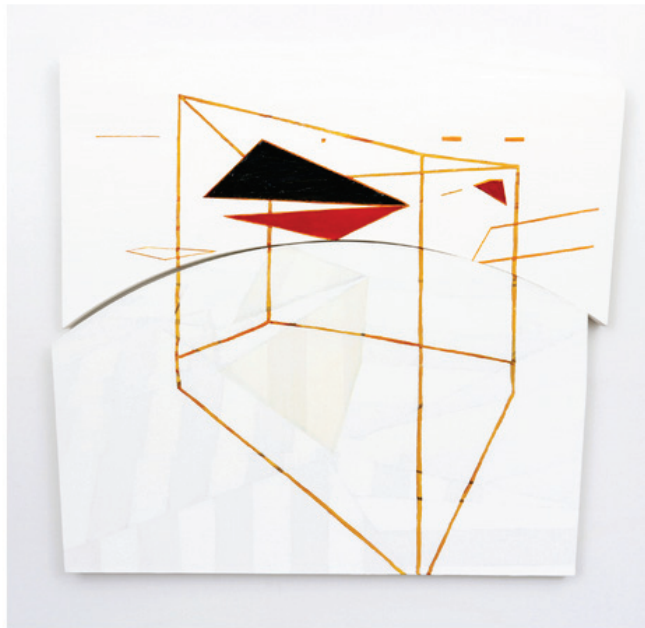


Talking With American Painter Leslie Smith III About Abstraction, Anguish, and Architecture

ARTSY

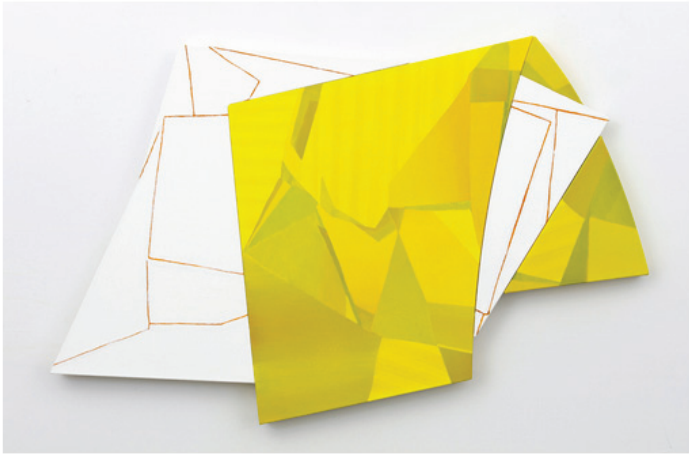
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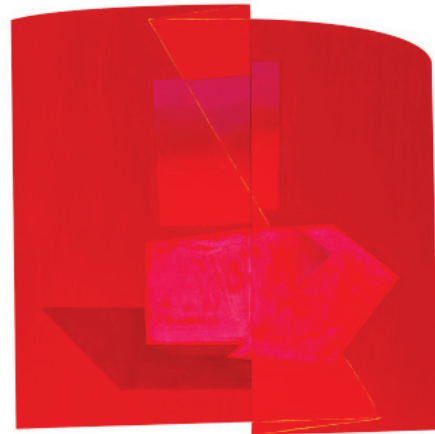
Leslie Smith III
Locus of Control, 2017
Beta Piccoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Not one human face or figure appears in the latest works by American painter Leslie Smith III. And yet his practice, by his own admission, is an investigation of the human experience. “Representation is cumbersome when dealing with human form,” says Smith III, whose new paintings are characterized by geometric forms, bold lines, and a vibrant color palette. “My studio practice is concentrated around visual abstraction as a method for communicating anguish.”

Ahead of “Locus of Control,” his second solo show at Maus Contemporary, we caught up with the artist to hear about the personal narratives behind his new paintings, the inspiration he finds in modern architecture, and the lessons he learned during his formal training at Yale University School of Art.



Leslie Smith III
Ultimatum, 2017
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary



Leslie Smith III
Five Sided Disposition, 2016
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Artsy: You've said that your paintings are inspired by personal narrative, and that your shapes and forms, though geometric, are stand-ins for human gestures. Can you talk about this with respect to your most recent works?

Leslie Smith III: I have always talked about the shapes being connected to interpersonal relationships, either observed by me or where I've been implicated. I'm curious how we choose to interact with each other. I find it incredible how many exterior conditions influence how we see ourselves and those around us. In the broadest sense, this is what informs the shapes I create. I often try to define characteristics resembling aggression or passivity in one shape or perhaps two shapes joined together.

The narrative is only a means of developing a complex visual situation, perhaps unsolvable in the same ways our relationships with others differ depending on the surrounding circumstances. It is easy to find solutions to situations that are clear-cut black and white. My paintings strive to represent the complex grey area we live in.

Artsy: Are there human stories behind your new paintings?

Leslie Smith III: My recent paintings are for a new solo exhibition, “Locus of Control,” at Maus Contemporary. They investigate the degree to which people believe they have control over the outcome of events in their lives, as opposed to exterior forces outside their control. There aren’t literal stories behind these paintings. They’re rather inspired by the experience of feeling overwhelmed. They come from feeling uncertain and that sensation of bewilderment that ensues.

