

# The Guardian

## Arvie Smith on his radical art: 'I'm not painting something to go over your couch'

The 85-year-old has fought for his place as an artist, capturing the complexities of the Black experience on canvas, in ways that provoke and inspire

By Veronica Esposito/ Wednesday, November 8, 2023



Arvie Smith: 'I want to engage and create a dialogue with the audience, a dialogue about the experience of Black people, the Black experience.' Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery/Robert Chase Heishman

At 85 years of age, Arvie Smith is arguably in his finest form ever. The artist retired from teaching in 2014, which allowed him focus on his art full-time, and after that followed a 2017 Governor's Art Award from the state of Oregon, a 2018 honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the Pacific Northwest School of Art, and a showing at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Now he is taking on New York: Smith recently exhibited in the US art capital for the first time as a part of the Art Dealers Association of America's annual art show. "I'm flexing my muscles for sure," he said, while discussing his work during a break in the action. "I want to engage and create a dialogue with the audience, a dialogue about the experience of Black people, the Black experience."

True to those intentions, Smith's painting draws deeply on his experiences as a Black man. Raised in east Texas in the 1940s, he lived in a world where the impacts of slavery and lynchings were still very much felt. "Many of the lessons I was taught were related to the proper social norms designed by Jim Crow laws dictating how Blacks should conduct themselves with deference to whites for their own safety," he said. During Smith's childhood, the Ku Klux Klan burned down his great-uncle's house, which was adjacent to his grandparents' house, where Smith was raised. "My great-uncle 'hopped a freight' out of the county to save his own life," he said.

During his boyhood, Smith's grandfather gave him a book about the Sistine Chapel, and he used his natural drawing skills to copy everything in it again and again. Eventually, Smith's potential was recognized by one of his middle school teachers. "I would stay behind to help her clean the brushes, and she took a real interest in me," he



said. One day, this teacher opened Smith's eyes to the idea that he could paint the Black experience. "One day my teacher pulled me aside and said to not draw white people but instead the people outside the window. She was talking about Black kids. That was a real eye-opener. That was when I realized that painting Black people was art. I'm not going to be accepted painting like Michelangelo – I'm going to paint what I can with the talent I have."

Smith recalled that while in high school he was known as the artist, and he hoped to garner a scholarship so that he could study art in college. Yet in spite of his great talents, racism forced him to take a much longer path to his vocation – after graduating high school in the

1950s, Smith attempted to go to art school but was summarily rejected. "I was told: 'We don't need your kind here,'" Smith said.

For years afterwards, Smith moved around the US and Canada and worked at various jobs in mental health facilities, eventually making his way to Portland, where he last

went to art school at the Pacific Northwest College of Art and graduated in 1986 at nearly 50 years of age. It was around this time that Smith began showing his art and garnering recognition. "Once I got into a gallery, the art was well-received by the public," he said.



Smith leans into the racist tropes that have surrounded him for his entire life, featuring them in his compositions equally alongside more empowering visions of Blackness. He recalled that the story of Emmett Till, who became a central part of the civil rights movement in 1955 when he was viciously lynched as a boy of 14 by a group of white men, was instrumental in his decision to portray racism in a stark and visceral way. "I think it was Jet magazine that had shown a picture of Emmett Till after he had been mutilated by these white men. I said, 'This was what I always feared when I lived in rural Texas.' It was known for the lynchings, so I always felt this kind of terror. I started to paint what I felt."

Black Athena is a typically complex, overpowering composition, packed with imagery that ranges from graceful to shocking. The canvas's visual buffet includes stereotypes and caricatures of Black people, the central Athena astride a galloping horse, scenes torn from national politics (there's Donald Trump both as the Hamburglar and blowing hot air to a woman in a life raft), a galleon sailing the high seas and numerous birds. It is all arranged with obvious care, and although Smith's paintings are quite robust and full, they feel extremely conscientious and graceful in how they are put together.

Smith's art restricts itself to a fairly consistent palette of rich and bright oranges, reds, yellows, browns and blues, giving his work an instantly recognizable aura. These were colors that he attributes to the influence of his great-grandmother. "She was born a slave, and she encouraged my artwork," he said. "I'm going to talk about what I feel is

the Black experience and say it in a way that people will look. So how am I going to do that? Color."

Eventually Smith realized that his palette came from quilts that as a young

boy he would see his great-grandmother and her friends create on her front porch. When he later traveled to Africa, he found that these colors were everywhere. "When I went to Africa, I was like, 'Oh, I see, these are the colors that I use.'"

After a career of nearly 40 years, one might expect Smith to rest on his laurels, but he has no plans to quit painting any time soon. "In part, the reason I continue to paint is that I have more to say," he told me. "The pervasive terror inflicted on Blacks through police brutality (and shootings) is today's lynching. And, on it goes." Smith knows that his work is not exactly the sort of calming, relaxing experience that people often want from art, and he makes it clear that he's fine with that – in fact, the frequently intense nature of his work is very much to its point. "I'm not painting something to go over your couch," he said. "My work is not meaning to offend, but rather it is meaning to inform."

Arvie Smith was showing his work with Monique Meloche Gallery at this year's ADAA New York.