

Art of the West

ARTIST: Gary Smith (1942 -) Highland
TITLE: Farmer With Grain Sack 1984
MEDIA: Bronze
SIZE: 77" High

Gary Ernest Smith was born in the rural Eastern Oregon community of Baker, in 1942. He attended Eastern Oregon State College and Brigham Young University, from which he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree. He served in the United States Army for two years as an illustrator, and he was on the faculty at BYU and acted as gallery director for three terms. Smith has been self-employed as an artist since 1972. He and his wife, Judy Asay Smith, have four children and live in the arts community of Highland, Utah.

Gary Smith presents impressive credentials as an artist. Though famous for his paintings, in recent years he has also turned his talents to sculpture. His paintings, some of which depict rural America from the turn of the century to the present, and others, which depict early Utah and Oregon 20th-century life, hang in museums, in private, corporate, and university collections, as well as in churches along the Wasatch front. He is extensively published as an illustrator and has received many major commissions for his paintings and sculptures.

Dr. Vern Swanson, of the Springville Museum of Art, describes Smith as "constantly seeking his ends through stylistic experiment." Smith strives for simple, direct statements that capture the essential character of his subject: icon and image are more important than explicit detail. "Large bold shapes," Smith says, "with minimal detail, are the substance of my work. Most of the detailing in my pictures is 'implied' rather than painted."

Termed a neo-regionalist, Smith works on the basis of reinterpretation of rural, mid-america themes. While acknowledging the appropriateness of the term, he also feels it's too limiting. As an artist he concentrates on spatial and coloristic solutions, and his themes are often spiritual, though the interpretation is clearly unique in form and style. The subjects of Gary Smith's art lie in three major areas--overt and latent religious subjects, landscapes, and evocations of the rural west, each born from poignant personal experiences in his life.

Smith admits to being a "driven painter" who needs the distractions of his musician wife and his children to rescue him from spending all day in the studio. He attributes this work ethic to his upbringing. With his brothers and father, Smith worked on the family cattle ranch and farm. "Farming is hard work; I didn't want to do that the rest of my life," he says. "I wanted more. I wanted to be an artist. I had no idea what that entailed-- it was a dream, kind of an unreachable dream."

Gary Smith has obviously reached his dream. "Art is a way of addressing humanity," Smith says, "and my works attempt to merge ideas and memories." Smith believes, "Good art functions on many levels. There is the surface appeal of subject, and below that are layers that may be peeled off, revealing information about the individual artist and the psychology of his era. There's the subject but there's also the underlying theme."

Smith also says his "... art is a constant struggle for the new insight, for the more effective technique. It is as changing and evolving as life itself. To unite humanity with the earth through art is like combining the body with the spirit."

Theodore F. Wolff, art editor for the *Christian Science Monitor*, says of Gary Smith,

Few artists today see things whole. Most prefer a sliver of the truth and an art defined by theory, passion or imitation. Not so Gary E. Smith. For him art is expansive and holistic, ideal for sharing what is good, beautiful and true, and the best way to communicate one's deepest beliefs and intuitions.

Gary Smith's recent exhibit, "Fields," at the Springville Museum of Art, centers on eight large canvases (he has since added to the suite) that show fields in various seasons and stages--one is of plowed ground with a dusting of snow, another of a harvested field with a few scattered bales of hay, and another has furrows echoing the contours of the rolling hills. At the opening for the exhibit, Smith asked for a response to his pieces. One individual said "I think you feel the same way about the land I do, but most people overlook over such kinds of beauty and never see it." Smith agreed that most people don't see empty fields as beautiful, and says that is why he painted these. And it's working, he says; people have come in (to the show) and looked around for a while and then come up to him to tell him about a field he needs to see--their eyes have been opened.

That personal insight Smith struggles to attain and to share has successfully expanded to encompass the viewers of his paintings. Careful observers walk away from his paintings

with a broader, more appreciative view of beauty and of the goodness of the earth and the people who work it, and of this artist, who paints it.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What does the figure in Gary Smith's sculpture appear to be doing? How long do you think people have been farming? Where were the first human agrarian cultures? Has any other artist ever used a farmer as subject matter? What other working people have artists depicted? Why would anyone be interested in paintings and sculptures about people at work?

When you look at the slide of Mr. Smith's sculpture, what is the first thing that catches your attention? Does it lead your eye into another part of the sculpture or does it make you want to keep looking at that one place? When you look at a portrait of a person, where do you first want to look? Why? Most people are most interested in other people's faces—why do you think that's so? What else gets your attention? Can you see these things in Mr. Smith's sculpture? Do you think the impact of this art work would be greater if you could see the real sculpture rather than a slide? Where can you go to see this work?

