

Joshua Smith

Reena Spaulings
371 Grand Street, SoHo
Through April 29

Taxter & Spengemann
504 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

The conflicting notions of the artist as protean creator and Warholian machine meet in the art of Joshua Smith, who works by hand in rote-like, almost obsessive ways and likes to highlight the conventions of the gallery setting. His concurrent second and third New York gallery shows consist of environments that are at once offhand and oceanic.

The most noticeable aspect of "Make It Plain," Mr. Smith's show of "Mirror" paintings at Reena Spaulings, is the sea of wood bar stools filling the tiny space, creating a porous, nip-level plane that one must wade through. The stools are also artworks, bestowed with passing glances of brushwork — an eye there, a flurry of dots or calligraphic squiggles there.

They send up solitary (seated) contemplation and hold up several paintings: chunky rectangles in which colorful motifs, veering among Op, Minimalism and Pattern and Decoration, have been painted over with slabs of subtle, Brice Mardenesque grays. Except at the edges: here broad borders of color and nonchalant brushwork remain as evidence of effort and serve as frames. A batch of smaller canvases, reminiscent of Joan Mitchell, were cooked up by being used as palettes to make other paintings.

In "Faces," a weeklong show at Taxter & Spengemann, Mr. Smith turns to drawing with his usual automatist abandon. Over the course of 800 5-by-8-inch file cards, he depicts the mirror's most frequent motif — the human face — in a bristling Expressionist profusion of bulging features and frazzled hair. Some are warm-ups; many are terrific. Unframed, they paper the walls and are also featured in the show's announcements, which, strewn about the floor, exaggerate the gallery's promotional function. These are bigger than the drawings, which might almost be handmade announcements.

ROBERTA SMITH



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Josh Smith

REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART
371 Grand Street
April 25–May 24

For years, Josh Smith has been making abstract paintings on which he emblazons his own name, and while this conceit may seem conceited, the effect is the opposite. Rather than coming across as aggressive self-advertisements, his canvases are relaxed to the point of messiness. In the best work here—*New Swamp Thing*, 2004—his name is partially obscured by a patch of red checkers that seems to grow out of the bottom-left corner of the canvas; elsewhere, the calligraphic curves of his lettering appear to be on the verge of breaking down into scribbles. His palette is nicely murky, as if he'd mixed globs of mud into his purples and greens, yet never mushy. Installed in the unrenovated interior of Reena Spaulings Fine Art (a former dress shop), the paintings are seamlessly contextualized, hung on and behind clothes racks and along one wall that is still its original salmon pink. Posters for the show lie scattered on the floor, and a black leather couch (the best seat from which to view the series of fantastic performances that have been taking place here since the gallery's January inauguration) cuts across the middle of the room. The intentionally casual presentation lends conceptual gravitas to work that is already striking for its merry disregard of the conventions of gallery painting.

—Emily Speers Mears



View of "Josh Smith," 2004.