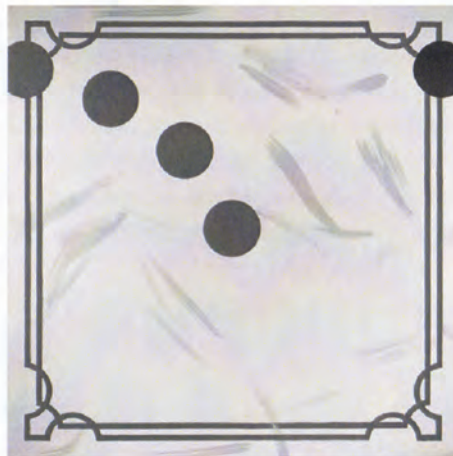


The Open Work in One Dimension

A dusty orange pattern borders the outskirts of *Orphan Sun* (2014), not quite containing the gestural pink brushstrokes scattered across the canvas. The pattern's horizontal asymmetry is borrowed from a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale label. But removed from that context and reproduced in paint, it looks more like a riff on a Baroque frame. By excising the form so thoroughly from its source—by orphaning it, one might say—Smith's citation yields this alternative referent and invites others still.

Smith derives many of her forms and colors from art history, graphic design, and textile patterns, to name only a few, and opens them up to new correspondences. To provoke such association, the artist makes explicit on the canvas what she has called her “hunter-gatherer approach to image-making.”¹ There, forms both geometric and curvilinear are discretely rendered and repeated, doubling within the picture plane the artist's own process of replication. They are painted alongside, beneath, or atop gestural passages that throw the sourced material into relief. Distinguishing her practice from a more referential practice of sampling, Smith effaces the specificity of her sources and invites morphological analogy without reference to genesis. In other words, she employs pseudomorphosis as painterly technique.

I borrow the term ‘pseudomorphosis’ from Erwin Panofsky, who used it to describe “the emergence of a form A, morphologically analogous to, or even identical with, a form B, yet entirely unrelated to it from a genetic point of view.”² It is often mistaken as evidence of



influence where there is, in fact, none. Smith mines precisely this confusion and uses it to generate new affinities. The Sierra Nevada motif, for instance, looks so at home on the canvas that it calls up a history of painting. Instead of elevating design to the status of painting, the artist's technique of pseudomorphosis upends the conventional hierarchy between these fields by confounding the categorical distinction on which it depends. In Smith's hand, form and palette migrate seamlessly between design and painting.

Yet if sourced materials, severed from their origins, elide differences between the fields from which Smith draws, they are often in tension with her expressive brushwork. In *Uppsala* (2014), a leaf pair floats in a sea of gestural strokes, pushing their expressionistic abstraction into illusionism. A decorative pomander motif repeated irregularly across the canvas reasserts the flatness of the picture plane. Smith resuscitates the modernist commitment to flatness but, by pairing the decorative with the gestural, refuses its historical purity and renders it instead as dialectical.

Take, for instance, *Sheet Set* (2013). A series of concentric squares, each patterned in differently scaled stripes of navy and white, is crowned with a slip of pink. The composition makes the painting look layered, collaged even. But it is a study in flatness. While the stack of stripes, like a pile of fabric swatches, recalls the flatness of decoration, the field of pink heaves with expressionistic strokes that evoke the flatness of gestural abstraction. Or perhaps these references to the decorative and the gestural are better inverted—the stripes inherited from the conceptual gesture of Daniel Buren's institutional



critique and the square of pink like a piece of fabric,
crinkled silk perhaps. Pattern doubles as decorative and
gestural. So too does brushstroke. Both at once, Smith's
painting renders them inseparable.

-Maggie Taft

¹ Natalie Smith, e-mail message to author, March 15, 2014.

² Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on Its
Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, edited by
H.W. Janson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1964),
26-27.

