

ARVIE SMITH



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by Berrisford Boothe

Every painting Arvie Smith produces, presents the viewer with a rich and complex assemblage of images. Laden with meaning, his paintings enlist metaphors, stereotypes, and popularized tropes to address the contemporary social politics of the Black lived experience in America. Masterful at rendering the human form, Smith is also critically acclaimed for his elegant and layered use of color as both a narrative and directional device. A popular refrain within minority or oppressed cultures is that “half the story has never been told.” Smith remedies that assertion, unapologetically occupying the role of a stalwart cultural storyteller. His work aligns with Sufi storytelling traditions in which multilayered parables teach history by employing humor and visual tangents that tease and provoke, while always maintaining a through line of truth meant to encourage sensible thinking. In crafting his interwoven narratives, Smith ignites the sensory *and* challenges his viewers’ presuppositions about what is Black cultural fact and what is culturally projected American fiction. Contemporary artist Felandus Thames compares this ability to the genius of Black comedic greats like Richard Pryor, who structure their jokes to convey irrefutable truths in vignettes that illustrate the arc of Blackness in America: the history, the triumphs, the dignity, the inhumanity, the physical and psychological subjugation that define Black realities. Iconic paintings like Smith’s *Down in the River to Pray* (2021) establish visual polyrhythms, multiple meters with synchronized elements. Cultural beliefs, contemporary truths, and immutable negative tropes coexist with potent figuration. Smith deftly uses all these elements to depict the ongoing precariousness of the Black American psyche. It comes as no surprise that Smith’s innovative consistency as a painter of multilayered histories has elicited critical praise and attention for decades. What is surprising is that his unique genius remains largely unrecognized, despite the fact that he may be the most distinctive Black Social Realist painter of our time.

Arvie Smith’s bold, honest paintings imbued with symbolism, constitute their own branch on the historical tree of Black Social Realism. His candor and his unflinching characterizations of social and racial tensions, reductive stereotypes, and foundational American ignorance can be compared to the work of the renowned African American figurative artist Robert Colescott. Both artists’ visual voices are charged with direct imagery that offers caustic commentary on the history of race in America. (Interestingly, Smith and Colescott have a personal relationship of influence.) Yet Smith’s fluid figuration and exceptional skill at compositional structure situate him as an unmatched, aesthetically distinctive artist of choreographed realism in contemporary African American art.

Historically, Social Realism refers to artwork that draws attention to the lived reality of a dispossessed or marginalized group. Social Realism uses figuration to tell stories, render portraits, or explore issues of race and class. Social Realism *requires* a point of view from the artist who belongs to the marginalized culture(s) being depicted. It is a type of art that offers a critique of injustice and ignorance and a reminder of systemic subjugation; it provides a critical examination of embedded perceptions and practices. Dox Thrash, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett are enshrined as some of the preeminent African American Social Realists of twentieth-century American art. Their art, like Smith’s, situates the impugned race or culture in the context of *their own* stories as told through the lens of *their own* lived experience. Smith’s figures are similarly rendered to elevate men and women of color and portray them as potent, heroic vessels of their own humanity. The collective goal of Mexican Social Muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, was to educate viewers by reproducing the crazy-quilted histories of their own people—for this reason they can be said to have influenced the African American Social Realists, as well as Smith. Using race to educate beyond the construct of race, is the ongoing objective of Arvie Smith’s entire body of work. Smith has fashioned his own form of Social Realism through the staging of Black cultural touchstones, the illustration of untold histories, and the inclusion of present-day African American social and political realities. His fantastical worlds are the product of a clever, unfiltered mindset and address abundant aspects of racial bias, including the ongoing commodification of Black bodies.

