
Michael Yates

Funding for the processing of this collection was provided by the Getty Foundation and funding for digitization was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

2008 January 8
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art
Title: Hassel Smith papers
Identifier: AAA.smithass
Date: circa 1900-2004  
(bulk 1930-1995)
Extent: 4 Linear feet
Creator: Smith, Hassel, 1915-2007
Language: English

Summary: The papers of Southern California painter and instructor Hassel Smith measure 4 linear feet and date from circa 1900 to 2004 with the bulk of the materials dating from 1930-1995. Found within the papers are correspondence, a transcript of an interview conducted by Jan Butterfield in the 1980s, personal business files, teaching files, writings by Smith and others, sketches, printed materials, and photographs of Smith, his family and friends, and his artwork. There are audio recordings of a lecture series organized by Smith and of reviews of Smith's work. Correspondents include Paule Anglim, Elmer Bischoff, Andre Emmerich, Clyfford Still, Wayne Thiebaud, and many others.

Administrative Information

Provenance

Related Material
Also found in the Archives of American Art is an oral history interview with Hassel Smith conducted by Paul Karlstrom, September 5, 1978 and a video interview with Hassel Smith conducted by Paul Karlstrom, January 15, 1986.

Alternative Forms Available
The bulk of the collection was digitized in 2011 and is available via the Archives of American Art's website. Blank pages, blank versos of photographs, photographs of artwork, duplicates, and medical, legal, and personal financial documents have not been scanned. In most cases, only the cover, title page, and individual relevant pages have been scanned from published materials.
The sound recordings in this collection were digitized for research access in 2011 and are available at the Archives of American Art offices. Researchers may view the original reels for the archival notations on them, but original reels are not available for playback due to fragility.

Processing Information

Portions of the papers were microfilmed upon receipt on reels 2008-2009, 2062, and 3472 - these reels are no longer in circulation. Microfilmed portions were merged with later additions and processed and arranged by Michael Yates in 2007 with funding provided by the Getty Foundation. The collection was prepared for scanning by Judy Ng and fully scanned in 2011 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation


Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center. Contact Reference Services for more information.

Ownership and Literary Rights

The Hassel Smith papers are owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws.

Biographical Note

Hassel Smith (1915-2007) was a California Bay area abstract expressionist painter, painting instructor at the California School of Fine Arts, and a lecturer at the University of California. His students included Roy De Forest, Sonia Gechtoff, and Frank Lobdell. Smith was also associated with the famed Los Angeles Ferus Gallery.

Hassel Smith was born on April 27, 1915, in Sturgis, Michigan, settling later with his family in San Mateo, California. He attended Northwestern University with the intention of becoming a chemist, but switched his majors to English and Art History and graduated in 1936. Returning to California, Smith enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA), and studied with the painter Maurice Sterne.

In 1937, he left school and shared housing with his adopted brother Lewis in the Haight-Ashbury district, where he maintained a studio on Steiner Street. At the same time, as a social worker for the California Relief State Administration, he worked with men on "skid row" in San Francisco. Declared 4F by the draft board, Smith served various government agencies during World War II, including the Farm Security Administration and the U.S. Forest Service. During this period, he met and married June Meyers. He later described his government service and social work as having a strong influence on his art and politics.

In 1941, Smith was awarded the Abraham Rosenberg Fellowship from the University of California, Berkeley, which allowed him to travel and paint outdoors at Angel's Camp in the Mother Lode of the Sierra foothills, along with Richard Hackett.

At the end of the war, Smith began teaching at the CSFA, joining faculty members Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and Clyfford Still. Smith taught there until 1952. His students included Roy De Forest, Sonia
Gechtoff, and Frank Lobdell. Smith continued to paint and exhibit work throughout the 1950s, and in 1958 became affiliated with the Ferus Gallery founded by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz. His wife June passed away in 1958. One year later, Smith remarried Donna Rafferty Harrington, and they had their son Bruce in 1960.

