

CHEIM & READ

ARTFORUM

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Kimber Smith

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“Cosmically we find that matter organizes around centers, which are often marked by a dominant mass,” the gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim once said, but “we cannot be grateful enough for living in a world that, for practical purposes, can be laid out along a grid of verticals and horizontals . . . the Cartesian grid.” In two early works by the abstract painter Kimber Smith (1922–1981) at Cheim & Read—*Untitled*, 1965, a modestly sized gouache on paper, and *Kup’s White Diamond*, 1970, a large acrylic on canvas—the center is utterly conspicuous. In the former, it is a pale, luminous void edged by golden bands; in the latter, it is a stuttering throng of rhomboid shapes, a sort of distorted or devious grid rendered mostly in primary colors. The gilded rings of the drawing *Untitled*, 1966–67, also lack proper cores, much like the quartet of emptied spheres on a navy ground in the painting *Day Circle Blue*, 1967. But this pair felt undeniably empyrean because, as Arnheim posited, “the circle stands in many cultures for . . . the celestial, and the eternal.”

The heart of virtually every work in Smith’s exhibition here unravels into a number of scrawling gestures, even as the image manages to maintain its geometrical form. The pinkish orbs of *Untitled*, 1976, become painterly blobs, evaporating into the milky-white paper on which they appear. The strange circles and earthbound pyramids in *Egyptian Rose Garden*, 1976, are a mass—a mess?—of slapdash tangerine slabs. The canvas has a visionary, otherworldly quality, as does the painting *Zday*, 1979, in which a flash of colorful brushwork is surrounded by a mystical, diamond-like figure that is “threatened” by a sort of hardened black lightning that approaches from the right side of the composition. And in the middle of *Tilt*, 1980, four overlapping triangles in burning red and autumnal yellow seem to have been created by a flurry of more or less horizontal strokes. At first glance, all of these crude abstractions, with their decidedly kindergarten palettes and rough-and-tumble facture, appeared to have been made by a little boy.



Kimber Smith, *Kup's White Diamond*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 94 × 65 1/4".

If Smith's art resembles that "spontaneous form of communication" by children, as the psychoanalytic art therapist R. M. Simon says, and his wild gestures bespeak his "true self," as the pediatrician-psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott thinks, then there is an expressive authenticity to the painter's output that connects it to romanticism—"a mode of feeling" involving "intimacy, spirituality, color, [and] aspiration towards the infinite," as Charles Baudelaire characterized it. To call Smith's work provisional painting is to award it a mindless misnomer; his pieces are spiritually ambitious and lyrical, a breed of art informel carried to an insistent extreme. I think Smith was searching for and achieved a new innocence in painting, the kind "with which a small child absorbs form and color," per Baudelaire. And with that a numinous experience of space merges with a transcendental relation to nature, as suggested by the grassy greens, ocean blues, and sun-kissed oranges in the sixty-inch-square painting *My Satin Doll*, 1980, which the artist made just a year before his death. Smith's enigmatic images are emotionally and aesthetically complex—masterpieces both subtle and sublime.

—Donald Kuspit