In *Down in the River to Pray*, multiple cross-generational time periods coexist because the experience of Black subconscious and conscious reality requires the ability to understand, filter, and adjust to multiple layers of American history—in real time. In the foreground of the picture plane, a traditional rural baptism is taking place. This evangelical scene of submission to faith for the purpose of redemption is intentionally given a deep, dark cultural twist. A young ‘white’ girl wearing a MAGA hat directs a young Black child wearing a polka-dotted “Jemima” headscarf to the river. Beside them, a robed bishop, whose hand hovers behind the head of another nubile young Black woman, balances the scene in which both girls are in fact being baptized into psychological bondage. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would Christ.” This text from Ephesians 6:5 served as the backbone of control over the enslaved. “This is a baptism of cultural dominance that is a trick, a control mechanism,” Smith says of the image. “They took away the animus traditions and gave us Christianity.” In the baptismal waters of the river floats a slave ship, ubiquitous in Smith’s paintings. He includes one of his archetypal characters, the Black Pimp, in the top left. The Pimp represents the oldest fear and touchstone trope in ‘white’ American culture, that of the industrious Black savage freed from civilized control, who exists only to breed with and commodify ‘white’ women for profit. This Pimp wears a mask to insulate himself from the bellowing pandemic lies of the reckless, half-drowning American president. But nevertheless, he remains the active protagonist in the piece, standing behind a virginal ‘white’ woman as she dips her toes into the metaphorical Black “river of experience.” It is inferred that she will sacrifice the purity of her ‘whiteness’ as a result.

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Echo and Narcissus, 2022

Oil on canvas

72 x 60 in

Photo: Aaron Wessling

Smith's paintings are very much the visual equivalent of the African oral storytelling tradition. They teach our true collective history. They tease, but they are simultaneously the repository of countless illustrated truths. African Americans' understanding of our value in history is enhanced by how we are represented and is diluted and demeaned by how we are continually *mis*represented. If the case is not made that Smith's works must be considered a legitimate form of Social Realism, then the real injustices that he tenderly illustrates will never be fully unpacked or absorbed as he intends. Smith is a curator of derogative images of Black-skinned history that have been conjured and repurposed for generations, and that remain egregiously intact in America. His depictions of the societal reality that Black Americans endure, and that we must wire ourselves to navigate, must not be dismissed because of style. It isn't style that denotes Social Realism; it's the truth within the style.

So, going forward, it is important and appropriate to write about Smith's aesthetic as a distinctive form of Social Realism. The integration of caricature and figuration as part of realism does not result in a stylistic dilution of America's uncomfortable truth, its original and ongoing sin of binary racism. There may be cinematic aspects to Arvie Smith's style, but he is not projecting. This is us. American history is not "critical race theory," as is fanatically embraced by those who feed on denial. Throughout Smith's oeuvre, he uses figuration to deepen the viewers' understanding of broader historical circumstances. Black figuration as a genre has been trending over the last few decades. Rendering the real, especially Black bodies, is on the rise, and therefore is the object of incredible demand in the current market. But Arvie Smith's work does not belong to *any* contemporary trend. His consistency of vision is the antithesis of whatever is deemed trendy. An octogenarian whose incredible life trajectory began with his formerly enslaved great-grandmother telling him stories, Smith grew up paying close attention to his world: the Jim Crow South. He was awakened to Black power and pride by the "revolutionary" '60s assertions that "Black Is Beautiful, Baby!" And he is *still* speaking out during this disunited time, in which 'Jim Crow v2.0' survives in the targeting of Black bodies as Black and brown citizens are *still* trying to convince America that Black Lives Matter. Smith has always been an impassioned messenger, a town crier of the real who brings his elegiac message to all who care to see and stand in awe when beauty is interwoven with provocative content. In painting after painting, Smith engages a multitude of interchangeable actors, forms, figures, and surviving cultural detritus to tell the story of America without preaching a reductivist story of race. His relationship to America's self-evident truths, spans his lifetime and is real. This is precisely why he is a Black Social Realist.

Throughout Western art, Black life has been depicted in ways that exclude or erase us, and that rarely—if ever—tells our story through the lens of our humanity, including our cultural missteps. Looking at Smith's work requires unpacking scenarios composed of seemingly unrelated historical facts. It requires connecting disparate references and investigating visual devices that arrest us. Smith paints and ridicules the real, but his ridicule is not meant to be ridiculous. To make sharp, poignant, and acerbic fun of the hatred America perpetually projects onto Black bodies, doesn't mean that hatred is "funny." There is a colloquial African American saying: "Just because you see my teeth, doesn't mean I'm smiling." In Smith's