After an exhibition at the New Arts Gallery in Houston, London-based dealer Charles Gimpel invited Smith to exhibit his work in England. As a result of this, Smith moved to England in 1962, and spent a year living in Mousehole, a fishing village in Cornwall. He moved back to California and between 1963 to 1966 was a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1966, Smith accepted a position as Senior Lecturer at the West England College of Art in Bristol, England where he stayed until 1978. He finished his teaching career as a Principal Lecturer at the Cardiff College of Arts in Wales from 1978 to 1979.

Smith spent most of the next two decades painting and exhibiting, which included exhibitions at the Oakland Museum and the San Jose Museum of Art. In 1991, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the San Francisco Art Institute (formerly the California School of Fine Arts). Due to failing health, Smith was forced to stop painting in 1997. Smith died in 2007 in Warminster, England, at the age of 91.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Southern California painter and instructor Hassel Smith measure 4 linear feet and date from circa 1900 to 2004 with the bulk of the materials dating from 1930-1995. Found within the papers are correspondence, a transcript of an interview conducted by Jan Butterfield in the 1980s, personal business files, teaching files, writings by Smith and others, sketches, printed materials, and photographs of Smith, his family and friends, and his artwork. There are audio recordings of a lecture series organized by Smith and of reviews of Smith's work. Correspondents include Paule Anglim, Elmer Bischoff, Andre Emmerich, Clyfford Still, Wayne Thiebaud, and many others.

Biographical materials include biographical sketches, curriculum vitae, genealogical materials, ephemera, and personal appointment books from the mid to late 1970s. Also found here is a transcript of an in-depth interview of Smith conducted by Jan Butterfield in the 1980s.

There is personal and professional correspondence with Paule Anglim, Elmer Bischoff, Andre Emmerich, Charles Gimpel of Gimpel Fils, Clyfford and Patricia Still, Kathryn Swanson of the New Arts Gallery, Wayne Thiebaud, family members, and many others.

Personal business records include art sales records, exhibition checklists, conservation and condition reports, and personal finance records. Teaching materials include class schedules, student lists, and syllabi. Also found are notes on topics such as American art and literature, artistic traits and forms, illusion, and women artists.

Writings by Smith include artist statements, creative writings, his thoughts on the art market and art institutions, the San Francisco art community, and social criticism. Writings by others consist primarily of essays about Smith and his work. There are also writings by Smith's friend Robert Wollard. Artwork includes sketches, doodles, and Christmas cards done by Smith, and a handful of artwork by others.

Printed materials include clippings, exhibition announcements and catalogs, and posters. Also found here are printed materials about other artists, schools where Smith enrolled or taught, Smith's general interests, and collages and flyers by Robert Wollard. There is a printed copy of the pictorial edition of the Communist Manifesto edited by Smith and other artists.
Photographic materials are of Smith, family members, artwork, his studio, exhibition openings and other art events, and friends and colleagues. A family photograph dates from circa 1900 and negatives date from 1920. Most of the photographs date from the 1940s through the 1990s.

Sound recordings include 1 sound tape reel of the radio show, Art Review, with host John Fitz Gibbon reviewing Smith’s artwork, and nine sound cassettes of student critiques overseen by Smith at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 9 series.

- Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1930-2004 (0.25 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1930s-2003 (1.0 linear foot; Boxes 1-2)
- Series 3: Personal Business Materials, 1953-2003 (0.25 linear feet; Box 2)
- Series 4: Teaching Materials, 1960s-1980s (18 folders; Box 2)
- Series 5: Writings, 1940s-1994 (0.25 linear feet; Box 2)
- Series 6: Artwork, 1928-1995 (8 folders; Box 2)
- Series 7: Printed Materials, 1928-2003 (1.25 linear feet; Boxes 3-4)
- Series 8: Photographic Materials, 1900s-2004 (0.5 linear feet; Box 4)
- Series 9: Sound Recordings, 1965-1980 (10 items; Box 4)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

- **Subjects:**
  - Abstract expressionism
  - Art -- California -- San Francisco Bay Area
  - Art -- Study and teaching
  - Art teachers -- California -- Berkeley
  - Art, American
  - Artists’ studios -- Photographs
  - Educators -- California -- Berkeley
  - Painters -- California
  - Women artists

- **Types of Materials:**
  - Christmas cards
  - Interviews
  - Photographs
  - Sketches
  - Sound recordings
  - Transcripts

