



Smithsonian
National Portrait Gallery

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST
ZAK SMITH

“You hear a sad song and everyone knows it’s sad, but a piece of art can be endlessly contested—half of the audience will think it’s sad, half of the audience will think it’s just numb or ironic or deadpan or whatever,” says 29-year-old New York City resident and artist, Zak Smith. Smith is part of a group of contemporary artists on the National Portrait Gallery’s innovative “Portrait of an Artist” Web site, part of the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2006.

“Portrait of an Artist” takes a look at the person behind the art, and this is what Smith emphasizes. “At a certain point you have to take a long view at the thing itself and decide whether it—as an object, not as a reference to someone else’s ideas—is interesting.”

A graduate of Yale University’s Master of Fine Arts program, Zak Smith is not a traditional artist, but rather uses acrylic and ink to bring out the vibrant colors and chaotic atmosphere he incorporates into his paintings. Smith’s competition entry, “Girls in the Naked Girl Business: Aprella,” is an example of this style. “Lately, I’ve been painting people I don’t know and the girls I paint get a percentage of the final price so we are working together. I don’t like to treat people as models. I like to treat them as people for whom I am making a portrait,” Smith says.

When asked if he is chronicling something personal or even generational with his choice of models and settings, Smith answers, “If this is my reputation, it is probably an echo effect of stuff we say to sell the work. Mostly I paint people I know. Anybody can do that. I don’t think I’m chronicling anything more important than anyone else. I like the way things look. Things should look good. I am not at all interested in the sociological aspect of anything.”

Born in Washington, D. C., Smith is the product of a dedicated art education, receiving his BFA from Cooper Union in New York City, before moving on to Yale for his MFA. His art has been featured in solo and group exhibitions all over the world, but Smith says, “Visually, good art doesn’t need a gallery or museum context to be good. If one of my paintings were hung upside down in a bathroom in a bar in Mogadishu, I would want you to be able to say, “Wow, that is an amazing thing.”

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Media: For more information or to schedule an interview with Zak Smith, please contact Vicki Moeser at (202) 357-2627 Ext. 111 or Cheryl Davis at (202) 974-5033 or davisc@ruderfinn.com. For more information on the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2006, please visit www.portraitcompetition.si.edu.