Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" takes on a new resonance in the work of **Robin Smith**.

the human presence

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

EXCEPTIONALLY MODEST, reserved to a fault and largely unknown outside her immediate circle, Robin Smith is, nonetheless, one of the finest portrait/figure painters working today. Together with her instructors and mentors Harvey Dinnerstein, Dan Gheno and Mary Beth McKenzie, Smith has contributed to the reinvention of portrait painting in America, making it an infinitely democratic and individualistic art form. Life-sized and nearly life-sized figures cover every inch of her studio walls; with boundless energy, she has created a cross-sectional vision of our contemporary world.

OPPOSITE: "Often, letting models try their own poses, wearing the clothes they walked in with, makes for the best subjects," says Smith. Such was the case with the model for ***Pedro*** (oil on canvas, 48x30), with his slouching posture and black hoodie.

A Narrow Swath

Artistically, Smith has cut herself a narrow swath—she paints almost exclusively figures, whether clothed or nude, seated or standing—but that swath is incredibly deep. In this respect, she is much like the landscape painter, John Constable, who, in response to a comment that he stuck to basically one subject—the acreage constituting his father's farmland—said, "I imagine myself driving a nail; I have driven it some way and, by persevering, I may drive it home; by quitting it to attack others, though I may amuse myself, I do not advance beyond the first, while that particular nail stands still. No man who can do any one thing well will be able to do any other different thing equally well."

Historically, Smith's work most resembles that of Thomas Eakins', who painted sympathetic, penetrating portraits of his friends and members of his social circle, as opposed to that of John Singer Sargent's, who received payment from the sitter. Smith does not paint portraits on commission; her models being paid rather than paying. Thus she retains control over her artistic response, which is invariably insightful and sympathetic. Smith's humanity and empathy come through, as did Eakins's. Only rarely is she unable to find some point of interest in a model. If that occurs, she turns her attention to the space of the studio itself: its light, the "gray smoke" in the corner of the room or the common studio objects—easels, chairs, spotlights—that make up this familiar and much beloved environment.

MATERIALS

Drawing: extra-soft vine charcoal

Surface: thick, preprimed cotton duck or linen with additional acrylic gesso applied

Oil paint: mostly **Old Holland**, some **Winsor & Newton**

Palette: flake white (to mark lightest passages), Mars black (to correct the drawing), Naples yellow, cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow, cadmium orange, cadmium red, alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, viridian, yellow ochre, raw sienna, **Winsor & Newton** light red, raw umber, **Vasari** red umber,

Brushes: **Robert Simmons** bristle brushes, **Utrecht** series 212 kolinsky sables, **Princeton** Snap! flats, filberts and brights of all sizes

Medium: **Winsor & Newton** Liquin

At Home at the League

Crucial to Smith's work is her deep connection to the Art Students League of New York. When she first signed up for Richard Pionk's pastel class at the League, she said that she felt as if she had "died and gone to heaven." After having studied there for many years, she made it her working home by becoming a monitor for two full-time classes. This position satisfied all of her artistic needs: a huge inventory of affordable models, the companionship of other students, and the criticism and guidance of invaluable teachers. Smith has populated an entire artistic world with the models she has encountered at the League. "I have always been drawn to the human presence," she says. "For instance, I don't do landscapes. When I once painted in the park, I ended up painting the people on the park bench."

Respecting the Model

In her cross section of the contemporary world,

RIGHT: Each day, the hair of the model for ***Pidgeon*** (oil on canvas, 40x30) would be a little different, but on one particular day, Smith felt the abstract shape of the hair was especially right for the subject's saucy attitude. "I like it when the model changes naturally from day to day," says Smith. "It offers me a wide range of possibilities."

Smith addresses the entire range of humanity: male and female, young and old, lithe and obese, mainstream and its exceptions. Like Velásquez, she treats them all with dignity and empathy. She notes that they present themselves with personal energy that reveals who they are and how they face—or do not face—the world. Every gesture communicates character.

She observes the models closely from the moment they walk into the room, noting what they wear and how they stand or sit. There is a minimum of intervention on her part because she feels that direction leads to artificiality. "I used to be very controlling about poses," says Smith. "I'd have a preconceived idea and try to force the model to conform. Over time, I've exerted much less control, letting models try their own ideas, doing what's natural to them. It's rare that they don't come with something that really excites me."

Intuitive Approach

While some painters buttress their work with preparation and calculation, Smith's work is deeply intuitive. Throughout her process, she uses her feelings as her visual and emotional compass, *listening* to the painting for feedback. Sometimes this internal dialogue is harmonious, sometimes acrimonious; sometimes it's just a mystery. "I'm constantly checking in with my feelings," she says. "Something either does or doesn't feel like the model."