- **Names:**
  - Anglim, Paule
  - Butterfield, Jan
Emmerich, André
Fitz Gibbon, John
Gimpel Fils
Gimpel, Charles
New Arts (Art gallery)
San Francisco Art Institute -- Faculty
Still, Clyfford, 1904-
Still, Patricia
Swanson, Kathryn
Thiebaud, Wayne
Wollard, Robert
Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1930-1990, 2004

0.25 Linear feet (Box 1)

Biographical materials include biographical sketches, curriculum vitae, interview questions for an interview with Paul Karlstrom, a transcript of an in-depth interview with Jan Butterfield, and a questionnaire about Smith's career with responses. Also found are appointment books from 1974-1978, school ephemera, genealogical materials, loose notes, addresses, and miscellaneous papers related to organizations Smith belonged to.

Materials are arranged by document type.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 1  Address Book, circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 2  Addresses, circa 1950s-1980s
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 3  Addresses, circa 1950s-1980s
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 4  Addresses, circa 1950s-1980s
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 5  Appointment Book, 1974-1975
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 6  Appointment Book, 1975-1976
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 7  Appointment Book, 1976-1977
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Box 1, Folder 8  Appointment Book, 1977-1978
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Box 1, Folder 9  Art Students League of San Francisco, 1935
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Box 1, Folder 13  Business Card, 1936
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Box 1, Folder 14  College Materials, 1936
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Box 1, Folder 15  Curriculum Vitae, 1964-1990s
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Box 1, Folder 16  Drivers License, 1970
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Box 1, Folder 17  Fundraiser, 2004
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Box 1, Folder 18  Genealogical Materials, 1960s
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Box 1, Folder 19  High School Materials, 1931-1932
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Box 1, Folder 20  Interview Questions, Paul Karlstrom with Hassel Smith, 1986
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 21  Interview Transcript, Jan Butterfield with Hassel Smith, circa 1980s
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Box 1, Folder 22  Maps, circa 1950s-1970s
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Series 2: Correspondence, 1930s-2003

1 Linear foot (Boxes 1-2)

This series consists of Smith's correspondence with family, artists, former students, galleries, universities, and friends. Among the correspondents are artists Elmer Bischoff, Wayne Thiebaud, and Clyfford and Patricia Still, as well as art dealers Paule Anglim, Andre Emmerich, Charles Gimpel, and Kathryn Swanson of the New Arts Gallery. Family correspondence is from Smith's second wife, Donna, his sons Joseph and Bruce, and his stepsons Mark and Stephen.

Additional letters are from friends, including Henri Lenoir, the founder of the San Francisco bohemian Vesuvio Cafe, and artist and writer Robert Wollard. Wollard letters are not only written as himself, but also as various characters associated with the "Natural Surrealist Party" and the Firesign Theatre. Also of interest are a letter to Thomas Albright in response to Albright's review of a Smith exhibition, and letters to Lawrence Ferlinghetti discussing the provenance of Smith's paintings in Ferlinghetti's possession. There is a group of illustrated letters sent to Smith upon the release of Hassel Smith: Drawings and Poems in 1999. These include letters from Frank Lobdell, Nathan Oliveira, and Wayne Thiebaud.

Named files were established for those correspondents with more than scattered letters. The remaining correspondence is filed in general alphabetical files.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

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0.25 Linear feet (Box 2)

Personal business records document Smith's finances, exhibitions, and his business with galleries and museums. There are also records related to his personal finances. Found are consignment forms, records of gifts, price lists, exhibition checklists, guest lists, loan records, shipping records, condition reports, conservation reports, and court records from a case against the Iannetti/Lanzone Gallery.

Materials are arranged by document type.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. Personal finance, legal, and medical records have not been scanned.

Box 2, Folder 38  Agreements, 1978-1993
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Series 4: Teaching Materials, 1960s-1980s

18 Folders (Box 2)

Teaching materials includes Smith's notes on art and art history, student handouts, syllabi, employment information, and administrative documents. There are surprisingly few records in this series, given the extent of Smith's teaching career and lectures. There do not appear to be any records in his papers documenting his teaching career in England.

