

# CURA.

October 2017

## GREG PARMA SMITH HONEY BEAR

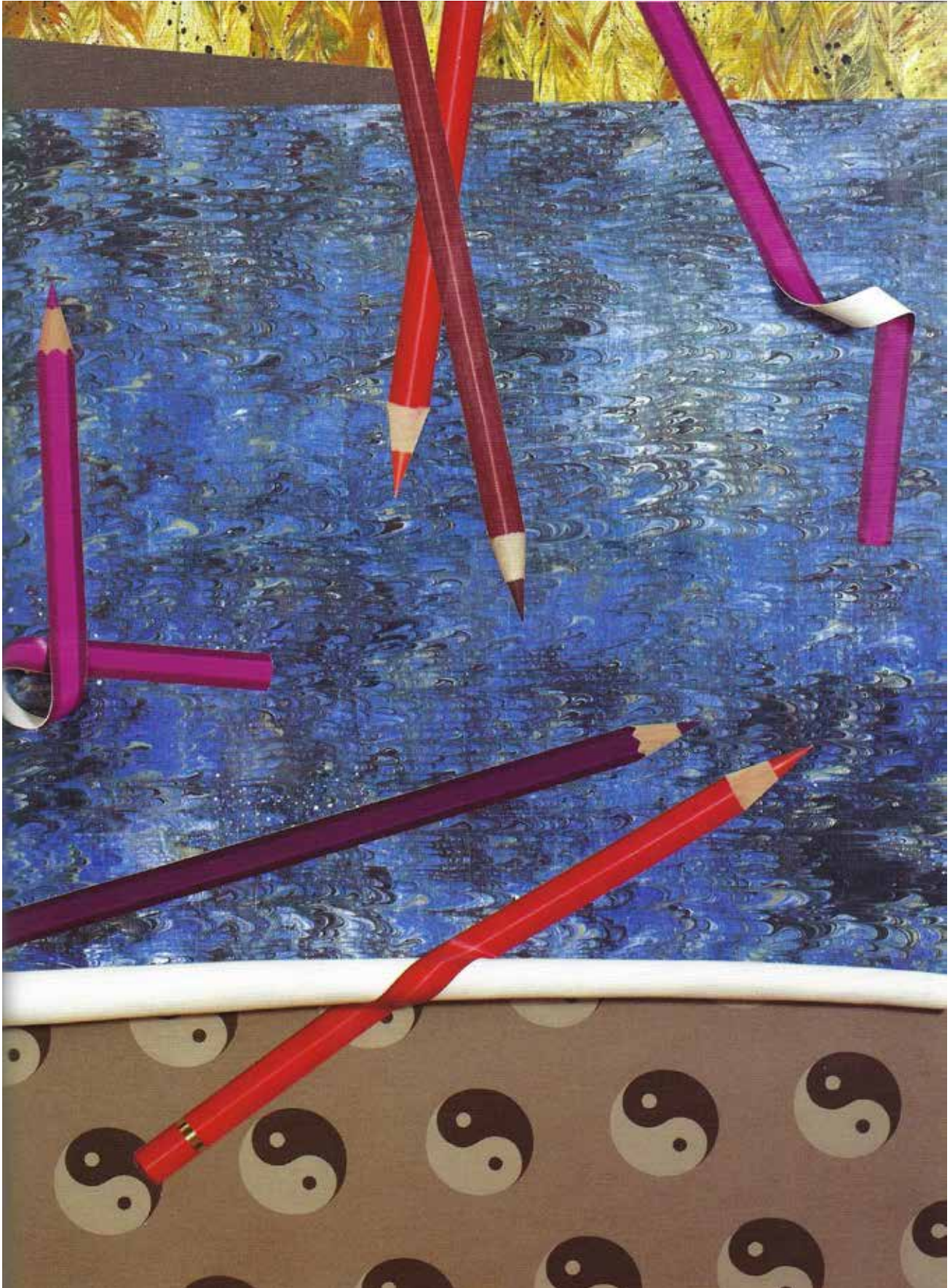
BY LIAM CONSIDINE

To begin at the beginning—one of Greg Parma Smith's earliest mature paintings sticks in my memory not only as a touchstone for his subsequent work, but as a kind of degree zero in an ongoing project to recode cultural symbols at the threshold of realism and artifice. A humble spread set out against an indistinct background of gradated brown hues and illuminated with a sharply angled light, the painting depicts items one might expect to find in a generic holiday or sympathy gift basket—an uncanny arrangement of fruit, cheeses, sugar candies, jams, fruit cookies, wheat crackers and a sentinel, anthropomorphic honey bear that together circumscribe a distinctly American vision of "gourmet" foodstuffs. The artist offers up his remarkable