

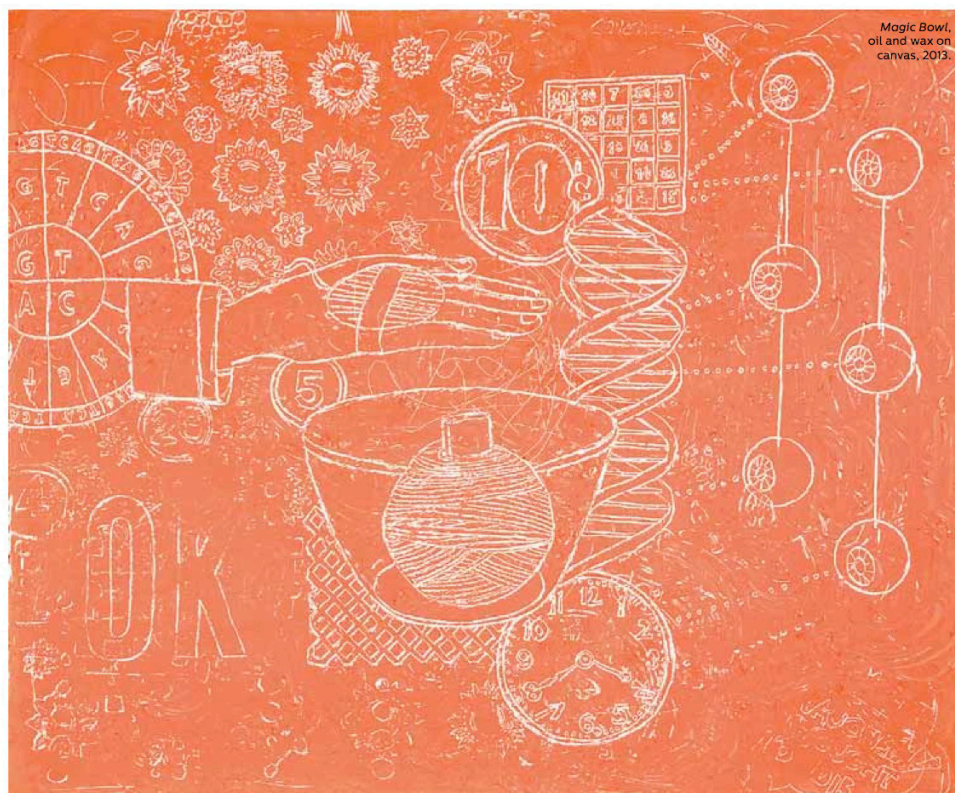
# PHILIP SMITH

ELLE DECOR: October 2013

Philip Smith

## ELLE DECOR

### ART SHOW



## PHILIP SMITH

*This Miami-based painter draws upon images both commonplace and surreal to create powerful modern-day hieroglyphics.* BY JULIE BELCOVE

Clocks, hands, double helices, and other pictographic motifs float on monotone canvases, reasserting themselves from painting to painting like a recurring dream you can't quite decipher. Random household items—forks, a box of cream cheese, a coin, a ball of string—pop up mysteriously. Their simple outlines are scratched into the oily, waxy surface with a screwdriver, and then sometimes rubbed out, leaving spectral erasures.

"I build these funny narratives," their creator, Philip Smith, says, then corrects himself. "They build themselves. I'm just the secretary."

The deeply personal symbolism of Smith's art sets it apart from the detached approach of many of his contemporaries who appropriated images in a deadpan or ironic fashion. According to Jen Mergel, senior curator of contemporary art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts,

Smith has shown "how an image-saturated age doesn't just affect our conscious, but also our subconscious."

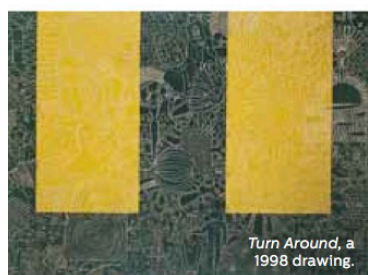
Moving from his native Miami to New York in 1974, Smith, then in his early 20s, found work writing for *Interview* and as managing editor of *GQ*, jobs that led to introductions to Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and other well-known artists. The lessons Smith gleaned were subtle but potent. After a long night of drinking, Robert Rauschenberg pulled out a match to light a cigarette, then changed his mind. "Most people would throw the match out," Smith says. "He very slowly tucked it back into the matchbook. The respect he showed that little cardboard match was a lesson: Respect your materials."

Smith's own work first gained widespread notice when his drawings of masks and totems were shown in the seminal 1977 "Pictures" >

SEE RESOURCES

AKART



Turn Around, a  
1998 drawing.

Watch, 1977.



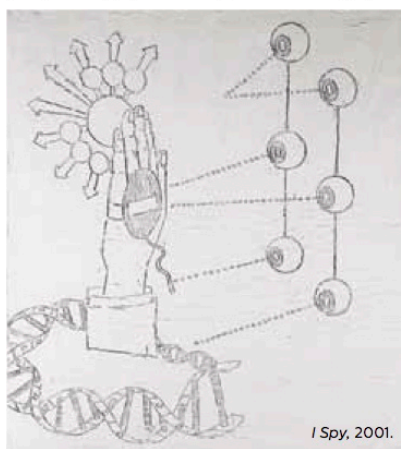
exhibition at Artists Space, along with works by Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, and Troy Brauntuch. The show explored how the emerging artists were rejecting minimalism and conceptualism and embracing the power of imagery. In the years since, Smith has not achieved the fame of some of his so-called Pictures Generation peers, which Mergel attributes to his points of difference, including the clear presence of his hand, even when dealing with found images, and his leaning toward the surreal instead of the cerebral. "Sometimes an artist makes an important statement," says Mergel, who recently acquired a Smith for the MFA, "and the zeitgeist is not ready to embrace it."

In 2003, Smith returned to Miami to write a memoir of his unorthodox childhood, *Walking Through Walls*. The book details with humor and affection how his interior decorator father, Lew, went from tricking out tropical palaces for Caribbean dictators to communing with the dead and healing the sick. (Showtime is developing a series based on the book.) Mergel sees a connection between Smith's writing—not just the content, but the style—and his painting. "Philip's paintings are not linear," she says. "There are many potential layers continuing to unfold."

Smith spends weeks preparing his canvases with a mix of oil paint, oils, and waxes.

"I slather it on like cake batter," he says. Before it's had a chance to dry, he scratches into it as if engraving. It's a method he developed after he became enthralled with hieroglyphics during six months in Egypt in 1984. "I think of the paintings not as paintings but as drawings," he says.

In his new exhibition, which opens November 7 at Jason McCoy Gallery in New York, "there are ghostlike images, like memories," says Smith. "It had a little to do



I Spy, 2001.

with growing up and having my father talk to people I couldn't see." Contrary to what some friends predicted, painting in Miami, where he now spends half his time, did not turn his canvases into riots of color. "The work really comes from inside, so it doesn't matter what's going on around me," he says. If anything, his palette has become more muted, with whites and off-whites mimicking drawing paper. The surfaces and pile-ups of imagery have, however, become less dense, more succinct—like haiku, he says. Smith attributes this change in part to his black belt in karate: "My teacher said there are no extraneous moves in karate—they all mean something. I started to think about what in my painting was extraneous." ■



SEE MORE!  
Scan the image  
above to view  
more of the  
artist's work