

ARTFORUM

Greg Parma Smith Critics Picks

by Sam Pulitzer
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View of “Life Drawings, Poseurs, and ‘thirteen oil paintings on canvas,’” 2012.

If paintings produce painters, how might one understand this painting subject correctly? Certainly correctness is relative to its milieu, so in what sense can painting’s social proprieties be sullied, and, more important, to what reasonable ends? With this in mind, let’s consider Greg Parma Smith’s current exhibition, “Life Drawings, Poseurs, and ‘thirteen oil paintings on canvas.’” In the eleven works on view, this conceptual trio of figurative themes are put to work with wildly disparate results. Painted from nude models, the “Poseurs” offer a United Colors of Benetton-esque collection of bodies rendered on decoratively embossed gesso grounds. The works collected under the heading “Life Drawings” appropriate cells from indie comics in brightly colored compositions that disorient their emphatically autobiographical narrative to artful disarray. Complementing this appropriative line is “thirteen oil paintings on canvas,” which binds together unstretched paintings of thuggish cartoons into an artist’s book that seems to teasingly adapt that quintessential subcultural form, the zine, for the symbolic economy of canvas and oil paint. Throughout, an exacting technical method is present, where musculature is rendered with the same machinic passion as an area of flat color.

Through his own investment in the dedifferentiated technical mark, Parma Smith’s conceptual mobilization of the figurative canvas seems part and parcel to a larger project that seeks to critically antagonize the role that identificatory interests culled from subcultural markets serve to inhibit artistic practices from articulating something of an ethical statement—like a teenager who refuses to leave the cultural hub of his or her bedroom. The dissonances and disorientations between the acculturated bodies figured in these variegated canvases are a barbed offering to a practice whose latest principle of sufficient reason is an idea prompted by David Joselit that, given the post-Fordist economies that circulate its mean(ing)s, painting is beside itself. In Parma Smith’s case, painting is recalcitrantly within itself to the point of bodily discomfort.