



## visual art source Editorial: Profiles

### Ali Smith

Profile by Molly Enholm



*Ali Smith, "Flip Side," 2012, oil on canvas, 76 x 120". Photo: Gene Ogami*

Ali Smith's complex large-scale paintings evoke myriad associations, ranging from the continuous dynamic of Gorky's scrawling lyricism to Kandisky's spiritual compositions to fantastical Seussian architectural constructions. Smith's studio, which she shares with her husband in Long Beach, CA, is densely populated with the scores of the artist's journals, sketches, canvases, and work tables covered with tubes of oil paint--the smell of which perfumes the air. The back wall reveals an elaborate array of influences, including images of folk art, quilts, a colorful Hindu temple in Seychelles, and newspaper clippings mixed in with her own sketches and explorations. Talking with the artist, it is quickly apparent how the idea of weaving together disparate ideas and influences is central to Smith's abstract paintings--as is embracing the creative process itself.

Smith has been creating art for as long as she can remember. "My dad built my first drawing table," she recalls, "and my mother put a crayon in my hand as soon as I could grasp it." From then on, the Southern Californian native was always making art, but it wasn't until college that she combined that passion with her formal studies. Smith moved to upstate New York to attend Skidmore College, where she earned her BFA in studio arts, while minoring in both French and Art History. A year abroad in France allowed the artist to nourish her fondness for the arts of la belle époque, but she credits her years in New York as a vital source of inspiration and development of her abstract style. "I had the chance to see work by a lot of strong

female artists: Ida Applebroog, Nancy Spero, Shazia Sikander, Margaret Kilgallen, Karen Kilimnik, Lisa Yuskavage, Marlene Dumas," she explains, "It was really key to me to see so much art in person in New York at a young age, it made anything seem possible."

Smith's time in New York was also pivotal in her move away from a more figurative style of painting. "Abstraction wasn't always something that interested me in painting," says Smith, who also speaks of the seriousness of abstraction and its history in New York. As she returned to SoCal to earn her MFA at Cal State Long Beach, she began exploring alternative materials, and "as formalism blended into abstraction," distilling the imagery to explore formal issues, and embracing the idea of letting go. "I'm always looking at contemporary painting, but historically, there are certain painters I often come back to." Among these, Smith counts Twombly, Mitchell, Bacon and Guston among her multifarious influences, "whether it be an interest in their stance towards painting, or a certain spirit of invention." Smith's excitement for viewing art--at galleries, museums, in books--and the ideas it can generate is contagious. She enthusiastically shares a book on the lavish interior designs of Tony Duquette and later recounts the impact of viewing Twombly's paintings at the Menil, and the repulsive/seductive interplay that exists in the tactile physicality of the works.

The idea of mark-making seems to be of particular interest to Smith's current works. The spatial arrangement of geometric and organic forms coalesces with traces of the artist's unique brushwork. The canvases reveal her passion for bold colors--hot oranges and crimsons contrasting sharply with cool chartreuse, cerulean blues and violets--and decisions rendered in scrawling passages and finely rendered hatches next to paint squeezed directly from the tube. With these marks, Smith preserves the same evolution that took place through the development of each of her paintings, a style that somehow relates to both stream-of-consciousness writing and advanced mathematic cryptology. Smith seems to enjoy the reference, noting that her father was a math instructor and husband taught music.

"Rather than artists who illustrate an obvious idea, I'm more interested in the dynamism and complexity of a painting," Smith explains, "and an idiosyncratic language of paint that shifts and changes." This interest manifests in densely layered dichotomies--high-pitched saturation against moody grays, intricate details underline bold brushstrokes, lustrous glazes juxtaposed with thick globs of paint. Smith's canvases are a visual candy-store, and after a little prerequisite window-shopping, it's all you can eat.

*Ali Smith was the subject of a recent solo show at Mark Moore Gallery, in Culver City. From February 25-March 31, 2012.*

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