Smith proceeds by trial and error, playing with serendipity. In this manner, she winnows out whatever is fake, whatever is done solely for effect. "I hate 'techniquey' things," she says. "I try to experiment and take chances, even taking drastic measures when I feel they're necessary. When I'm unhappy with something, I feel it's better to risk ruining the painting than to stick with something I'm dissatisfied with."

The Artist's Touch

The thing that allows experts to distinguish one person's signature from another's is the same thing that allows us to identify even the smallest passage of a particular artist's work—the artist's touch. Whether the look of the work is hard or soft, clear or fuzzy, quiet or strident, it all comes down to this: the ultimate beauty of an artist's work lies in his or her touch.

Smith's feeling for touch goes all the way back to the way she prepares her surface. The extent to which a surface allows a brushstroke to glide, as opposed to offering resistance, is hugely important to her. She uses gesso-primed cotton duck or, when money allows, linen. She prefers acrylic gesso, not only because it dries quickly, but also because its absorbency offers resistance to the brush. She finds that her brush slides too much on oil-primed surfaces, which makes her feel out of control.

Starting with a roll of preprimed canvas, she adds more gesso with a roller and then flattens the gesso with a painting knife. "Invariably, there are ridges left," says Smith, "but I've learned to capitalize on the added texture." She then tones the canvas with acrylic, usually in a neutral earth color or something consonant with what will be the dominant tone of the painting.

Simple, Exacting Drawing

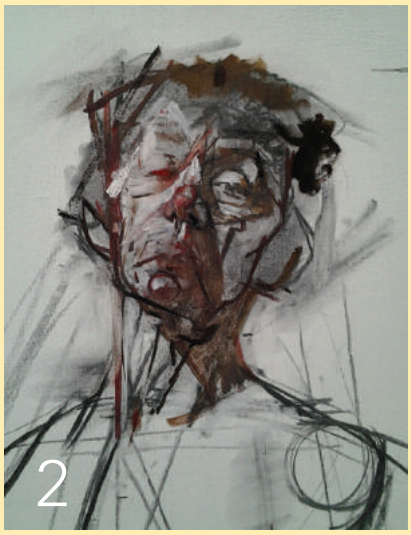
Once the canvas is toned, Smith begins by drawing broadly in charcoal. In this way

Text continued on page ••

ABOVE: Smith usually includes more detail in a painting than she did in ***Jon*** (oil on canvas, 40x30), but she found that putting all the features in this subject's face countered the dreamy, contemplative feeling of relaxing with a cup of coffee that she wanted to convey.

Modeling the Figure

BY ROBIN SMITH



1. Sketch in charcoal: With extra-soft vine charcoal, I loosely laid in the head, torso and a hint of the legs. I spent about three hours on this sketch, using plumb lines and abstracted angles to find proportional relationships between the body parts.

2. Establish proportions: Having laid in a loose approximation of the figure, I shifted to drawing with paint. I generally try to nail down the proportions of the head and facial features and then use those measurements to help me find the size of the torso and body parts.

3. Block in major shapes: I continued blocking in the figure. I like to establish my major value shapes early, massing in the shadow shapes broadly, looking for the big abstract shapes they make and filling in the background with color.

4. Push contrasts; explore volume: I deepened the background further to help bring out the effect of the bright light falling on the figure. I also explored the volumes of the model's form, by letting my lines wrap around the figure in cross contours.

5. Set light values with white: I used a painting knife loaded with flake white to work out the light side of the face. I like painting with a knife because I can get fine lines with the side of the knife, make crisp triangular shapes with the flat trowel shape, or drag a loaded knife over dry paint. The thickness of the application allows me to then go back in, scraping into the paint with the end of a brush handle or blending a think application into a neighboring thinly painted area. I also like the expressiveness of thick paint. When this thick, whitish paint is dry, I often glaze over it with transparent color.

6. Address the darks: With the broad masses established, I began working out my dark accents. I looked for anatomical details and smaller plane changes.

7. Tune contrasts and harmonies: I started subduing some of my initial construction lines while looking for harmonies within the separate light and dark masses. I further darkened the background to increase its contrast where the upper part of the body faces the light.

8. Make final adjustments: I continued to develop the halftones and lights, building up the paint quality throughout the canvas. I added more mass, color and detail to the hair, shifted the subject's right hand slightly and further developed both hands. I also added movement lines to the background. Here you see the completed piece ***Julie*** (oil on canvas, 48x30).

Text continued from page ••
she can work out all the major structural decisions—composition, proportions and gesture—before thinking about color. The charcoal drawing functions as a linear map telling her where her color will go.

Even though this initial drawing is broad and simple, its execution is rigorous. With a viewfinder made from a diagonally cut framing mat, she considers where to place the large shapes within the rectangle of the canvas. With a stick or ruler, she plots the shapes and corrects proportions. When the drawing is in place, she fixes the charcoal with hair spray so it won't come off in the paint.