Sure, there are autobiographical events that prompt this work differently than the last body of paintings. However, I don’t believe that’s the true content of the work. The matter of these paintings is how they communicate real and abstract emotions. I’ve focused on creating image objects that provoke uncertainty in the viewing experience.



Leslie Smith III
The Mistress of Time, 2017
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Artsy: You use abstraction as a tool to communicate the human experience. Why not just paint human forms? Are you better able to express certain ideas through abstraction versus representation?

Leslie Smith III: In 2011, my paintings shifted away from common figural concerns associated with figural abstraction. Inspired by what Raoul Eshelman calls “performatism” in his book *Performatism or the End of Postmodernism* (2008), my shaped canvases became signifiers of form replacing the representational figure. The architectural space of a wall became the pictorial ground shifting the figure-ground relationship toward a seemingly flat and graphic relationship.

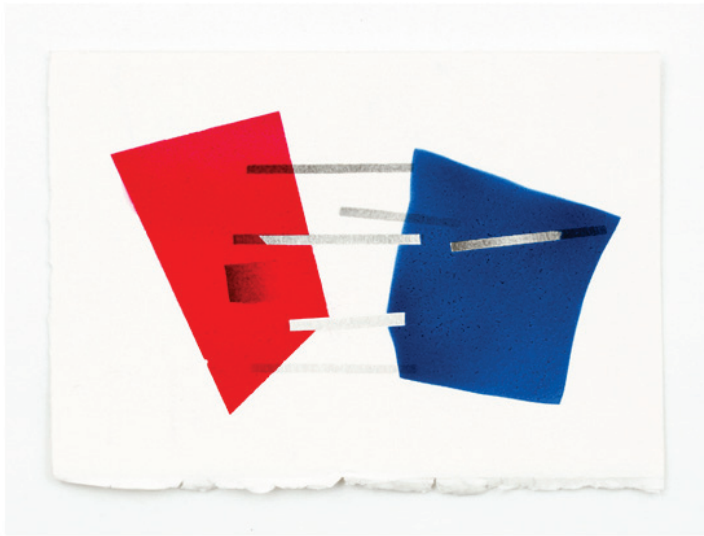
Representation is cumbersome when dealing with human form, especially when the act of recognizing someone in an image is symptomatic of our own bias and prejudice. The malleable nature of abstract signifiers creates a level table where notions of difference and otherness aren’t lost amongst pre-determined categories burdened by individualized histories. My aesthetic is the result of employing abstraction as a means of altering this type of perception.

Artsy: Tell us about your *Affliction* series. What’s the inspiration behind it?

Leslie Smith III: The *Affliction* series started out as three paintings. The idea was that each painting would consist of the same three individual shaped canvases bolted together. The resulting shape emulated the physical gesture of crossed arms. I wanted to work on a repeating format. I intended them to posture in ways that mimicked the back-and-forth and stressful feeling of making a hard moral or ethical decision. I focused primarily on the concept of the moment when you recognize what you want to do is at odds with what you know is “right.” For me, the five piece series chronicles the build up to affliction as the result of a conflicting ethical imperative.

Artsy: How does architecture play into your practice?

Leslie Smith III: Architecture is really influential in how I organize the actual and perceptual space of the canvas. Modernist architecture in particular plays into how I conceive of the painting as an object, a shape on the wall.



Leslie Smith III
Swoy no. 7, 2017
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary



Leslie Smith III
Swoy no. 2, 2017
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Artsy: Many of your recent works' titles reference childhood or classic pop culture, like *Peter And The Wolf* (2016), *Sweet Dreams and Flying Machines* (2016), and *Only A Paper Moon* (2015). Can you speak to this? How does nostalgia play into your work?

Leslie Smith III: Titles are hard. I try not to use them descriptively; nonetheless, I believe they give security to viewers. They're an anchor to hold onto and sometimes a dock to depart from. I consider the correlation that might be associated with something more universally recognizable. It becomes a lens or filter to color how you might enter into a painting. Sometimes work can be inaccessible; the titles are a way to guide the thought and emotions of an audience in hopes that they share a similar experience.

I don't spend a lot of time thinking about nostalgia when making paintings. Be that as it may, I do consider the principles of colors and form as being part in parcel to creating a sense of familiarity amidst a form you've never had any prior relationship to. There are transitions of certain colors that locate particular times of day and palettes of colors that might make an audience more or less reminiscent of something. I usually consider these possibilities when I feel a painting needs a stronger point of access. Similar to the way I think about titles.

Artsy: You're a classically trained painter with a graduate degree from Yale University School of Art. Can you talk about that decision? How important is formal training for a contemporary artist, in your view?

Leslie Smith III: I'm not sure how important it is for a contemporary artist to have formal training. It's the same reason I'm not sure it's necessary for all artists to have gone to graduate school for art. Different artists need different things. I am invested in paint and wanted to know the craft in-and-out, so I studied painting in undergrad at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Graduate school allowed me to find solutions to problems in ways I'd never thought of before. It encouraged risk-taking in ways I hadn't considered as part of my practice.

I think all contemporary artists need time. Time to think, time to focus, read, observe, commune, and time to make. Sometimes graduate school can offer these things. This doesn't mean it's the only way; it's just the way that worked for me.

—Bridget Gleeson