

# WASHBURN



DECEMBER 13TH, 2017

HASSEL SMITH:  
*The Ferus Years*  
by David Rhodes

Ferus Gallery, founded by Walter Hopps, Ed Kienholz and Bob Alexander, could be found on La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles between 1957 and 1968. After Irving Blum became a director of the gallery in 1958 (replacing Kienholz, who left to concentrate on his career as an artist) the gallery presented artists from both the West Coast and New York. West Coast artists who had debut exhibitions included Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Kenneth Price, Larry Bell and Ed Rucha. Andy Warhol had his first West Coast exhibition at Ferus, and other New York artists who exhibited there were Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Frank Stella—all at Blum’s initiative. Blum organized Hassel Smith’s (1915–2007) solo exhibitions in 1959, 1961, and 1962. This current exhibition is Smith’s first in New York since a 1961 solo at André Emmerich Gallery. In a text written for this exhibition, Blum says that Smith’s underappreciated status is due to his insistence on continuing to live in Northern California when the focus for contemporary art in the U.S. was far greater in New York. It can be added that after 1966 Smith also started to live in Bristol, England, after being offered a teaching position—it was here that I first met Smith in the late 1970s when he became one of my painting professors.

This exhibition is comprised of five paintings and six drawings dated between 1952 and 1963. The paintings in color and surface recall the American West, not as landscape painting, but as abstractions of light, heat, and surface. Both Arshile Gorky and Clyfford Still come to mind, and I can remember Smith’s deep respect for both in our conversations. Another artist, one of Smith’s (and Clyfford Still’s) students at the California School of Fine Art, Deborah Remington (1930–2010) is currently part of a Bay Area group exhibition at Karma: her paintings possess the zones of mineral color and gestural marks evident in Smith’s own work.

*The Houston Scene* (1959) is the largest painting here at 69 × 119 inches. It’s a very difficult painting to categorize. Simply put, it’s somewhere between spontaneous gestural painting and organic/geometric compositional painting. Smith’s unique hybridity is more comparable to jazz innovation than notions of Post-Modernity. This is painting that is both very visual and rigorously conceptual. Smith was a fan of Ornette Coleman so the changes in speed and disjunctive transitions come as no surprise. Smith’s interest in music found commonalities in painting; he talked about the relationship between noise and silence and how they are functions of each other, and about quantity of sound, and for his own work, quantity of color. The rhythms apparent in *The Houston Scene* derive from just these changes in quantity, of amounts of color and incident. To quote Smith, “The corners of the canvas are events with a necessary dimensional ‘interval’ between them but that does not imply that the interval is without ‘eventfulness’ in other words, ‘nothing.’”

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*Untitled* (1963) is a drawing in graphite and ink. It looks fast-moving; lines of graphite rapidly marked in changing directions and scrapes of ink applied with a vertical register, or a circular twist of the hand, are all laid down next to plenty of mute—but not inactive, as they are counterpoints—areas of untouched paper. The drawings appear to inform the paintings as relationships between active and *sotto voce* areas correspond qualitatively rather than imitatively. The vitality and thoughtfulness throughout all works here is testament to a singular artist who didn't fit into available generalizations, and didn't care to.



Hassel Smith, *The Houston Scene* (1959) Oil on canvas. Courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York.