

Byron Smith: Cover Girls at Institute 193

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Byron Smith's *Cover Girls* offers earnest and adoring tributes to glamorous movie, TV, and music industry icons. Smith's drawings are typified by a hyperbolic allure, with an archetypal framework revealed collectively throughout the portrait series; this becomes most evident in simplified yet distinctive feminine features - elongated eyelashes radiating outward from almond-shaped lids, cherry red lacquered fingernails and lips, pronounced cupid's bows, and wide, toothy grins. This repetition, economy of line, and influence of pop culture seems prevalent in the creative culture of LAND, where artists Michael Pellew, Kenya Hanley, Raquel Albarran, and Myasia Dowdell employ similar concepts and methods alongside Smith. At Institute 193 (the Lexington, Kentucky space with the intention to increase the exposure of innovative Southern artists), we are invited to consider the work in another context - Smith's perspective as an artist with roots in North Carolina, or conversely, the role of his creative voice in the contemporary history of the rural South.



Byron Smith, *Untitled*, 2017, Mixed media on paper, 24" x 19"

Reinterpreting source imagery collected from magazines and album covers, "Smith is highly selective in regards to the images he works from. Often, the women he chooses to depict are unabashedly happy, smiling and looking directly at the viewer. He also gravitates towards images of female kinship and friendly affection; Thelma and Louise, Edina and Patsy from the TV series *Absolutely Fabulous*, pairs of synchronized swimmers, and groups of women dressed in beach attire have all been depicted tenderly and with a deep display of platonic intimacy (Institute 193)." While much less rigid in execution, Smith's women are a bit reminiscent of those portrayed by Amy Sherald or Alex Katz (particularly a series depicting his wife Ada in various bathing caps), most often posed in front of flat monochromatic backgrounds and echoing Ada's recurring red lips.

Two standouts in the exhibition are a solitary swimmer boasting an ornate bathing cap and an untitled gathering of seven smiling women. The latter provides a starting point in parsing what Smith's portraits achieve, encapsulating several process elements of the entire series. This drawing is defined by a system disrupted by variations - seven pairs of sunglasses, five black, one brown, and one translucent green, with two white frames, three gold, one purple, and one brown - a timeless method to expand an understanding, with each deviation from the established system becoming a new exploration. There is also an apparent attention to the picture plane itself, which isn't a single-minded representational endeavor. In some cases, representation is even subordinate for the sake of the overall composition (such as the elongated shoulders of the woman at the bottom left). Seen side by side, each woman of the group smiles quite differently - some may do so naturally, while others take on practiced poses.

All of these aspects culminate in the understanding that Byron Smith strives for highly specific imagery, demonstrated further by residual marks on the surface (lines drawn in graphite, erased, and then

revised). Although he sometimes achieves a surprising likeness despite the simplicity of his subjects (as in the case of Diana Ross), Smith's revisions don't appear to be engineered in the interest of achieving that likeness; often it isn't possible to know the priorities that led him to reject one choice and accept another. Through studying the history of erased lines, the viewer is prompted to consider whether it would matter if the volume of hair had increased or a nose (created with one meandering contour) had shifted. The narrative that Smith constructs with each drawing is not a reflexive or intuitive one, but a singular intention. In reference to this quality Director Paul Brown proposed the term "McGuffin", a literary device in which a glaring unknown rests at the center of a story, much like the "somethin'" being thrown off the Tallahatchie bridge in Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billy Joe". Intention as McGuffin is a subtle but crucial element in Smith's works; asking "why these women, in this exact way?" provides a compelling and enduring aura of mystery.

Bryron Smith (b. 1963) is originally from North Carolina and has maintained a studio practice since 2008 at LAND in Brooklyn. Smith has exhibited previously at Christian Berst, MoMA's Cullman Education and Research Building, Trask Gallery at The National Arts Club, The Outsider Art Fair, and extensively at LAND Gallery. He was also recently commissioned by Unu O Unu to create three original portraits that were subsequently made into hand-woven tapestries. *Cover Girls* is on view through March 31, 2018.



Byron Smith, *Untitled*, 2016, Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 24" x 19"



Byron Smith, *Diana Ross*, 2017, Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 14" x 17"