abilities as a delectable array, yet like many of Smith's images, this unassuming still life revolves around a series of juxtapositions: the pliable cheese and the hard, reflective glass jar; the limpid honey and the opaque jug; the milky expanse of Muenster and the sinister black-wrapped sharp cheddar; the carefully nested candies at center and the haphazard cropping of the cookies at the edge. Encompassing these is a disjunction between the exquisite, quasi-photographic realism of Smith's factureless technique and the unremarkable objects he lavishes it upon. But is painting today really like a basket of gourmet cheese—commodified and exchangeable but reserved for special occasions?

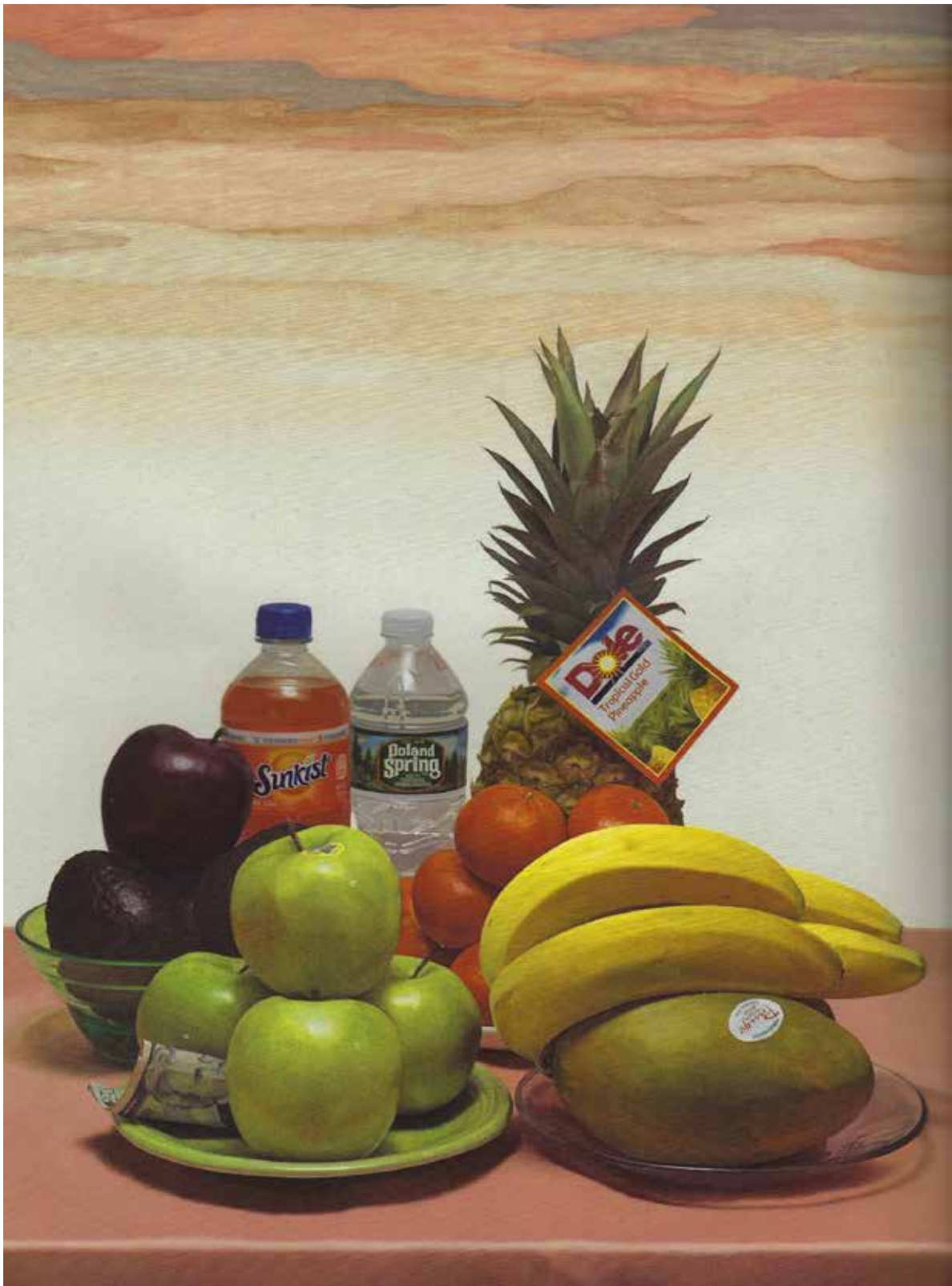
From these formal and symbolic juxtapositions Smith has launched what must rank among the most thoroughgoing contemporary

