Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert

Uptown / Downtown: The Early Paintings of Richard Smith 1959-63

Curated by Marco Livingstone

1 November – 14 December 2018

Private View: 31 October 2018, 6 - 8pm
38 Bury Street, St. James's, London, SW1Y 6BB

Richard Smith, Flip Top, 1962. © The Richard Smith Foundation, courtesy Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert

LONDON — The British painter Richard Smith (1931-2016) might well be regarded as the artist who kickstarted the 1960s. From his debut New York show in 1961 at the Green Gallery, he pioneered a highly distinctive form of Pop Art with lush, textured paintings that evoke the sleek American 'Madmen' consumerism, while nodding to the gestural Abstract Expressionism of the preceding decade. Entitled 'Uptown/Downtown', this loan exhibition explores how Smith, an Englishman in New York, explored the visual languages of uptown glitz, while living a life of downtown bohemianism, in exuberant canvases that combine the different cultural currents of his adopted city. As the exhibition curator Marco Livingstone writes: '…these paintings are infused with the scent of luxury and with the aura of popular culture, commerce and the spectacle of modern life.'

Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert is proud to present a long-overdue show of rare early works by the artist, the first such survey to take place in the UK. The exhibition features 18 paintings, including loans from the Arts Council of England Collection, Southampton City Art Gallery and private collectors including Peter and Chrissy Blake. Curated by scholar Marco Livingstone, who has written the introduction to the catalogue, this exhibition focuses on the groundbreaking paintings produced by Smith during his first two years in New York and immediately on his return to London. Livingstone notes that this work, much of it large in scale and painted in joyous, saturated colours, reflected the abundance and optimism of American society that the artist found so striking. As Livingstone writes:

'The stroke of genius in these early works by Smith lay in his understanding that this language of painting, however attractive in itself, could be given even greater depth through connections with the visual stimuli that he found in the modern urban environment.'

Richard Smith in his studio, Bath Street, East London, circa 1963. Lord Snowdon Private View © Snowdon / Trunk Archive

In London Bryan Robertson presented an early retrospective of Smith's work at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1966, cementing the reputation established by solo shows in 1962 at the artist's Bath Street studio and at the ICA. By 1970, Smith was a strong enough presence in the contemporary art world to represent the UK at the Venice Biennale as the first artist to occupy the entire Pavilion. In 1975 the Tate Gallery presented a mid-career solo exhibition of his paintings, conceived as a restaging of seven of the artist's key solo shows. However in the late 1970s Smith's work seemed less attuned to the times and fell out of the critical and popular discourse. The current exhibition aims to reappraise the work of a British artist who found his métier and moment in 1960s New York.

Smith, who first travelled to New York in 1959 on a Harkness Scholarship, was inspired by the consumer culture of 1960s America – its Technicolor imagery, huge billboards, bright advertisements, movies, jazz – a vibrant popular culture that seemed a world away from drab, grey post-war England. 'America really drove me

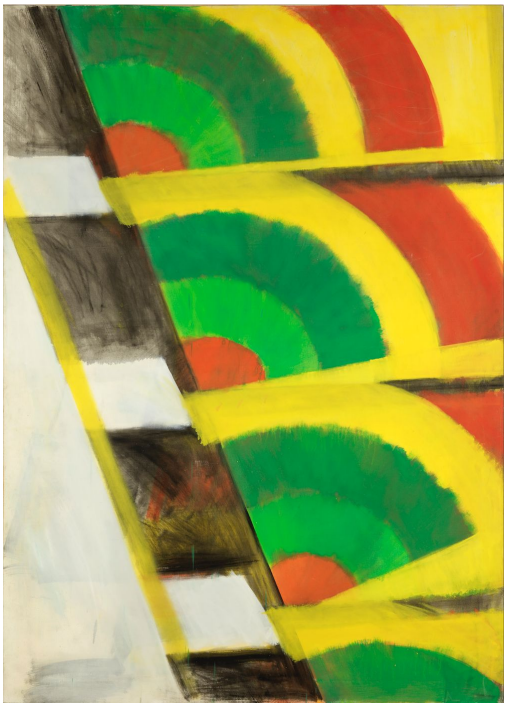
in very positive ways,' recalled Smith in an interview for the British Library's Artists' Lives project in 2011. 'I became very much my own person.' Entranced by this rich visual mix, he created works with titles such as 'MM' (for Marilyn Monroe), 'Revlon' and 'Flip Top', evoking the ads for the then novel cigarette packaging.

