

Dave Smith. Twist of Fate. 1975-1989
National Art Gallery of The Bahamas

"Once was a time, was a very good time, Monkey chew tobaccan an' spit white lime":¹ When the generation who grew up over the hill moved to new suburbs like Sea Breeze, Monastery Park, Joans Heights and Winton. The time of fancy block walls, concrete lions, fireplaces, station wagons and Pan Am. When Bahamians moved from antennae and boosters to twelve-foot satellite dishes, Galaxy 2 and Satcom One. When the battle was between beta and vhs, and we became obsessed with acquiring the latest...Gucci watch, HCL bag, walkman and color tv. These were the years when consumerism became a part of Bahamian life, but the straw market still had majority Bahamian made goods.

It was a time Bahamians began to think that an American education might be equal to a British one. A time when one might still see women balancing cargo on their heads, walking straight-back down the road. When fish men came through the neighborhoods on bikes yelling "fresh fish" or you could go to the docks and see fish swimming at the bottom of fishermen boats - and riding the bus was cool. Father Allen and the Palm Tree still took orders, with the Palm Tree always full on Saturdays for those special burgers and big conch fritters that didn't need sauce. People still covered their chairs in plastic and proudly laid linoleum on the kitchen floors. It was a time when we modernized our wooden houses with bulldozers or "stocked" them over with the veneer of concrete, new dark windows. Hanging beads separated rooms and chain-linked fences began to separate yards.

It was a time when kids still played outside, rode bikes, roller-skated on four wheeled skates, played ringplay, 'pockin' and dodge ball, jax, catchers and knew what it meant to go explorin' through the track roads. When only the rare kid was overweight and fast food was a rare and special treat.

It was a time when kung fu and karate "pictures" were king. Jim Kelly was the black prince and the Drunken Master stayed at the Sunshine Twin Theatre for two months. When children went to the drive-in with the parents dressed in their "dusters". When even grandmothers knew about "Wrastlin" and the matches with Dusty Rhodes and Tyree Pride, The Haitian Sensation at the Nassau Stadium.

It was the time of the mighty T-Connections, The Beginning of the End, when Ronnie Butler and the Ramblers went "Down Burma Road" and young people partied at The King and Knights, The Palace, La Pon, Waterloo and Club Pastiche, and afterwards stopped for food at Keith's Chicken Shack, Johnsons, Dirty's. When kids went to junkanoo with bibi in your eye and when the sun came up, so did the results. When Shaft was a bad muther...shut your mouth! Foxy Brown and Coffy were icons and not recycled rappers with rap sheets. We grooved to the Emotions, Earth Wind and Fire, Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, The Commodores, Musical Youth, Prince, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Boy George, Run DMC and Soul to Soul and never questioned our Bahamianess because we also knew every word of every song Eddie Minnis and the Brudders sang, and we knew the importance of holding on to Exuma The Obeah Man's albums even when the record players and eight tracks disappeared into tapes and cds. And we knew about that sweet sleep as we listened to the radio hoping to hear a song dedicated to us on the Quiet Storm.

It's almost too much to remember the time of shoulder pads, leg-warmers and polyester, of bubblegum, straight leg and acid wash jeans, pants with stirrups, Benneton T-Shirts, shopping at Georgie Porgie, Ambrosine, Hot Wire, Adam and Eve and Tempo Paris. The mushroom and afro were the must have styles of the seventies, super long nails and the jherri curl arrived in the eighties. The Bump, the Bus Stop, the Cabbage Patch, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Sugar Hill Gang, Whodini. Pass the Dutchee, Get Flat, Yellowman, Cross Colours, Mills and Boon, red and yellow candy, "tuffee", salty and hot sauce, slam bam, cup and baggie, rockers, afros, dashikis. Bob Marley's performance at the sports center. Elisha Obed's victory and Ray Minus' defeat. How can we ever forget seeing Mary Ann Higgs, Fabian Whyms, Boy Blue and Joey Wells run, Steve Hanna jump and Pauline Davis' last leg of the 4 x 400 relay in Carifta 1984 in Nassau?

When kids still read Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Encyclopedia Brown and we all had to recite Susan J. Wallace poems and Pat Rahming's verses on the page or the radio, cause GCE and BJC results were still published in the papers. We entertained ourselves bowling at the Village Lanes, playing Atari, Pac Man and Galaxian, Rubics Cube and spades, learning Commodore 64. It seemed like a time when young men were more concerned with perfecting their bop or going driving and parking by the sea with their "boops", though nobody wanted to be a "babbit" or "get buff".

In order to enter Dave's Smith's paintings one has to recall this part of our nation's recent history, and with it the context of their making. Smith's work is often described as "Bahamian" Pop Art. This is a slightly curious, but strangely appropo when one unpacks how Smith's approach has allowed him to appropriate and transform a specifically British form of Pop Art into Bahamian painting that is far less celebratory and far more introspective than its historical referent.