When you look at this art work what is the first feeling you have? Is it painful or pleasant? Are there other words that better describe your feelings? Can you describe your feelings without discussing WHY or the IDEAS behind your response? Try to say, "When I look at this work of art I feel _____" instead of saying, "This art makes me feel _____."

This statement of feeling is a kind of art criticism called "mechanism," --a non-intellectual, visceral, and emotional response to art, usually dealing with the pain/pleasure scale.

ACTIVITIES

Art History

Objective: Students will demonstrate an understanding of how artists depict farming and the agrarian life by developing a time line containing as many examples as they can find.

Using the slide of Gary Smith's sculpture of a farmer as a visual aid, generate a class discussion about farming and the agrarian life as depicted in art throughout human history and across cultures. Students should be given ample opportunity to collect these images by photocopying work and by writing a short description of the work, including

title, artist, date, medium, and cultural or geographic location, and any subjective information the student thinks relevant.

Since the photocopies will be black and white, have students hand color the images with either watercolor or colored pencil to reproduce as closely as possible the original color scheme.

This activity can be a long-term project. Give students a chance to present their finds to the class and then mount the facsimiles on the time line. [Caution, certain periods of the time line will probably be crowded, so allow for flexibility, but display works in chronological order]

Hints for research--Ancient man rendered farming subjects extensively: Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Asian, Greek, and African. Primitive cultures also are full of farming references in art, pottery motifs, architectural relief sculptures, and tool manufacturing.

Some recent western artists to look for are Vincent Van Gogh (*The Reapers*), Peter Brueghel (*The Harvesters*), Diego Rivera (murals), Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White (photographs), Marc Chagall (*I and the Village*) Grandma Moses (paintings), John Hafen (*The Gleaners*.)

Language Arts/ Creative Writing

Objective: Students will demonstrate an understanding of the process of writing poetry (or song lyrics) by generating an original piece of poetry based thematically on farmers and the farming life. Literature is full of wonderful works about farms and farmers. Examples of poetry at all levels of sophistication can be found that discuss the farming experience, from *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, and *The Farmer in the Dell*, to Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, and Woody Guthrie (songs).

After sharing examples of this genre, have students look at the slide of Gary Smith's work and brainstorm some ideas for poetic subject matter. Ask the students What is he doing? Why? How does he feel about what he must do? Other works of visual art can be used to stimulate the creative response. Possibilities include the following artists' works: Grant Wood, Vincent Van Gogh, Gary Smith, John Hafen, Peter Brueghel.

You may want to discuss with your class the idea that many people feel the best art (and literature) is personal and is based on one's own experience.

Variations: For young students, group creation of extra verses to Old MacDonald can be a fun activity.

Japanese Haiku, Native American poetry or song, and African American poetry are excellent sources for a multi-cultural slant on the subject.

Art

Objective: Students will demonstrate an understanding of and proficiency in figure drawing by producing a life-size rendering of the human figure.

For this activity, suit the difficulty of the drawing to students' ages, training, and interests. See Variations, below.

Using a slide of Gary Smith's life-size (or larger) sculpture as an example and other slides of figurative sculptures by Mahonri Young, Cyrus Dallin, or Auguste Rodin as visual examples, have students discuss proportion of the human figure. By projecting the slide on large butcher paper, the difference between proportion and scale can be demonstrated.

Have students measure with ruler or calipers the specific proportions of Smith's figure. A standard can be found by measuring the head--chin to crown--and using that to determine the size of other body parts. How many heads tall is this figure? How many heads long are its arms, legs, hands? Change the size of the slide projection. Notice the proportions don't change, only scale changes.

Next, do the same measurement process with a member of the class as model, drawing the life-size proportions on a large sheet of butcher paper.

Once the "head standard" proportions can be determined, smaller and larger versions of the drawing can be developed by determining basic head size first. Encourage students to detail the figure in their own stylistic manner using color, value, texture, and foreshortening and overlapping. The large, finished drawings make wonderful wall panels to grace the school halls.

Variation: Have the students produce mannequin-like drawings with simplified forms and no hair, clothing, or facial features.

Variation: Have the students measure out the proportions of each major body part on the paper and then do the best job they can of rendering the whole figure.

Variation: If you have discussed gesture in your class, have the students use gesture to make their drawings more interesting and life like.