Materials are arranged by document type.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

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Box 2, Folder 88  Subject/Object, circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 89  Syllabi, 1968-1970
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 90  Women Artists, circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)
Series 5: Writings, 1940s-1994

0.25 Linear feet (Box 2)

Writings and fragments by Smith concern the art market, art institutions, and social criticism. Of special interest is a lengthy essay by Smith about the art community in San Francisco.

Writings by others include essays about Smith and his work, and quotations and essays by artists and critics. Also found are writings by friends Henri Lenoir and Robert Wollard, an entry from the journal of his son Joseph, and essays about art and literature in San Francisco.

Materials are arranged by author and writing title/subject.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 2, Folder 91 [Al and Phyllis], circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 92 Alphabet For Adults, circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 93 Aphorisms, circa 1940s-1960s
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 94 The Appeal to Reason, circa 1960s-1970s
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Box 2, Folder 95 Art in Action, circa 1952
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Box 2, Folder 96 Artist Statements, circa 1960s-1980s
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Box 2, Folder 97 Artists and Information Theory, circa 1960s-1970s
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Box 2, Folder 98 Fragments, circa 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 99 Letters of Recommendation, 1977-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 100 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 101 [The Middle Class], 1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 102 The Nettlecomb Exhibition, 1994
Box 2, Folder 103  
[On Art Criticism and Galleries], circa 1960s-1970s

Box 2, Folder 104  
[On Article By Patrick Heron], circa 1970s

Box 2, Folder 105  
[On Painting], 1977

Box 2, Folder 106  
[On the Los Angeles County Museum of Art], 1977

Box 2, Folder 107  
On the San Francisco School of Painting, circa 1956

Box 2, Folder 108  
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Box 2, Folder 109  
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Recent Pronouncements, 1952

Box 2, Folder 111  
[Restraint/Chance/Pattern], circa 1950s-1970s

Box 2, Folder 112  
[Sebastapolecats], 1950s

Box 2, Folder 113  
[Statements and Quotations By Hassel Smith and Others], 1970s-1980s

Box 2, Folder 114  
"Lilly Fenichel" by Robert Duncan, 1981

Box 2, Folder 115  
[Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson], circa 1960s-1970s

Box 2, Folder 116  
"Hassel Smith's Resistance" by Chelsea Gilmore, 1994
Box 2, Folder 117  
[From *The Literary World of San Francisco and Its Environ* by Don Herron], 1985

Box 2, Folder 118  
"Cookie, You're Number One" by Henri Lenoir, circa 1980-1986

Box 2, Folder 119  
"Letter to the Editor" by Henri Lenoir, 1980s

Box 2, Folder 120  
"Hassel Smith" by Douglas Macagy, circa 1950s-1970s

Box 2, Folder 121  
"American Artists Exhibition" by Maggie Mash, 1976

Box 2, Folder 122  
"Hassel Smith" by Bruce Nixon, 1994

Box 2, Folder 123  
"How Black Was the Cat" by Anne Frisbie O'Neil, circa 1950s-1980s

Box 2, Folder 124  
[Picasso Quotations], circa 1960s-1980s

Box 2, Folder 125  
"A Conversation With Hassel Smith" by Kevin Power, circa 1970s-1980s

Box 2, Folder 126  
"Myths and Rituals of the Avant Garde" by Harold Rosenberg, circa 1950s-1970s

Box 2, Folder 127  
"Movement For Rethinking Art and Design Education" by Pilar Saizar, circa 1970s

Box 2, Folder 128  
[Journal Entry] by Joseph Smith, 1980

Box 2, Folder 129  
[Leo Stein quote], 1947

Box 2, Folder 130  
"Hassel Smith" by Allan Temko, 1975
Box 2, Folder 131  [Possible Transcript of an Interview], 1961

Box 2, Folder 132  "Su-dra the Lion" by [unknown], circa 1940s-1960s

Box 2, Folder 133  [Writings by Robert Wollard], circa 1960s-1980s
Series 6: Artwork, 1928-1995

8 Folders (Box 2)

Scattered artwork by Smith includes handmade family Christmas cards, doodles and sketches, a folded paper fortune teller, and an exhibition announcement with humorous pen additions. Also found is artwork by others including Elmer Bischoff and Robert Wollard.