In 1952 a group of young artists coming out of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London formed the Independent Group. The Independents came of age in a Post War Britain undergoing remarkable change behind years of

¹ Elsie Clews Parsons Folk-Tales of Andros Island, Bahamas (American Folklore Society: Lancaster and New York, 1918).

crisis and anxiety. The minds of this group of young people were squarely set on the future. They rejected pre-war forms of art making and the stifling nature of the British art establishment epitomized by the ICA. Instead they chose to embrace new technologies (new forms of communication) and popular culture (specifically American advertising, science fiction etc.) as creative processes and art forms. They saw in these innovations resources to produce a democratic art form, open and available to all. In their view traditional art practice and mainstream art institutions had become elitist and closed to few and there was a need to disturb these waters.²

One of the most iconic works to come out of the Independents was Richard Hamilton's collage on paper *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956).³ This collage can first be described as "domesticated surrealism" with its full moon ceiling and disjunctive elements of popular culture finely arranged to form an idealized 1950s British home. However it is all "Pop," emblematic of the group's philosophies in its use of cheap and plentiful magazine cutouts as material and collage as process. This collage concretized the philosophies of the group. It was representative of an outright rejection of the governing art historical narrative which had focused on the increasing dematerialization of the art object through sanctioned non-objective art forms like Abstract Expressionism, Op Art and Abstract Art.

The lack of religious representation in the work allows the composition to reflect the increased secularization of British culture, the displacement of previous forms and the elevation of new icons such as the pinup girl and the musclemans, to television, movies, the vacuum cleaner, the car, canned ham and even the blow-pop candy.

It is through this branch of Pop Art that one finds the art historical link to Dave Smith's paintings. Like the Independent group, Smith's paintings also visualize societal shifts through cultural iconography, but his landscape is the Bahamas and unlike the Independents, his process is still firmly rooted within the tradition of painting.

The fractured formalism of Smith's paintings affect a narrative of the social, economic, racial, cultural and class inconsistencies and divisions present in a post independence Bahamas. These works question whether change in the context of The Bahamas is synonymous with growth, whether old ways of doing and believing will be effective in charting a solid course for the future, and whether differences perceived in belief systems are very different than marketing systems. In works such as *Knights of Promise* (1980), *Nassau Trinity* (1980) and *Prey* (1985) old icons literally "buck-up" against new forms of faith. Martin Luther King, JFK and Jesus are challenged by more tangible idols, earthly liturgies and answered prayers, such as the promise and comfort of money, the ritual of shopping, and the manifestation of the car.

The ambivalent affects of tourism, histories and consumerism (of goods, people, nation and vision) are eloquently addressed by works such as *Encounter* (1980), *Vendor* (1982) and *Excerpts from the American Dream* (1984). What is Dave Smith trying to say? What are these works asking of its audience? Do they question the ironies of replacing what is present naturally in this environment with simulacra? Do these works inhabit that slim philosophical space between the natural vista of the sea and the postcard image of the sea? Or is it that the image of the sea is being replaced with a preference for that provided by the television and movies? Are these paintings about an increased alienation of Bahamians from The Bahamas: An increasing physical, psychological and economic disconnect from our natural, historical and cultural environments as American mass media began its assault in the 1970s? Or is it something else?

Perhaps some insight can be gleaned by examining how Smith employs the metaphor of the car. A symbol of modernity and masculinity for post war generations of Bahamian men (arguably, its acquisition was viewed as being more important than a house) the car emerges from the shadows or lies decaying in the sun in these paintings, often redoubling as icon and container of icons in works such as *Supplement* (1989) and *Calypso Skies* (1989).

In *Twist of Fate* (1980), the viewer is placed in the front seat of the car. Here the car is presented as both a metaphor for freedom, and limitations. While the presence of the Mills and Boon novel on the dashboard suggests that perhaps the native Bahamian inhabits an insurmountable distance from romantic view of these islands consumed by the tourist, the car is primary metaphor engaged. Though it provides the freedom to move, here it has literally carried its occupants to the edge of the island, revealing its limits but also that of the viewer. The car has carried the viewer far enough to understand (in the ship and horizon) that there are still farther distances to go and the available tools may not be what is necessary to take them further. The car therefore becomes a fulcrum for opportunity and dashed hopes in its reemphasis of the nature of the island as container.

These paintings have an epistle like quality that is reinforced by the strong formal bifurcation present in most of the works. Compositionally the left side of many of the paintings is juxtaposed to the right through the manipulation light, representation of interior or exteriors, and vistas vs. intimate objects or spaces. The visual experience is like reading a book or rebus, but the impact is multidimensional and never easy.

² The Independents were not comprised solely of visual artists. They were a group with representatives from various fields organized by specific philosophies that governed the practice of the group in their various fields: Peter Reyner Banham, architectural historian; Lawrence Alloway, art critic; Richard Hamilton, artist; Peter and Alison Smithson, architects; John Mchale, artist, James Stirling, architect; Nigel Henderson, photographer and Edouardo Paolozzi, artist.