explorations of the ways in which the materials, techniques, and formats of painting reinforce or clash with hierarchies of genre and taste. Style, a concept shunned by contemporary criticism, is leveraged as a play of visual attractions: what appears to be a game of high and low is in fact a hieroglyphic kaleidoscope that scrambles cultural codes beyond recognition: graffiti writing, comics, neoclassical nudes, Song dynasty painting and *trompe l'oeil* arabesques are marshaled into layered allegories that may or may not become legible. Art supplies—colored pencils, crayons, spray nozzles, wooden drawing mannequins, origami papers—proliferate across topographic surfaces, raising processes and pedagogy as subjects.

*Sung Song* (2015) is emblematic of Smith's layered effects: a central section of canvas, rolled at either ends, shows a pair of turtles rendered in the black and white tones of Chinese literati painting, floating against a stratified rock surface mottled with decorative acrylic and metallic leaf patterning. Beneath the scrolled ends of the top layer—made of canvas, not silk—read the graffitied words of the title, themselves embedded in rock. We expect to find calligraphic characters inked on the margins of Song dynasty scrolls, but here they are sedimented beneath the surface. *Lumpen Underground*, a related piece from the same year, similarly peels back the roots of a gnarled oak tree to reveal two truncated graffiti figures in a stalactite-encrusted cave. Here the class connotation of Smith's image montage becomes overt, although it is unclear whether







the oak is suppressing or drawing sustenance from the thugged-out gnomes underneath. In fact, there is no hierarchy, only a series of ironic reversals that follow the logic of materials: because acrylic does not bind to oil paint, the rain drawn in silver acrylic rain was laid down first, and the stately oak tree was painted around it.

Though clearly influenced by postmodern appropriation art, which banked on the exchangeability of deracinated and homogenized cultural symbols, Smith's images also harken back to an earlier moment in Pop art when handmade images were held in tension with the dematerializing effects of mass media, and the hegemony of the commodity was less than certain. For instance Kiki Kogelnik's layered images, produced with techniques ranging from collage and spray paint to oil, reduced (mostly female) figures to stenciled decorative patterns waiting to be reassembled as virtual bodies. Richard Hamilton's *Pin-up* (1961), which combines Playboy images with collaged photographs and projecting relief elements, similarly plays on the mediatized reification of the female body.

While Pop art, with some exceptions, promoted the objectification of women and racial exclusion, Smith's *Poseurs* prove unsettling for different reasons: they draw on this legacy of the disassembled, hybridized body, but use academic techniques to reassemble it as a race and gender chimera. Like a neoclassical David painting crossed with a Paul McCarthy tomato head, they are at once demotic and deeply antisocial—a trans image of racial coexistence liable to be censored by Instagram. The embossed spider web superimposed on the figure lends dimensionality to the surface, drawing a continuum between the body depicted and the painting-as-body. Yet Smith's *Poseurs* are fundamentally about the irreducible material difference, the *différance* as Derrida would say, between signs and their signifieds. Like a United Colors of Benetton advertisement gone horribly wrong, these works produce difference as estrangement and recalcitrance, restoring use value to the academic nude.

Smith's most recent paintings have seen both a formal return and a thematic expansion. The title of his exhibition *Music of the Spheres* (Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich, April 22-May 27, 2017) gestures towards a mythic harmony of heavenly bodies, yet offers a calcification rather than a reconciliation of opposites. Numinal and visual plenitude are courted with soaring birds surrounded by haloes of plastic jewels, and fruit arrays offered up to an atmospheric celestial expanse. However these are brought down by the signs of commerce: dismal commodities, barcoded product labels and money. In *Offering with Sunkist* (2017), a still-life, the lowest historical genre and sine qua non of oil painting, is set out on a provisional table that doubles as a parapet—a classical threshold of sacred and profane, private and public realms. This is unmistakably a painting about skill and its almost gratuitous appeal at a limit of fullness and emptiness, meaning and meaninglessness. Smith tips the scales by nestling a \$20 into the cleavage of two green apples. This is the love that money can buy.

Offering with Sunkist, 2017 (previous page)  
 Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich  
 Ultimate Colored Pencil Techniques 1,  
 2012 (p. 199) Courtesy: the artist  
 Poseurs 4, 2011 (pp. 200-201)  
 Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York