Materials are arranged by artist and document type.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 2, Folder 134  Altered Postcard, 1987
  Image(s)
  Exhibition announcement for Hassel Smith/Charles Strong with pen additions.

Box 2, Folder 135  Christmas Cards, 1928-1932
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 136  Doodles, circa 1940s-1980s
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 137  Fortune Teller, circa 1930s-1970s
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 138  Sketches, circa 1930s-1960s
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 139  Artwork by Others

Box 2, Folder 139  Elmer Bischoff, 1995
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 140  Robert Wollard, circa 1960s
  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 141  Relatives [?], circa 1950s-1970s
  Image(s)
## Series 7: Printed Materials, 1928-2003

1.25 Linear feet (Boxes 3-4)

Printed materials include clippings; exhibition announcements and catalogs about Smith and other artists; menus; a poster; and pamphlets and flyers from the California School of Fine Arts, the Mother Lode School run by Smith, and Bristol Polytechnic. There are also miscellaneous printed materials related to Smith's interests in music and politics, including a copy of the pictorial edition of the *Communist Manifesto* edited by Smith.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. In most cases, only the cover, title page, and individual relevant pages have been scanned from published materials.

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Series 8: Photographic Materials, circa 1900, 1941-2004

0.5 Linear feet (Box 4)

Photographic materials are of Smith, his family, his wife Donna, and his sons and stepsons. Found are photographs of Smith's artwork from different periods in his career, of exhibition installations and receptions, and of Smith's studios. Photographs of others include Robert and Mary Fuller McChesney, Kathryn Swanson, and Elmer Bischoff's wife and son. Also found are photographs of Smith teaching at a Summer Art School in Sonoma County, California in 1955, and at the College of Notre Dame in Belmont, California in 1988. Reproductions of artwork by others include David Park, Henri Lenoir, Cornelius Sampson, and Smith's stepson, Mark Harrington.

Materials are arranged by subject.

Original photographs have been scanned. Negatives, slides, and unannotated photographs of artwork have not been scanned.

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Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 38  Hassel Smith, 1960s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 39  Hassel Smith, 1970s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 40  Hassel Smith, 1980s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 41  Hassel Smith, 1990s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 42  Hassel and Donna Smith, 1960s-1970s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 43  Hassel and Donna Smith, 1980s-1990s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 44  Donna Smith, 1960s-1990s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 45  Smith Family, 1900s-1930s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 46  Smith Family, 1970s
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 47  Smith Family, 1990s
Box 4, Folder 48  Hassel Smith with Robert and Mary McChesney, 1950s-1990s Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 49  Friends and Colleagues, 1920s-1960s Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 50  Friends and Colleagues, 1980s-2000s Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 51  Architecture and Travel, 1930s-1980s Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 52  Summer Art School, 1955 Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 53  Student Work, Slides, 1980-1981 Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 54  Teaching, circa 1988 Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 55  Studio, 1945-1970 Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 56  Studio, 1980s Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 57  Studio, 1990s Image(s)

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Box 4, Folder 61  Studio, 1999 Image(s)

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Series 9: Sound Recordings, 1965-1980

10 Folders (Box 4)

Sound recordings include 1 sound tape reel of the radio show, Art Review, with host John Fitz Gibbon reviewing Smith's artwork, and nine sound cassettes of student critiques overseen by Smith at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Materials are arranged in chronological order.

The sound recordings have been digitized for research access and are available at the Archives of American Art offices.

Box 4, Folder 79  
John Fitz Gibbon Reviews Hassel Smith, 1965  
(1 sound tape reel)  

Image(s)  
Radio show, Art Review, broadcast through Pacifica Radio on KPFA and KPFB out of Berkeley, California. Host John Fitz Gibbon reviews Smith's work, his influences (Clyfford Still, among others), and his recent works.

Box 4, Folder 80  
San Francisco Art Institute Student Critiques, 1980  
(9 sound cassettes)  

Sound recordings of student critiques by Peter Linenthal, John Corzan, Ricardo Tringali, Sabrina Ott, Peggy Simon, Jeff Richardson, Joshua Gallup, Joe Smith, Rick Camic, and Toshi Oi.

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