

Vic Joachim Smith
1929 - 1994
PROFESSOR OF ART, EMERITUS

B.A., M.A., Art, Long Beach State College, June 11, 1954
California State University, Fullerton From September 2, 1962 To June 29,
1981
Birth: April 3, 1929; Death: November 17, 1994

A 1985 retrospective exhibition in the California State University, Fullerton Art Gallery presented three decades of drawing and painting by Professor Emeritus Vic Joachim Smith. This event documented the consistent excellence of a life's work, and showed the high regard given him by the community and his colleagues. As a consummate teacher his vision, thoroughness and precision brought esteem from a large following of devoted students.

Vic Smith joined the art faculty of his alma mater, Long Beach State College, in 1957, by which time he was becoming a significant contributor to an emerging Southern California art scene. In 1962, together with his mentor, Chairman, John Olsen, he left Long Beach to help establish the art department at the new Orange County State College. At that time he lived in Westminster, California, with his wife, Elaine, and two young daughters, Melanie and Therese.

In the fifties and sixties Smith exhibited extensively in the U.S. and abroad and wrote critically for *Art Forum* magazine. In 1960 he showed with the *Gutai* group in Osaka, Japan, and in 1961 Smith exhibited in Europe with such renowned American artists as Frankenthaler, Hoffman, Kline, De Kooning, Lewis, Motherwell, Pollack, Rothko, Still, Tobey and Tworkov. Nevertheless, here in California, as *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson complained in 1967, "The art of Vic Smith is so good I can't understand why it isn't more famous." But fame had not eluded Smith so much as Smith had eluded fame. He never felt himself to be of any particular time or place, least of all a prominent L.A. Modernist.

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest and on the beaches of Southern California, Smith spent much of his time alone--drawing, and in nature. His school years included working as a commercial artist, cartoonist, and as an animator for the Walt Disney Studios. In the years after graduation, he involved himself in the avant-garde art world and was building a solid solo exhibition record. However, he remained an avid hiker and naturalist, seeking always to balance solitary pursuits with those of career and family.

In 1967 the *Art News* critic Jules Langsner wrote of Smith that he "...is philosophically learned as well as minded." Although painting and teaching made his career he was also a scholar and a poet. His first solo exhibition included his poetry, and his essays were published in museum catalogues and national art journals. From an early age Smith read modern Western

philosophy from the humanists to the existentialists. By the early 1960's he was seriously studying Zen and the pre-Buddhist Chinese, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, in multiple translations. Smith undertook occasional formal training through philosophy and practice which are paralleled by the transitions that occurred in his painting and life.

In an excerpt from one of Smith's studio journals of 1975 he says, "if my early painting can accurately be said to involve a concern with growth and change, then it may be no less accurate to note that painting has for me become not so much a voyage as a meditation--an attempt to slow the mind down to watch it work." As his painting students at C.S.U.F. we met Smith immediately after his pilgrimage to Asia. He was producing his central Mumonkon Series of paintings and still burning with enthusiasm for the vivid experiences he had in India, Southeast Asia and Japan. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in his ideas and observe the development of his remarkable art.

In 1975 Smith legally changed his name to Joachim, a gesture that was symbolic of an end and a beginning. With a second wife Andrea he moved to a fifty year old house on Lookout Ridge above Sleepy Hollow in Carbon Canyon. The next years were spent restoring, renovating and becoming involved in environmental activism. His efforts were instrumental in creating a new Chino Hills State Park--a 13,500 acre wildlife and hiking preserve linking Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties.

After he had spent five years as a C.S.U.F. art administrator (chair, vice-chair and graduate coordinator as well as a commencement speaker for The School of the Arts), Joachim began his last group of paintings and drawings the *Carbon Canyon Series*. In his role as artist-naturalist, this most recent series turned back from those earlier states of meditative emptiness toward an embrace of things as they appear and as they function in the world, and he was serious about recording life forms before they disappeared.

Smith took early retirement in 1981 teaching at CSUF only during the fall term, working primarily with beginning drawing students. He also presented a special lecture course, two years in preparation: *Art and Survival*--"an inquiry into the functions and meanings of art as they relate to the political and environmental conditions of a post-modern world."

In 1990, natural disaster struck Smith for the second time in his life in the form of a wildfire. This time, besides paintings, he lost much of his writings and personal records as well as an extensive research library. Disharmony plagued his last years of teaching, and after retiring he planned to leave the world of entanglements and retreat to the redwood-forested coast of Mendocino where he could paint and write, and help his sister, Jeannie, care for their aged mother, Malia. Those plans for a new life were well underway when they were unfortunately lost to a brief, fierce battle with cancer.

Joachim Smith showed great loyalty and affection to his family and those he let into his personal life, though he often expressed a suspicion that

he was likely to spend his retirement in near isolation. He had an enormous capacity to will variations on himself--he played with persona--presenting intentional style and attitude to those in divergent areas of his life. He once wrote that "...I have tried in my own work to weave the sublime and earthly together..." For him the physical and metaphysical were simultaneously present. Joachim will be remembered by so many of those who knew him; he worked tirelessly and not just to explain, but to share an expansive view of the mind and its place in nature. He was able to accept many of his life's surprises with grace and left a scrupulous, if romantic, legacy.

Submitted by
Tom Holste
Professor of Art
and colleagues
Bob Schmid and Doug Smith
May 25, 1995