

# Discussion Guide for the Online Virtual Tour of **Arvie Smith: Scarecrow**

Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University  
January 22 – March 26, 2022

**360° Virtual Exhibition Experience**  
<https://bit.ly/3uvtZpx>

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION**

By John Olbrantz, The Maribeth Collins Director

Arvie Smith (American, born 1938) is a nationally recognized African American painter from Portland, Oregon, who deals with the complex history of social and racial injustices. Born in Houston, Texas, in 1938, the second of three children, Smith moved to Roganville, Texas, with his mother, sister and brother in 1941 after his parents separated. In Roganville, Smith lived with his grandparents and great-grandmother, who was born a slave in South Carolina. Smith attended an all- Black grade school in nearby Clear Creek, where his grandfather was the principal and his grandmother the teacher. Even as a young boy, Smith was fascinated with art and pored over a picture book on Michelangelo that his grandfather had given him when he was eight years old, copying it from cover to cover.

In 1948 Smith and his siblings joined their mother in South Central Los Angeles. He attended all-Black schools and continued to pursue his interest in the visual arts, taking art classes in high school and having his first one-person exhibition at a local Black owned bank that his best friend's mother organized. Smith graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School in 1956, but when he sought to apply for admission to the Otis Art Institute to pursue his interest in art, he was told by the front-desk receptionist, "We don't need your kind here." Instead, Smith enrolled at Los Angeles Community College, where he took classes in art, sociology, and psychology and worked as a hospital orderly.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, Smith worked as a mail carrier, janitor, and psychiatric technician but continued to pursue his interest in the visual arts in his spare time. In 1958 or 1959, he responded to a matchbook ad for the Famous Artist School and was accepted; for a fee of \$300, he received three art books and monthly critiques of his artwork by mail. In the mid-1960s, Smith took night classes in art at UCLA, but by the early 1970s, he moved to the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco. During the mid-1970s, he traveled up the West Coast and lived on communes in British Columbia and Idaho. By 1976, he settled in Portland, Oregon, where he spent the next six years as a psychiatric technician and counselor in a hospital and at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility.

In 1982, Smith fulfilled a lifelong dream by enrolling in the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) in Portland, where he received his BFA degree in 1986. During this time, he met the African American painter Robert Colescott, who would have a profound influence on the development of Smith's mature style, and studied painting and printmaking at the Studio Art Center International and Il Bisonte in Florence, Italy, where he was a teaching assistant in printmaking. He went on to earn his MFA degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore in 1992, where he worked as a teaching assistant for Grace Hartigan, an abstract expressionist painter and director of the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at MICA. Smith taught painting at MICA for a year before he finally returned to Portland in 1995 to teach at PNCA, where he served as a professor of painting until his retirement in 2014. In addition, Smith has taught at the University of Oregon and the Oregon College of Art and Craft.

Smith paints in a figurative, expressionist style. His palette is dominated by bright reds, orange-yellows, browns, and blacks—colors reminiscent of his grandmother's quilts. While his subject matter appears light and innocent and at times, downright cheerful, his work aims to convey the horrors, humiliations, and injustices that Black people have suffered in the United States over the past 450 years. Subjects range from Black stereotypes like Aunt Jemima and the Cream of Wheat chef to representations of Black performers on the Chitlin' Circuit and historically taboo subjects like interracial relationships. Other topics include Smith's African ancestry, slavery, the KKK, and the Jim Crow South. As the artist has commented, "I speak unfettered of my perception of the Black experience. By critiquing atrocities and oppressions and creating images that foment dialogue, I hope my work makes repeating those atrocities and injustices less likely. These are the reasons I paint."

Over the years, Smith has been featured in a number of important solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States, and his works can be found in many public and private collections, including the Portland Art Museum, the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Oregon State University, the University of Maryland Global Campus, the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, the Delaware Museum of Art, the Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, the Nelson Mandela Estate, and others. In 2017, Smith was a recipient of a Governor's Art Award from the State of Oregon; in 2018, he received an honorary doctorate from PNCA; and in the spring of 2022, he will be included in a group exhibition of African American artists at the Venice Biennale in Italy

## **ARTIST STATEMENT**

For the entirety of my career, I have sought to transform the African American experience into provocative paintings that depict deep sympathy for the dispossessed and marginalized in search for beauty, meaning, and equality. I draw from my personal experiences, and present day and historical omissions, violations, and contributions of African Americans. My time growing up in the Jim Crow South laid the blueprint for my life as an artist.

