

PHILIP SMITH

Modern Painters: February 2014

Philip Smith

MODERN PAINTERS

NEW YORK

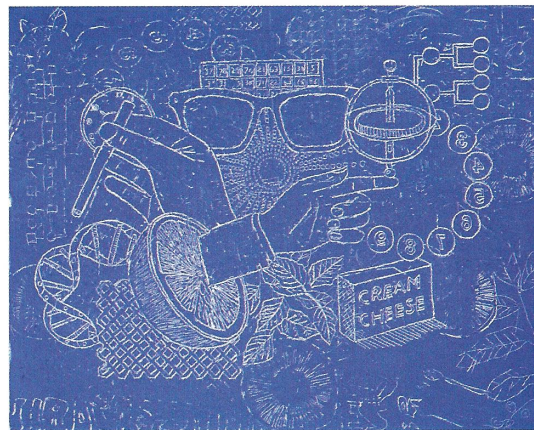
Philip Smith

Jason McCoy Gallery // November 7–December 20, 2013

ONE OF FIVE artists in the “Pictures” exhibition, curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in 1977, Smith was associated with a group of makers chosen for their appropriation of recognizable images—artists who absorbed the visual detritus of contemporary life and reanimated those images in the context of their artworks. The “Pictures” artists have achieved lasting resonance, and in “Sign Language,” his first New York solo show in more than a decade, Smith presents a new body of work that, at a time of ever-increasing visual saturation, seems all the more relevant.

Several monochrome coats of paint are applied to Smith’s canvases, each inscribed with characters that become increasingly obscured with each subsequent layer. These bits of scenes and objects are rendered in wavering lines by a worn screwdriver, giving them a hand-drawn quality that, coupled with barely perceptible images in the underlayers, evokes memories and the way pictures and ideas ebb and flow through our subconscious. The result reads like a series of afterimages, creating connections between a variety of signifiers. In the seafoam-green painting *In the Planning*

Stages, 2013, the most lucid images contain references to pop culture, science, and humans as witness. A Pepsi-Cola cap takes center stage, its round shape replacing the 9 in a string of backward numbers in circles that resemble a rotary dial. A double helix hovers in the background, arching over gridded forms ranging from matrices to mesh and circuit-board shapes. A talking head in a 1950s-era television faces a depiction of hands pulling a cord from a small box, perhaps as a magic trick. “5 Miracles” appears in block letters, stretching the definition of miracle from scientific and mathematical discoveries to magic tricks, TV, and, incongruously, a popular soft drink. Smith’s compositions have an equalizing effect; the eye scans them, registering trademarks and recognizable objects as a wash of images. Underlayers of the painting feature eyeballs and men who act as stand-ins for the viewer, as well as the artist himself, trying to parse what they see.



Philip Smith
Models of Jupiter, 2013.
Oil and wax
on canvas,
43 x 53 in.

The other paintings in this exhibition employ similar content. Smith’s paintings provide a new way of visualizing what is a rather murky mix of nonstop imagery that is perhaps unsurprising given the amount of optical information we take in on a daily basis—online articles, broadcasts from news organizations competing for our viewership, advertisements, social media, and so on. This artist shows us what the mind’s eye sees as the strangely enticing, multilayered mess that it is. —Lilly Lampe