

# ARTFORUM

## Greg Parma Smith

by Michael Wilson  
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Greg Parma Smith, *Poseurs 4*, 2011, oil and gesso on canvas, 36 x 48”.

It’s not often that practitioners of academic figure painting are identified as a subculture, but when Greg Parma Smith used the term in relation to such artists in his exhibition “Life Drawings, Poseurs, and ‘thirteen oil paintings on canvas,’” the classification didn’t seem entirely off-the-wall. Juxtaposing nude studies with paintings that sample from comic strips, a handmade book of graffiti-style lettering and imagery, and a cartoonlike wall painting, Smith’s show made a case for connecting stylistically divergent representations of the body to niche interests identified with particular historical moments. And by approaching one usage in the style of another, he aimed to explore ideas around public and private modes of expression.

In the life paintings (the titular “Poseurs,” 2011), Smith’s treatment of his subjects appears conventional. Young men and women are shown positioned in various ways against a succession of featureless backdrops: One sits on a folding chair; the others stand or sit on the floor. The five canvases are competent but bland, seemingly devoid of affect. But look closer and a rogue element emerges. The surface of each canvas is marked by a raised pattern of graphic symbols and line drawings, a kind of iconographic Braille. Stylized renderings of horses’ heads, men wearing hats, and hands wielding pens are mixed with abstract squiggles in a loose arrangement that covers the painting without obscuring their primary subjects. In being naked, the subjects lack the usual markers of subcultural identity, but the bas-relief patterning adds a layer of information redolent of technology, suggesting that the digital mediation of one’s image now impacts it more significantly than even clothing.

In “Life Drawings,” 2010–, the inflected naturalism of “Poseurs” is exchanged for riffs on panels appropriated from a range of comic strips that trace the pleasures and pitfalls of modern love. Scattered across canvas-fronted boards and mirror panels, these fragments of narrative are further abstracted by wild coloration entirely divorced from the modeling of form or the clarification of reading. What we see are part-portraits of already highly stylized figures and lines of dialogue that, while conjuring a general mood and tone, are removed from full expository context.

Also containing an image absent context is *thirteen oil paintings on canvas*, 2012, which takes the form of a book displayed under glass so that just one spread is visible. On the left-hand page, a drawing of a bug-eyed hardcore kid with a do-rag covering his head, a bandanna over his mouth, and a pair of gloves branded with the straight-edge X on his hands confronts the viewer with both fists clenched. The facing page bears a wild-style text in three colors that reads THE FIGURES IN THEIR DRAWINGS LOOK AS IF THEY HAVE BEEN SPATTERED WITH TINY BRUSHES.

Seen in conjunction with the nearby *Untitled*, 2012, a wall painting of a comparably styled character, *thirteen oil paintings* represents yet another way in which images of the figure inevitably become avatars of their users or creators. It reflects, as does all the work in the show, figuration’s varied and surprisingly persistent functionality. In Smith’s hands, the age-old mode is shown to have outlasted its projected obsolescence, remaining stretched across the entirety of culture from the traditional to the specialized to the populist. The figure is out there, he argues; the point is to control it—or at least keep track of it.