

Bright Jazz, Dark City

Behind Vincent Smith's glass bebop and gnarly angst

BY R.C. BAKER

Coming in from the Bronx, I'd seen the murals zip by—flashing yellow diagonals, circles that might be stoplights or multihued suns, famous faces from jazz history—but I hadn't yet hopped off the number 2 train to take a closer look. Then came an email full of promising canvases, triggering a Google search of the artist's name that brought up still more paintings and—an unexpected connection—those subway murals. That night I got off at 116th Street and stood before a glass mosaic, *Minton's Playhouse* (1999), by Vincent Smith (1929–2003). Raking pinstripes and fractured checks define the performers' attire in a panorama the title plaque describes as a “legendary jazz club where the great musicians developed the improvisational music called Bebop.” The spaces framed by trumpet curves and trombone slides contrast with colorfully segmented geometries, the generalized players syncopated—one there/one-two here/one-two-three-four there—by slashes of color, what Ralph Ellison described as “the hide-and-seek melodic methods of modern jazz.”

The cadence of the mural on the downtown side, also in glass, is statelier due to the inclusion of such architectural landmarks as the Apollo Theater and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Here again are jazz musicians, but specific stars, such as Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, along with others who fit the title, *Movers and Shakers*—Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, and, in resplendent uniform and clutching a saber, Marcus Garvey. Yellow tiles of varying size coalesce into broad fields as variegated as the brushstrokes in a van Gogh painting—perhaps unsurprising from someone who quit his job at the post office in 1953 to become a painter after seeing a Cézanne retrospective: “I came away so moved with a feeling that I had been in touch with something sacred,” Smith told *American Visions* magazine in 1999. For the subway pieces, he joined that epiphany with a later influence, saying, “When I went to Africa, the landscape was all over the place, and so the yellow started coming into the painting—all those yellows.” Bringing that tropical radiance underground, the artist expressed—in that most democratic of environments—pride and joy in a heritage beyond his Brooklyn youth.



Alexandre Gallery

Vincent Smith's
Attrition, 1972

At the Alexandre Gallery, however, in darker paintings from a quarter-century earlier, joy is adulterated by angst and anger. The brown face in *Home From Vietnam* (circa 1972) is literally boxed in by thickly textured, overlapping rectangles of clotted reds, a tenement rubbed raw by soot and neglect. A window shade blotched with pond-scum greens hints that the urban grid also jails nature. The totemic figure in *Attrition* (1972) might be wearing a mask, the eyes like ivory horns, the teeth a diced arc, chin as sharp as a shovel. Smith's compositions are shot through with bold enigmas: Is the central figure's shadow actually a coffin? Is that elaborate lattice a frame for the mask or another yellow window? Two of these bright openings reveal grimacing faces; a third surrounds gamboling bodies with patches of color, like a stained-glass dance troupe.

“I tend to refer to whatever I am doing as an orchestration,” Smith once said. “I may be working with seven or eight ingredients at the same time—oil and sand, dry pigment and collage and pebbles and dirt and so forth.... When I hit, I'm like a conductor.” Similar to Francis Bacon, who likewise emphasized texture and energetic bodies arrayed against geometric designs, Smith was bucking the dominance of abstraction during his formative years, and he maintained his independence amid the conceptual and minimalist strains that ruled the art world in the 1960s and '70s.

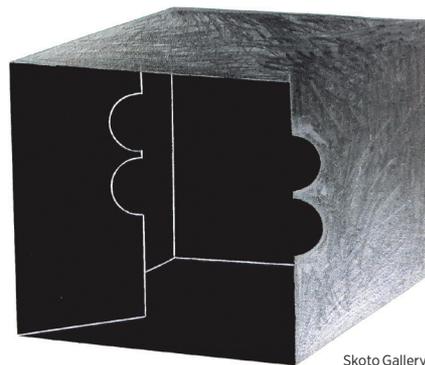
Such commitment might have been fueled by the overall experience of African-American artists, as Smith recalled to an interviewer: “We went through the hallowed halls of these museums. We didn't see anything reflect the black experience or black contribution to American culture.” This dearth of direct influence has long been echoed by the masterful painter Kerry James Marshall (born 1955), who wrote to me in an email in 2008, “There is such scant representation of the Black body in the historical record, that I believe I have a duty to advance its presence using every means at my disposal.”

Marshall might take some solace in a painting such as Smith's *The Super* (1972). A pair of Black bodies, or at least their heads and shoulders, resides here. Corporeal despite being starkly stylized, they lean together, seeming to impart secrets known only by building superintendents about the steel and stone and souls in their charge. The figures are set at the bottom of

the composition, as if in the basement; above, gnarly squares conjure both a one-room Hades and an airy cathedral, while shaftways open onto vistas of gloomy housing projects. The resulting shape, a cross, with all its implications of suffering and deliverance, suggests that Smith embraced the Western canon even as he infused it with a grace drawn from his own travails and triumphs.

Osi Audu was born in Nigeria in 1956, and his shape-shifting drawings derive partly from the Yoruba concept that the human head encompasses a duality of spirit and matter, mind and body. Combining layered graphite and fathomless black pastel edged with sleek white lines, each of Audu's renderings oscillates between a depiction of an empty and oddly shaped container—imagine a hatbox with tendrils—and a space-warping geometric abstraction. The graphite planes shimmer like sheet metal, seemingly enclosing dark expanses rimmed with light.

Segueing between three-dimensional representation and vivid graphic design, Audu's work encourages mind games that summon unexpected allusions. With its cartoonish curves, *Self-Portrait No. 57* (2015) recalls the line drawing Alfred Hitchcock made of himself for his television show, which, during the opening titles, would be filled with the director's own shadow. Audu delivers a similar sense of disembodied animation, flummoxing the brain as his velvety surfaces dazzle the eye. Some future production of *Hamlet* could up the metaphysical ante by using one of these drawings as a stand-in for Yorick's skull.



Skoto Gallery

Osi Audu's *Self-Portrait No. 33* (2015)