

Greg Parma Smith, "Adult Learning"



Adult Learning 1, detail



Swiss Institute, through Oct 25
(see Soho)

In "Adult Learning," an exhibition of just a few modestly sized canvases, Swiss-American artist Greg Parma Smith conveys a poignant yet ambivalent involvement in academic painting. Through his exactly executed compositions, Smith reveals a penchant for both producing classically beautiful images and breaking down surface appearances. His subject matter—mostly objects found in consumer catalogs—takes on a Jekyll-and-Hyde quality, too, as it embodies both commercial design and high art.

Smith borrows Old Master techniques without irony. In one canvas, an aloe plant in an onyx vase from Pottery Barn is rendered faithfully, but as someone born on the crest of postmodernism—1983—Smith dutifully includes a few oddities: The image covers an actual carnival mask jutting from the canvas like a Halloween decoration, while squiggly lines thick as toothpaste bulge from the underpainting to further disrupt the otherwise smooth picture plane.

Duality continues to be a theme in the show's titular centerpiece, *Adult Learning 1*, a series of nine canvases hung in a grid. Made up of overlapping shapes (an apple, scissors, a dinosaur) and patterns (wood grain, checkerboard, polka dots), these graphic compositions seem more akin to Adobe Illustrator than to oil painting. To underscore the sense of incongruity, Smith has stretched his canvases askew, leaving sections of stretcher bars laid bare. In this cerebral installation, Smith takes traditional painting and turns it sideways, revealing that, for artists today, engaging even the most traditional fine-art motifs can be a very dicey thing.—*Emily Weiner*