

Josh Smith

Finding Emo

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Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present American artist Josh Smith's second exhibition with the gallery. The artist will present new paintings and monotypes depicting the Grim Reaper. These will be shown for the first time in Belgium in an impressive installation spanning both spaces.

From the fish that he exhibited in his inaugural exhibition at the gallery in 2016, to skeletons, turtles, palm trees and his own name, Josh Smith is known for painting sequences of simple yet highly distinctive visual motifs. The Grim Reaper is one such device: an instantly recognisable form that, by virtue of its straightforwardness, is easy to replicate. Just as the Impressionists made multiple paintings of the same scene to capture different atmospheric effects, Smith will repeatedly paint a subject from memory as a way of exploring different painterly qualities. In this sense, the Grim Reaper functions as a compositional device that unlocks an enormous range of creative possibilities. It could be said that the true subject of these paintings, therefore, is the expressive potential of paint, colour and repetition, rather than the actual personification of death. At the same time, Smith also plays with ideas of similarity and difference: like variations on a theme, each Reaper is a new iteration of the same basic idea. Part of an on-going process of image production and experimentation, the paintings are autonomous entities but, equally, also part of a larger 'family' of interrelated works.

By exhibiting these canvases and monotypes in close proximity and across both gallery spaces, the viewer is automatically prompted to examine differences in terms of colour or detail. Smith's palette ranges from soft and luminous hues to almost neon-bright shades, but also strays into a spectrum of richer and earthier tones. The playful way in which these are combined, coupled with Smith's virtuoso painting style, is endlessly fascinating: there are the uncomplicated Reapers and those which dissolve into a semi-abstract tangle of lines, dark figures and coruscating ones, Reapers that beckon and those that point. A wealth of tiny details, such as birds and plants, or powerful symbols like the moon and sun, all help to further individualise the paintings. The effect is augmented by unique borders, some of which are painted while others are stencilled. These patterns allude to early American decorative wall stencils, as well as to the serrated and perforated edges of postage stamps, both of which point to the idea of an enclosed space. The evocative titles assigned to the paintings echo the artist's thoughts about what the individual works might convey, while also encouraging the viewer to think beyond the image.

For thousands of years, death has assumed a human or skeletal form in various cultures. The Grim Reaper—a dark, hooded figure who harvests (or 'reaps') human souls with his scythe—is perhaps one of the most common and enduring of all such personifications. From medieval times until today, the embodiment of death is part of a rich art-historical and cinematic tradition. It is also an enduring emblem for counter-cultural groups such as bikers and Heavy Metal enthusiasts. Seen within this context, the image of the Grim Reaper can also be read as a cliché: an image so ubiquitous that it is barely given a second thought. In this series, Smith rises to the challenge of how to paint the Grim Reaper in a contemporary and meaningful way and, in so doing, creates a modern form of memento mori. Only in this case, it is one that transcends the

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motif of death and opens up a space in which to consider how the subject is treated in contemporary art. Ultimately, the endless repetition of the subject, coupled with the rich painterly qualities of the works, almost serves as an antidote to death's more grandiose and threatening incarnations. Although the Reaper is ever-present in these paintings, Smith's canvases radiate, in both literal and figurative terms, an irrepressible sense of joie de vivre.

The exhibition also includes a group of Grim Reaper monotypes. Josh Smith originally trained as a printmaker and these unique works are made by painting or drawing on a smooth, non-absorbent surface. The image is then transferred onto a sheet of paper by pressing it onto the plate. In this case, the process was completed using a printing press. The surfaces of the resulting works are richly nuanced, with the paint layers interacting with the material qualities of the paper to create beautiful visual effects. Josh Smith has said of the prints: "I feel as if the monotypes are a type of painting. The process of creating a monotype allows for reaction and reflection as you are creating. In this exhibition you will notice the changes between the monotypes and the paintings."

Josh Smith (b. 1976, Okinawa, Japan) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Josh Smith*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany (2016), *Josh Smith*, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, Italy (2015), *The American Dream*, Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2011) and *Hidden Darts*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria (2008).

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