Though the paintings are rendered in a clear and concise style, the artist's position to these objects/subjects is not cut and dry. The final word on what they mean and what is being presented is not provided, but is left for the viewer to grapple with. Today the very title of the painting **Kill, Kill and Kill Again** might be an affront to one's politically correct sensibilities. But paired with **Drive in Bambi (1976)**, one might capture the subtleties at work in Smith's oeuvre. During this time distinctions could still be made between what appeared on the screen and what one experienced day to day in the Bahamas, but this no longer the case, as our society appears to have been sucked into the television screen it once watched at a distance.

Art critics and historians often speak of the lack of representation of the contemporary human form in paintings described as "Bahamian Romantic", yet much of Dave Smith's work first appears to exhibit the same tendency. However, as with **Twist of Fate**, the human presence is not so much absent from representation as it is formally contained in the body of the viewer and his/her formal relationship to the painting. This is a very Renaissance approach to painting, completely different from traditional Pop Art and highly self-reflexive in its intent. These paintings in this sense become screens for the true subject of the work - The Bahamas, and the viewer- whether native or foreign who is compelled by the image to decide what his or her relationship to what is presented will be.

When the story of the Bahamas is told, it will say that the 70s and 80s were a time of tremendous change in the Bahamas. When the seeds for the future were sown and sometimes rooted up. In 1980 when the HMBS Flamingo was sunk, the last protective coat of innocence as a young country was sanded off and a sense of vulnerability, perhaps even doubt set in. By the end of the 1980s the drive-ins had closed. Sunshine Twin had become a grocery store, middle class kids stopped taking the bus, drug trafficking took hold and drug use took an even tighter hold. The Bahamas was introduced to new, not so well packaged icons such as the "jonser" and the "dealer", social problems such as cyclical poverty and AIDS.

Dave Smith's paintings allow us to recall a time when the battle for this future, our present, was still being waged. In addressing our cultural underbelly and alleyways, they also paradoxically allow us to embrace this nation's light and the role each of us play in ensuring the future of these islands.

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List of Works

1. Drive-in Bambi, 1976. Acrylic on Paper. 11 x 17". Collection of The Artist
2. Twist of Fate, 1980. Acrylic on canvas with fake fur. 28 x 50. Collection of The Artist
3. Brief Encounter, 1980. Acrylic on canvas. 26 x 50". Collection of Marysa Malone. Estate of Brent Malone.
4. Time Passage, 1980. Acrylic on canvas. 32 x 64" Collection of Neil and Joann Behagg
5. Nassau Trinity, 1980. Acrylic on canvas. 30 x 20". Collection of Tom and Erica Asselin. Estate of Joy Thomson.
6. Knights of Promise, 1981, Acrylic on canvas. 35 x 59" Collection of Stan and Denisia Burnside
7. Art in a Home in Nassau, 1982. Acrylic on canvas. 31.5 x 57.5" Collection of the Artist
8. Vendor, 1982 Collection of Janet Johnson
9. Kill, Kill and Kill Again, Bamboo Gods and Iron Men, 1983. Acrylic on canvas. 34 x 50" Collection of Ron and Donna Reid.
10. Done Within, 1983. Acrylic on canvas. 30 x 50. Collection of Stan and Denisia Burnside
11. Excerpts From the American Dream, 1984. Acrylic on canvas. 35 x 42". Collection of Dawn Davies
12. Let Us Prey, 1984-86. Acrylic on canvas with enamel on wood. 54 x 40". National Collection
13. Calypso Skies, Catalog Sunset, 1989 Acrylic on canvas. 33 x 58". Collection of Vincent and Marina D'Aguilar
14. Supplement, 1989. Acrylic on canvas. 32 x 57. Collection of June Knight

About the Artist

Dave Smith was born in Derbyshire, England in 1944. He studied painting at Derby College of Art and completed Post-graduate work at the Hornsey College of Art. In 1969 he co-founded the London based design group Electric Colour Company which specialized in design projects within the London Fashion scene. The work ranged from furniture, interior design and store-front to custom car finishes, murals graphic and fashion accessories and frequently appeared in publications such as Vogue, HotCar, TimeOut, and the Sunday Times. He left the company in 1973 to teach for a year at a college in North England. In 1973 Smith moved to the Bahamas and taught art for a year in Eleuthera before moving to Nassau. In the mid 1970s he began a small series of drawings focused on incongruous juxtapositions, motivated in part by seeing American films projected onto the Caribbean Sky at Nassau Drive in Theaters. His first solo show was in 1981 at the Institute for the Arts, Nassau. In 1990 Smith moved to the United States where he currently works a scenic artist in the motion picture industry while continuing to exhibit in the United States and The Bahamas. His work is in numerous private collections in The Bahamas, The United States and the UK.