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Art in Review

By Michael Kimmelman

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Philip Smith Jason McCoy Gallery 41 East 57th Street Through June 12

It is understandable that Philip Smith's paintings did not stand out at last year's Whitney Biennial. They're quiet works that do not try to compete for attention. The considerable pleasure of them comes from the painstakingly constructed oil and wax surfaces into which are incised myriad images, like hieroglyphs. Mr. Smith builds layer upon layer, first painting abstractions on linen and then covering them up, often with subtle stripes of color, and on top of these laying down the final soft surface. The incisions reveal the painting underneath, so that the result is a multiple image of swirls of color beneath geometric designs beneath loopy drawn pictographs of matchbooks, corncobs, skyscrapers, grapefruits, clocks, fingerprints, African carvings and much else. Mr. Smith's inspiration seems to have come from many directions, from Brice Marden and Mark Tobey and Jackson Pollock and also from Egyptian art and even from the graffiti carved in antique monuments. But there's a combination of slowness in his surfaces and patterns, and speed in the rush of cacophonous imagery, that is distinctive to him.