

ARVIE SMITH

THE SEER

WORDS BY ZACHARY WEG



Circus Circus on Fifth Avenue, 2019

The paintings of Arvie Smith lock the eye. Dark yet bright, uncompromising yet compassionate, the work of the eighty-two-year-old Portland artist grips the viewer with not just its fiery social engagement but, when looked at more closely, the intensely personal vision of its creator. Smith, who grew up in Houston and Los Angeles before settling in Oregon in the late 1970s, has led a seemingly charmed but certainly hard life and, to both his joy and that of admirers around the world, has wonderfully transformed his pain, his struggle as a Black man in a historically racist America, into vibrant, essential art.

From an early age, Smith knew he wanted to be an artist. Speaking by phone from his home in Portland, which he shares with his wife and manager, Julie Kern Smith, the painter says, “My great-grandmother, who had been a slave, took an interest in me. I did a copper tooling when I was about seven or eight years old and she really made a big thing of it and I said, ‘Hmm, this is kind of nice.’” Smith was also given a book about Michelangelo when he was a child, and he went on to draw all of the work of the legendary Italian artist. However, this was Jim Crow territory, where there were separate bathrooms for blacks and whites, for instance, and although he yearned to, the now Professor Emeritus at the Pacific Northwest College of Art couldn’t just become a professional painter overnight. So, along with his family, he moved to South Central Los Angeles where, as he puts it, he got into his “fair share of trouble” in high school and saw no way to college. His love for art, however, for such painters as Diego Rivera and Jacob Lawrence, remained a constant. After living in various communes throughout the country, he came to Portland, where he could pursue art more seriously.

Smith’s paintings aren’t easy to digest. With their renderings of people smiling widely and big parades of trumpeters, his works may seem innocent or outright merry, but they are not; Smith is doing no less than confronting the viewer and flipping the history of Black people in this country on its head. In a painting such as *Piggy Black Ride* (2019), which was featured in his recent exhibit, *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center in Portland, a pink-dressed little girl sits atop a Black man in clown’s makeup as another Black man lays amidst flames blazing from the floorboards underneath, white hands clapping at the spectacle. Lavish in a style somewhat reminiscent of Marc Chagall’s blue and red murals that hang in the Metropolitan Opera House in



The Courtship, 2014

New York, this masterful work of Smith's otherwise stirs and outright disturbs the viewer. However, Smith isn't a preacher or a lecturer; he is an artist who aims to convey the horrors that Black people have suffered in the United States to open the onlooker's eyes and ignite discussion. "I can use my voice to expose the inequities of our system that continue, going back to slavery," Smith says, explaining, "I want to speak my truth. And you can't hold back doing that." The painter is, in fact, almost relentless in his depiction of racial and socioeconomic disparities but only as a means of trying to resonate with audiences and get at a more profound beauty, a vision of unity.

With President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris's election, Smith does seem optimistic about America's prospects. "I feel very hopeful," he admits, adding that the "chickens have come home to roost" when it comes to the country's grim legacy of slavery and racism. As an artist, Smith is acutely aware of America's political past and present. In fact, much of his oeuvre deals explicitly with events that have happened in this country, whether it be a lynching as portrayed in his landmark painting, *Strange Fruit* (1992) or the murder of a Black man as depicted in his starkly beautiful work, *Boys Night Out* (1989). Yet, at his core, Smith is a believer, a seer who could make a painting like *Circus Circus on 5th Avenue* (2019) in which a little girl rides on a carousel, spinning, hopefully, into a more just and free future.



Bojango Ascending the Stairs, 2013



Best Man, 2016



Eclipse, 2019