The colors of my grandmother's quilts and African rhythms embedded in African music form the palette for my paintings. From my travels in West Africa, I am impressed by the parallels of the sounds, smells, and images of the Black South and Africa. I draw inspiration from artists like Romare Bearden, Michael Rae Charles, Robert Colescott, Grace Hartigan, Thomas Hart Benton, Palmer Hayden, Jacob Lawrence, Kerry James Marshall, Horace Pippin, Diego Rivera, and Charles White.

Through art there is a freedom and my intent is to address ideas and concerns that affect our humanity. I speak unfettered of my perception of the Black experience. By critiquing atrocities and oppression, by creating images that foment dialogue, I hope my work makes the repeat of those atrocities and injustices less likely. These are the reasons I paint.

*Arvie Smith*

## LOOKING AT THE WORK OF ARVIE SMITH

Focus on a few works in the exhibition – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.

- Describe what you see here.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
  - Where does your eye go first? Why?
  - How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
  - Describe the color – has the artist used it realistically or more expressively (for example: a red face for anger or passion, a green face for envy). Does it create a certain mood?
  - Are the forms and figures flat or modeled? Do they appear realistic? How does the artist's use of line, shape and color contribute to this effect?
  - Where do the forms and figures exist in space (foreground, background, on different planes, etc.)?
- What do you think is happening in the work?
  - Is the work realistic or dreamlike? Or both? Explain.
  - Is there one figure (or figures) that is the focus of the work? What makes it stand out? Size? Color? Facial expression (or lack of facial expression)? Gesture?
  - What is the mood of the work? How has the artist created it?
  - Does there appear to be a relationship between the figures in the work? Explain.
    - Do they seem to be interacting? Share the same space?
    - Why do you think he put these figures together? Do they seem to inhabit the same "story?"
    - Does there seem to be more than one story or scene? If so, are they related? Explain.
  - What objects, figures, and/or symbols has the artist included?
    - What do you think they mean to the artist? Have you seen them in other works in the exhibition? Does the way he has used them in other works contribute to your understanding of them?
    - Does the setting give you a clue as to their meaning?
    - What do *you* think they could mean? What are your own associations with them? Are they personal? Cultural or historical? Do your own associations influence your

interpretation of them? Of the meaning of the work as a whole? Explain.

- Has the way the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis) contributed to your interpretation of the work? Explain.
- Does the title influence your interpretation of the work? Explain.

### **Further Discussion:**

- What images, figures, and symbols do you see repeated in Arvie Smith's work? How does he address cultural stereotypes, including demeaning representations of Black people?
- What themes do you see repeated?
- Discuss the following artist's quote as it relates to a work, or works, in the exhibition:

“My work is informed by public discourse, advertising, news media, pop culture, and daily micro-aggressive assaults on Black people. My paintings reveal normalized and commonly accepted inequities born out of privilege based solely on skin tone. I intend to expose and flip narratives designed to interfere with truth, advancement, and release from the chains that have given rise to a dominance hierarchy.”

- Arvie Smith describes his works as “provocative,” saying, “My voice is art. I try to use it to engage people to maybe think differently. In using that voice, I try to do it in a way that people will hear it.” What role does Smith's work play in the current conversation about race? What is the overall message in Arvie Smith's work?

## LEARN MORE ABOUT ARVIE SMITH

- Artist's website

<https://www.arviesmith.com/>

- *Oregon Art Beat*

<https://www.pbs.org/video/oregon-art-beat-art-beat-update-arvie-smith/>

- In the Spring of 2022, Arvie Smith will be included in a group exhibition of African American artists at the Venice Biennale in Italy.

<https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2021/11/04/galerie-myrtis-exhibiting-black-art-at-the-venice-biennale/>