Down in the River to Pray, 2021
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 in
Photo: Aaron Wessling

painting *Echo and Narcissus* (2022), the “smiling” alligator at the bottom right reminds the viewer of the gruesome reality that Black babies and children were once used in Southern America, as alligator bait. Two young Black boys are looking at their reflections in the pool of water where the alligator lurks. Both reflections—the “Coon” and the commercialized “sock monkey”—reduce and reflect the boys’ status as caricature and commodity. Mental slavery keeps the minds of those who are oppressed focused on their oppression. This as a residual aspect of Black reality, and without a doubt, it is *the* most successful psychological remnant of American slavery. To invite a broader base of cultural understanding, Smith takes figures from antiquity—classical mythology, as the title suggests, and uses them to make a direct analogy to Black American culture. Hand on her hips in a gesture of young Black female potency, a head-scarfed Echo is guided by another ‘Sista-goddess’ to witness the young Black boys (both of whom represent Narcissus) internalizing their culturally assigned images. To be a Black man or boy in America is still to live in a state of existential despair. There is additional meaning nestled into the imagery here but Smith, as a matter of practice, implores his viewers to consider “What’s about to happen?” as much as what *appears* to be happening.

Arvie Smith’s career is a continuum of commentary, where to see is to know but not always to immediately understand. His artwork, rife with historical objects, illustrative of cultural deviations, and loaded with signifiers, ultimately identifies itself as belonging to African American realism. It is Black Social Realism because it is concerned with the real, not with the ability to paint reality, as determined by art-world distinctions or proclamations. The art-historical canon has created a mental model of what constitutes traditional American Social Realism, but Smith’s mission is to draw his own elegant lines of distinction between the realistic and the very real circumstances of being socially conscious and Black, in America. Realism, as a captive prescribed style of embellished technical rendering, is not an absolute. Behind the smiling, shuffling characters, the pickaninnies and Coons of Black commodity culture; behind the luscious, sexualized, race-based imagery, lies the truth of the social reality of a people. “Arvie’s work isn’t about mimicking realism, it’s about the real impact of American racism on Black history in America,” says Felandus Thames. “It’s in a weird way an Elegba level of trickery! The saturation of colors and [the] nonlinear narratives he uses, force you to look, but despite Arvie using the same devices as narrative painters, if you’re trying to find a familiar story, you won’t!” He summarizes, “Arvie fits the model of intelligent painters I once heard Dawoud Bey once say, he is “a painter who thinks as he moves his hands.”

Arvie Smith’s collection of images are an amalgamation of many aspects of Black life, thought, and mindset. They are spaces where we are confronted by the fractured lens of the systemic binary racism through which we are seen, and how that lens, that gaze distorts us. In his storytelling spaces, we also see how we often redefine ourselves after being seen. Arvie’s brand of Social Realism is a well that needs to be plumbed again and again so America can awaken to the more enlightened social reality he paints. There is no established figurative painter working today who is as passionately dedicated to the telling the real psychological and social impact of race politics on Black lives in America as Arvie Smith.

Berrisford Boothe is an artist, lecturer, curator and Associate Professor of Art at Lehigh University.



Leda and the Swan, 2022
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 in
Photo: Aaron Wessling



Bacchus, 2022
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 in
Photo: Aaron Wessling



*Watermelons, White Women,
and Straight Razors, 2022*
Oil on canvas
60 x 40 in
Photo: Aaron Wessling



Hands Up Don't Shoot, 2015
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 in
Photo: Dan Kavotka

ARVIE SMITH

*b. 1938. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon
2022 Hallie Ford Fellow*

Arvie Smith is a painter, educator, and visual storyteller whose work addresses the complex histories of social and racial injustices in the United States from the perspective of a Black man. Smith creates large-scale, figurative oil paintings that are rich and vivid in color. He addresses complex subject matter by compiling narratives of stereotypes and biases historically placed on Black bodies, incorporating semiotic reference points like those found in advertisements, which relate to the inequalities and oppression experienced by Black Americans. He is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including the 2020 Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptures Award, the Oregon Governor's Award for the Arts in 2017, and an honorary PhD from Pacific Northwest College of Art, where he is a Professor Emeritus. His work has been exhibited extensively both internationally and nationally, including the 2022 Venice Biennale, and can be found in the permanent collections of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, Hallie Ford Museum, Portland Art Museum, Reginald F. Lewis Museum Baltimore, MD, among others. He completed a Master of Fine Arts from Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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*Watermelons, White Women, and Straight
Razors*: Private collection, Chicago, IL

Leda and the Swan: Private collection,
Kansas City, MO

Bacchus: Private collection, Portland, OR