

A dot, a line, and a pattern walk into a bar ...

by Dominic Molon

Unmemorable Tryst With a Hypnotist, 2017
Gouache and ink on paper
30h x 22w in



Geoffrey Todd Smith's combination of levity, form variation, deft skill and precision in over two decades of painting evokes nothing so much for me as the legendary Chuck Jones' 1965 animated film *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics*.¹ This cartoon appeared occasionally within regular weekday morning broadcasts of *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* on WGN during my childhood. The film presents a love triangle (pun intended) between a socially awkward straight line who is hopelessly smitten with a red dot, who herself is distracted by a careless squiggle. Smith's work shares the cartoon's ability to develop charming wit and humor around patterns and geometric forms with its buoyancy, ingenuity, and seemingly inexhaustible variation of intricate systems, synthetic and primary hues, and a wildly imaginative use of line. Scrolling through images of his paintings and works on paper vertically on an iPhone, one could be forgiven for mistaking the succession of pictures as the work of a schizoid computer screen flexing its skills in devising ever more elaborate arrangements of color, shape, and form. As such, it echoes the line's over-exercising his capacity to bend, angle, curve, and so on in *The Dot and the Line* when he wills himself into a burst of creativity. The line eventually observes to himself, "freedom is not a license for chaos," and while Smith's process initially appears to be guided by neither rhyme nor reason, his sustained engagement of preexisting geometrical forms suggests both an embrace and critique of order and structure. This places him within a long and distinguished legacy of artists who, in acknowledging what an artist-curator once defined as "the ecstasy of limits," have discovered the virtues of assembling predefined shapes in meaningfully dynamic and unexpected ways.

Smith's work also shares with *The Dot and the Line* a belief that abstract geometrics or geometric abstraction—typically associated with a sort of detached formality—possesses the wherewithal to convey personality—and indeed to have a personality of its own. A painting such as *Show Me All of Your Piercings and I'll Tell You All of My Dreams* for example, possesses a stoic restraint in its use of white, black, gold, gray, and brown, and tightly alternating patterns. Contrast this with the fluidity and off-centeredness of *Unmemorable Tryst with a Hypnotist*, which layers differently patterned circular, ovoid, sunburst, and square forms (among others) with curving lines of varying thickness in a seemingly inchoate jumble. Philip Glass meets David Lee Roth ... Stephen Wright meets Sam Kinison ... Michael Snow meets Mel Brooks and so on. Smith fascinatingly alternates the personality of his paintings within his own oeuvre, making the inconsistency of their temperament and tone an absolute constant in his practice.

(northern) WESTERN EXHIBITIONS

7933 N Lincoln Ave, Skokie, IL 60077 // (312) 480-8390 // scott@westernexhibitions.com
Gallery hours: Wednesday to Saturday, 12-6pm and Sunday, 10am-3pm.

Another sustained element in Smith's production—and evident in the two works cited above—is the use of complicatedly irreverent turns of phrase to title his work. Titles have a historically ambivalent place in the appreciation of art—particularly with the advent of the all-purpose punt “Untitled” sometime in the 20th Century—yet they can't help but modify and affect the viewer's reading of a work itself. Taken collectively, an artist's titles—and this is certainly true for Smith—also develop one's sense of their (the artist's) relationship to their work overall, framing it as a variously poetic, scientific, aesthetic, sardonic, or philosophical expression. Titles such as *Rhinestone Pine Cone* and *Maximum Saxophone* allow the works to double down on their facetious proposition of what a geometrically abstract painting can and should be. Other names including *Jealousy Trellis* and *Causal X* serve a more descriptive purpose, bringing clarity and, again, personification to initially inscrutable arrays of pattern and designs.

Smith's work establishes a fairly unique place in art history with its subtly parodic exploration of non-objective form and color (and titles to match), but it doesn't do so frivolously. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristics of his practice is its complex combination of patterns and shapes within each picture, and its sustained complication of compositional situation and placement. In the first instance, forms are frequently assembled into arrangements that, for all of their ability to present a resolved whole, still clash with and pull at one another. Smith, in this sense, uses pattern against the idea of pattern, and in doing so ridicules our reliance upon systems and organizing principles that are always doomed to fail due to human frailty and unpredictability. Numerous works additionally complicate the edges of the picture plane, never fully reconciling that relationship, yet also never suggesting that their content has simply been cropped from a larger image. As a result, there's always something a bit “off” about a Geoffrey Todd Smith painting. It's never “centered” the way your eye wants or expects it to be, and always feels weirdly weighted toward the right, left, top, or bottom. His paintings seem to declare that proportion is vastly overrated and that even in instances where it does appear—in *Show Me All of Your Piercings* and *I'll Tell You All of My Dreams*, for example—something, like the integrity of a spot or circle is sacrificed to maintain the “off-ness.”

The Dot and the Line ends with the cheeky observation that the titular subjects lived “if not happily ever after, at least reasonably so” and this bit of equivocation about a geometric coupling's romantic future perfectly summarizes the prospect of Geoffrey Todd Smith's paintings. Sarcastic sentiment notwithstanding, the suggestion that dot and line coexist in both harmony and with the occasional lover's squabble or quarrel reflects the manner in which patterns, shapes, and forms alternately behave or go rogue in Smith's work. The paintings' synthesis of satirical arrangements, psychedelic colors, and a deliberately off-kilter compositional sensibility brings a desperately necessary and knowing charm to an abstract approach in art history that is typically defined by a restrictive rationality (even at its most tongue-in-cheek.) They ultimately provide a refreshingly witting yet urgent reminder of the immutable and universal dynamic between the order and disorder of things.

Dominic Molon
Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art
RISD Museum

¹ The cartoon is available to watch on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_QhIVYlcmE, and is also available in book form: Norman Juster, *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics*, New York: Random House, 1963.

(northern) WESTERN EXHIBITIONS

7933 N Lincoln Ave, Skokie, IL 60077 // (312) 480-8390 // scott@westernexhibitions.com
Gallery hours: Wednesday to Saturday, 12-6pm and Sunday, 10am-3pm.