Distinctive Technique

One factor that gives Smith's figures such presence is that she gravitates toward the life-size. When the painted head is the same size as the real head, there is an immediate identification with the subject that is palpable.

Another distinction is that her primary goal is to create powerful form. "Structural solidity is what I am after most—I can't stand things being mushy. Given the opportunity, I'll make things into geometric shapes, and the fewer and more powerful these shapes, the better."

Also of note concerning Smith's painting technique is that, early on, she will identify the lightest areas of the figure and establish them in broad passages of flake white (see *Peter 1*, page ••). Generally, she will eventually paint over this white, either with more color-saturated opaque mixtures or with glazed-on transparent color. The white acts as if it were a light bulb under the surface, radiating light from below so as to contribute to the overall glow of the skin tones.

As Smith establishes the lightest areas, she also makes corrections to her drawing with straight black paint or another dark color, so there is a tremendous range of value right from the beginning.

While Smith feels confident about her value decisions, she admits she is much more tentative about her warm/cool judgments. "Hue," she says, "has always been much harder for me than value."

Smith has a marked preference for dry, "pasty" paint. "I like it so dry," she says, "that I need to apply it with a painting knife or with sturdy bristle brushes—brushes tough enough for me to really bear down. I don't like oily pigments at all. Like the oil-primed canvas, they are too slick."

That being said, she will occasionally introduce a glaze into select areas of the painting. She prefers Winsor & Newton Liquin as a glazing medium because it dries so quickly. Liquin also helps her oil out (even out the oil content in the pigments on the painting surface) so she can make passages merge when she paints wet over dry. It was Harvey Dinnerstein who introduced her to Liquin to assuage her tendency to destroy her work. Before that, she would often erase days' worth of painting she felt was going badly.

The Second Week

Almost all of Smith's paintings are completed within three weeks, or 45 hours with the model. Smith's allegiance to "what's in front of her" does not allow her to do much work without the model. She tends to work out the faces first, fulfilling her need to get a "hook" on the painting—to feel "right" about one part of the piece—before moving on.

Even when paintings get off to a strong start, Smith admits that the second week of work is usually the most difficult. "There's

BELOW: "I had planned on doing a full-color portrait," says Smith, "but I liked the stark effect of the flake white applied with my painting knife, and I felt it showed the form well. Anything more on ***Peter 1*** (oil on canvas, 14x11) would have detracted from or covered the texture I love so much."

always a crisis—I feel I have to make major changes, to try something radical, and then I either accept it or move on. In the second week there is the realization that the painting is never going to be what I set out to do. I always hate the painting during that time because I invariably realize my own limitations. Then, by the third week, I give over control and don't try to fight it."

Opposition and Appreciation

What makes Smith's work so enduringly satisfying is that it juxtaposes several opposing states and then reconciles them. One of the most apparent of these oppositions is finished and nonfinished. Smith places a finely rendered area of form next to an area of raw, unmodulated paint. Such juxtapositions are not just visually exciting—they also allude to a deeper opposition, that between the image and the process. Smith is torn between the desire to render things to a high level of verisimilitude and the need to keep the viewer from forgetting that he or she is looking at a painting, something that's ultimately built up of nothing but marks, lines and colored shapes. She insists that the viewer remember that any finished image is the accretion of hundreds of small and large decisions, stops and starts, and changes of mind. Smith builds and then defaces; she wants the viewer to sense her moving forward, but also retreating, to regroup and push up another avenue of thought. "This is why I love Degas so much," says Smith, "because of the way he melded so many conflicting views. He loved Ingres and he loved Delacroix—fusing those two styles was one of his life's great projects."

In fact, Smith expresses a deep appreciation for all of her teachers. "Anytime anyone gives me something, I love him," she says, and she passes on this warmth and generosity of spirit to her models through her paintings.

ABOVE: "Folds in clothing change with each 20-minute modeling session," says Smith. "With works like ***Peter 2*** (oil on canvas, 30x30), I try to sieze upon those wrinkles that best describe the underlying forms.

Robert Henri, one of the Art Students League's greatest teachers, was thinking about what went into a great painting of the model when he wrote, "To start with a deep impression, the best, the most interesting, the deepest you can have of the model; to preserve this vision throughout the work; to see nothing else; to admit of no digression from it." Henri could very well have been talking of Smith's work. ■

EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN's work can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He's currently on the faculty of both the Art Students League of New York and Columbia University. Learn more at www.ephraimrubenstein.com.

Meet Robin Smith

Robin Smith studied at the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence) and, while working as a graphic artist, at the State University of New York at Purchase College. She's also studied in New York City at the National Academy Museum and School and the Art Students League, where she currently monitors two classes. Her work is in several private and public collections, including the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut. Alex Adams Gallery in New York City represents her work. Visit Smith's website at www.robinsmithartist.com.