

THE PAINTERS' EYE

Works by **Ray Smith** and **Norman Bluhm** show the power of personal vision



The "Queen of Spades," from 1959, is in a show of paintings by the late Norman Bluhm. Scott White Contemporary Art

show are part of a larger set of pictures that were done in preparation for a tapestry. They're small pictures, a different type of dog in each; some stare at you, others are in profile or three-quarter profile. All of them are charming.

The power of paint

Norman Bluhm believed in the brush stroke the way that a poet believes in the power of the right phrase. He was part of the second generation of abstract expressionists. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and other pivotal figures broke ground in New York, and artists like Bluhm tilted it well.

The reputations of Bluhm and other artists of his generation are on the rise. Some departed more dramatically from the expressionist style of brush strokes, gestures and drips that Pollock and de Kooning established. Morris Louis, seen last year in a big exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, honed the art of pouring and staining canvases. He is arguably more innovative than Bluhm, but that doesn't mean Bluhm paintings aren't seductive.

Some of the examples on view at Scott White Contemporary Art are lovely, dense with color, layered and splattered, carefully controlled in some places and spontaneous in others.

"Norman Bluhm: 1956-1960" is a rare chance to see his work locally. It tracks the artist's transition from Paris to New York, from a more Eurocentric style of painting, mingling post-impressionist and expressionist effects, to a full-blown gestural style. His work is best when big, as in "Queen of Spades" and "The Idol," giving his lines the room to dive and soar.

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DETAILS

"Ray Smith," paintings

When: Through Nov. 1

Where: Lux Art Institute, 1550 S. El Camino Real, Encinitas

Tickets: \$10 (good for two visits during one show); free to all under 21

Phone: (760) 436-6611

Online: luxartinstitute.org

"Norman Bluhm: 1956-1960" paintings

When: Through Nov. 1

Where: Scott White Contemporary Art, 939 W. Kalmia St., Little Italy

Tickets: Free

Phone: (619) 501-5689

Online: scottwhiteart.com

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technically a better painter.

"La Grand Vache" creates a mood, a disquieting one — and mood, more than meaning, is a central quality of Smith's paintings.

He is the first artist in the Lux's second season of exhibitions/residencies. Smith, who splits his time between New York; Cuernavaca, Mexico; and Brownsville, Texas (where his family has roots going back to the 19th century), spent about two weeks at the Lux at the end of September. During his time here, he completed another large-scale painting, "Santa Fe," this one

7-plus-feet tall and 12 1/2 feet wide.

It's not as cryptic as "La Grande Vache" and it's less dense with imagery. He's rendered two horses, but not two complete horses. Their bodies are fused in the hind portion, with one head facing left and the other right. There is a matching saddle and rider on each, though one rider is distinct and the other appears faded, as if he's dematerializing before our eyes. The horse's head on the left is normal, while the one on the right is skeletal. Dogs run across the scene, which is stark, unreal terrain. The picture is an allegory about mortality or the life cycle.

Generally, Smith's imagery is what lures your eye first. But some of the life of his pictures is rooted in his skill with paint. His surfaces are alternately smooth and textured, thin and thicker. He also has a curious palette — colors are alternately bright and bleached — but it suits his work well.

The smaller paintings are less compelling. One partial exception is "Washington in the Persian Gulf" (1997), with its levitating head and its patterned female body in a geometric landscape. You sense he revels in obscurity here and the title is pretentious, but the image lingers in the mind's eye.

Another exception: his "Dog Portraits" (2001). The nine in this



Ray Smith painted "Santa Fe" during his residency at the Lux Art Institute, and the large painting, 12 1/2 feet wide and more than 7 feet tall, is part of his solo exhibition in its gallery. Lux Art Institute

By **Robert L. Pincus**
ART CRITIC

Interpreting might be the wrong word to have in mind while looking at Ray Smith's art. It's more fruitful to simply experience it first and delay any thoughts about explaining it, since the symbolism often seems as private as that of dreams.

A good place to start might be the biggest painting in his exhibition at the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas, "La Grand Vache" (10 feet tall and almost 21 feet wide). The title loosely translates as big cowhide — and that's what the background pattern resembles. There's a shadowy pair of intertwined figures, as tall as the painting itself, sporting a floral pattern. One grips a set of masks in one hand, each tied to a string; the other, a flashlight. Additional heads float free of any hand. Then, there are frogs, immense in proportion to the human faces in the picture.

This is also the oldest painting on view, dating from 1991. And while it's not dated, in the pejorative sense of that word, it does remind us that his style of fragmented imagery was prevalent in figurative painting of the 1980s and 1990s — and part of the era's Zeitgeist. David Salle's work from those years is a prime example, though Smith is