Smith lived at the heart of the 1960s art scene in New York. His downtown studio was an epicentre of artistic activity, as was the London studio near Old Street in which film director Ken Russell recorded the final party scene for his celebrated TV programme 'Pop Goes the Easel', first televised in early 1962. John Lennon visited Smith's studio and engaged him in conversation about his collection of American pop records. Frank Stella was a friend and owns work from this period. The artist Michael Craig-Martin, also a friend, has written admiringly of his work and his role at the heart of key artistic developments of the period:

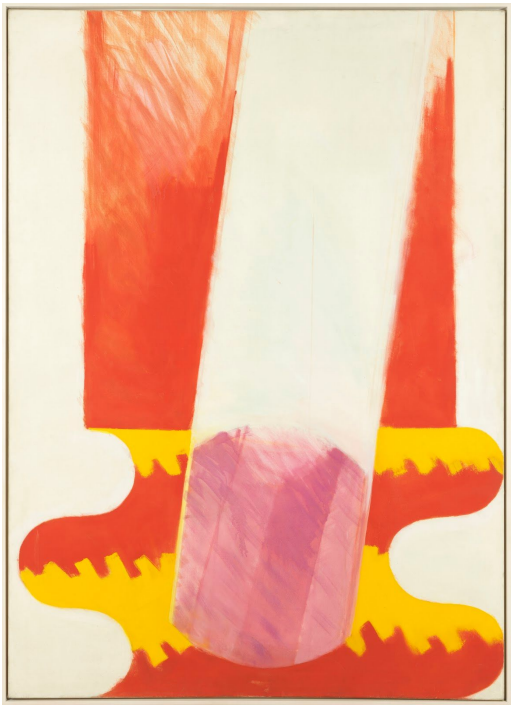
'The early 1960s in New York were key to all the major developments in art – pop, op, color field, minimalism, conceptualism – that would dominate the decade. Dick Smith was the only British artist to play a truly active part in the early days of this exceptionally creative period in New York. He caught the Zeitgeist… I think of him as having combined aspects of color field painting and pop, a soft-focus take on a hard-edged world.'

Craig-Martin's text is one of several appreciations by Smith's artist peers, including Frank Stella, Joe Tilson, Peter Blake, Clive Barker, Derek Boshier and Stephen Buckley, that are published in this catalogue to complement Marco Livingstone's analytical essay about these paintings and a separate note about Smith's life and career. Also featured in the catalogue are photographs taken during the 1960s by such eminent photographers as Robert Freeman, whose portraits of the Beatles graced the front covers of their first five LPs, and Lord Snowdon. The publication represents an important addition to the literature on this distinctive and much admired painter.

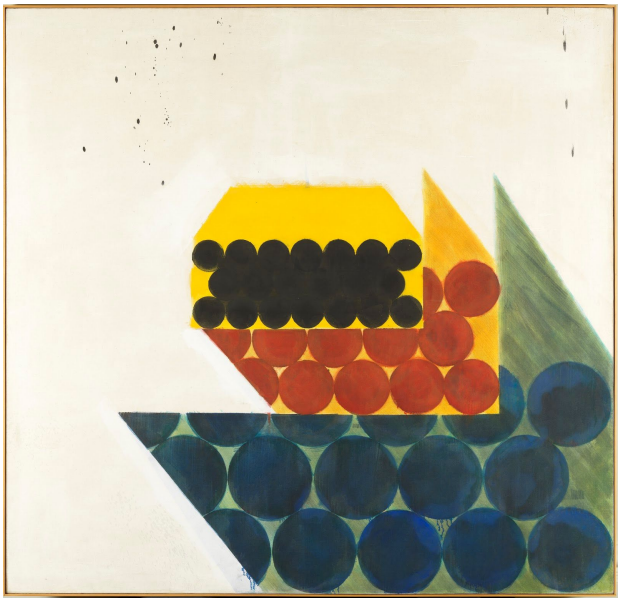
Richard Smith, MM, 1959. © The Richard Smith Foundation, courtesy Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert.



Richard Smith, Trailer, 1962. © The Richard Smith Foundation, courtesy Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert.



Richard Smith, Lubitsch, 1962. © The Richard Smith Foundation, courtesy Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert.



Richard Smith, Tip Top, 1963. © The Richard Smith Foundation, courtesy Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert.

High-resolution images can be downloaded here.

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Notes for Editors

Exhibition information

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1 November – 14 December 2018
Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert
38 Bury Street
London SW1 6BB
+44 (0) 20 7839 7600
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Opening hours: Monday – Friday, 10am – 6pm

Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert is the leading specialist in museum-quality modern and contemporary British art. Based in London, with an office in New York, the gallery focuses solely on British artists with an international reputation, such as Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Francis Bacon, Bridget Riley, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Richard Long, Howard Hodgkin, Patrick Caulfield, Gilbert and George and many others.

The gallery participates in major international fairs, including Frieze Masters, TEFAF New York, Art Basel and Masterpiece. In recent years the gallery has held loan exhibitions of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Bridget Riley, Gerald Laing and the ground-breaking *Lucian Freud: Early Works 1940-58*.

Press Enquiries

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