want to do is represent myself and support my friends.

Do you feel that you are somehow a race apart?

No, I am not a race apart from other artists, just way different than a lot of artists who take themselves very, very seriously. I take myself seriously too, but not as far as becoming mean to other people and then acting like a jerk in public.

Would you then describe yourself as a happy man?

I'm happy when I'm in my element. Here I can control things pretty much completely. I can be the happiest person on earth, I'm certain of that.

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The artist (above) on his porch as the last rays of the autumn sun disappear below the tree line, while (right) shadows form against a cold stone wall, his painting instruments becoming part of the pattern-play. Smith (facing page) working in his studio after recovering from back surgery. He often uses the letters of his name as his subject matter



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Does control create happiness?

Right now it does, for me. That's not a good thing, that's just how it is. Not that I'm controlling, but right now I would like to be in control of my life a little bit.

Is art an obsession for you or a profession?

It's legitimately a lifestyle, so I guess it's both of those things. It's a way I pass the time, it's a way I organize my thoughts, it's a way I represent myself for the world, it's a defense, it's a manipulative thing. I can compartmentalize whole aspects in my work or hide them somewhere. I can just put them away forever. It is a luxury, and I often wonder how people who don't have these outlets do it. I guess they have friends and spend more time with their families or they play golf or go out to bars.

Isn't your being in this secluded wood also a kind of hiding?

Oh yeah. I don't know anybody here, not one person. There is a woman at the grocery store who sometimes says hello and good-bye to me. That is the most social interaction I have. I guess it's my own artist-in-residence arrangement. You put yourself in certain situations and wait and see how you react and how your art reacts.

Your home and your studio are separate, aren't they?

Yes. At home I just sleep and read and hang out in the yard. Here I watch sports and look at my books and it is all very different. I have an office here. Sometimes I wish I lived here, but I don't.

You've been quoted as saying, "If you have an apartment then art is a job you go to, but if you don't then art is your life."

I know. I like my house here so much that I didn't want to take the chance of ruining it.

In New York I was suffering. I lived in the East Village and my studio was in Midtown so I had to commute every day. I ride my bike in New York and it started to feel like a job. When I go back to New York, I definitely want to get a live/work space. I am one of these artists who believe in moving studios every five years, maximum. I don't like it when you go to see a person who has had the same studio in New York forever and everything's all filled up and sort of dusty and you can see stuff from the '60s and '70s. I want it to be really fresh.

You mentioned that your father was in the military and that you moved around quite a bit ...

Yeah. It made me more transient; I don't feel like I come from a particular place. Pennsylvania is as much my home as anywhere. New York feels like my home too. That is part of why I came here. What I'm realizing is that I do actually love being in New York.

What part of your journey has been the most challenging and transforming?

I have a few sharp memories, all of which involve people being mean to other people, with me either being the one who is being mistreated or watching people mistreat other people.

You see people behave in a lot of different ways in New York. Some are really beautiful and some are really troubling. They accumulate inside you. I have a good memory; I don't forget things. I wish I could forget more things.

I'm in Pennsylvania to protect myself, to preserve the core of my existence. I am a sensitive, piece-of-shit guy, and I don't want to become a jaded, mean old man. I hate when people say, "Let it go." At night I lie there thinking of letting it go, thinking how great an idea that is. I am here to learn how to do that.

You seem to have a love/hate relationship with art ...

Art can be very pure or very convoluted. It's a complicated business that I'm in. It would be nice if you just made a salary and didn't have to sell things.

Have you paid a price for your art?

I've got a broken-down body. Working alone is very hard on your body. I don't have assistants; I'm not that type of artist. It's a complicated, messy, beautiful and troubling lifestyle. No book a million pages long could ever explain the nuances and the rewards and the tragedies of it. It is very surprising.

And the effect on your work has been what?

I made the name-paintings knowing that people would think they were stupid, knowing that they wouldn't like them. If you make a painting of a flower and someone doesn't like it, it's like, "How could you not like a painting of a flower?" But if you make a painting of your name and someone doesn't like it, you understand why right away. Why would someone like a painting of my name? So there is comfort in understanding why someone doesn't like your work. Then you can try to correct it.

Is your work about self-sabotage at all?

Being destructive in art is not like destroying a family or destroying something real. It is a metaphor for destruction. When I destroy art, it's not buried. The word *destroyed* is a violent word, but I'm not doing terrorism or killing people or anything. It's a metaphor for something that one person feels. It's not a real thing.