



## 2.17 / Stored Energy

# Conversation with Dean Smith

By Bruno Fazzolari *May 17, 2011*

Image: thought form #11, 2005; colored pencil on paper; 37.25 x 50 in. Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Ben Blackwell

In the mid 1990s, Dean Smith left behind a painting practice that was largely material-based to create large-scale graphite drawings. Retaining the emphasis on process, he shifted his focus from manipulating material to manipulating the operations of drawing. Deploying fields of meticulous and precise mark-making to create a variety of forms, the work evokes a range of associations, from strange hybrids of obscure scientific data charts to ecstatic tantric painting and/or computer models for some sort of possibly harmful alien product line. Over the years, Smith's work has charted a trajectory of increasing conceptual and visual complexity by exploring and often undermining the nature of these forms and their interrelationship with the marks that create them.

The word “abstract” is a very loose descriptor for Smith's work, and the lack of a term to put a finer point on what type of abstraction it is only highlights the fact that the critical dialogue surrounding abstract and non-objective art has failed to keep pace with the ever diversifying complexity of the enterprises it considers. Smith participates in abstraction in a very specific way, and he does so by navigating the complex terrain for how images are understood on a cognitive level by viewers. I spoke with him in his West Oakland studio about his inspirations, sources, and process. We also discussed his friendship with Bruce Conner, for whom he worked in the last years of Conner's life.

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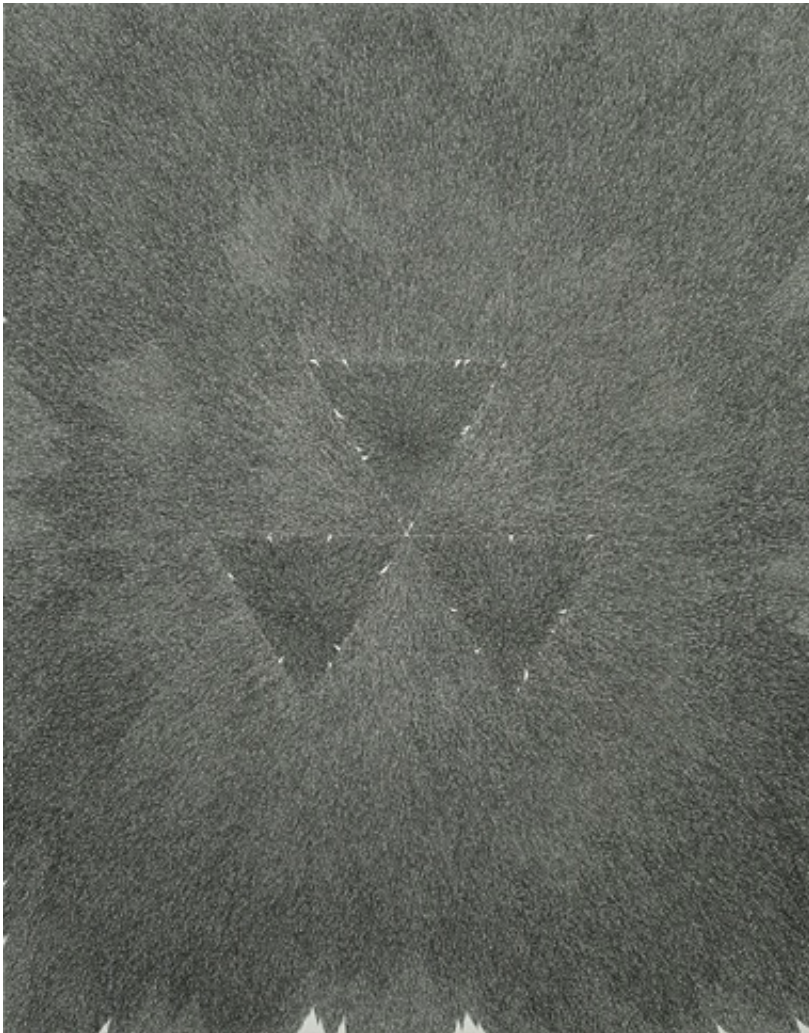
**Bruno Fazzolari:** Your drawings sometimes recall diagrams, maps or structural models. Do you look at those things?

**Dean Smith:** Well, scientific illustration has always interested me in a very broad way. I'm interested in everything—from representations of exotic animals and plants to depictions of cosmological phenomena. But I'm most interested in images made prior to the mid-nineteenth century. There's often a crude quality to the way the information was translated into visual form. Maybe crude isn't the right word, but the decisions weren't informed by an extensive body of scientific knowledge or even a systematic approach to image making. The visual language of the infographic hadn't been invented yet. Artists and scientists tried to describe phenomena with the utmost fidelity—objectively—but there was more room for subjectivity to enter into the process of representation.

**BF:** The terms and tropes of that objectivity hadn't been codified yet.

**DS:** Exactly. Previously, people only had their eyes and their hands to describe this stuff. Today, we have so many imaging devices: cameras and telescopes and computers to create charts and tables. They have come to define our ways of representing and conceptualizing our experience, especially when we want it represented “objectively.” We look at an image of a planet from the Hubble Space Telescope and we tend to think it’s an accurate representation of that planet, when in fact, that’s not necessarily true. But we take that image as more objective than somebody looking through a telescope and doing a little sketch.

**BF:** We tend to forget that a photograph is a fragment. But a picture of a planet doesn’t really convey much information, whereas a drawing or chart can communicate something about its movements or other factors. It’s interesting to think about how charts have a visual language that is culturally determined. For instance, the standard calendar where a month is represented as a grid of squares essentially represents time spatially. We conceive of ourselves in relation to time almost as though we were moving along a map. But in the shift from today to tomorrow, we don’t “go” anywhere.



*focusing #3*, 2008; graphite on paper; 25.5 x 20 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Don Felton.

**DS:** Basically, you're abstracting at that point. You're taking a lot of information and synthesizing it and changing the context of that information, presenting it visually when maybe it wasn't visual to begin with—for instance, depicting

quantities and numerical values as bars and/or curves. That kind of translation is what interests me and in particular, the possibilities for what can arise in the gaps that open up at various stages in the process.

**BF:** Let's talk a little about process. Your earlier wax paintings were very process-based and involved a lot of chance. The materials, methods, and sequence created forms and surfaces that you couldn't necessarily predict. How does chance and process play out in the current work?

**DS:** The work remains very process-oriented, but it is less determined by materials and more by operations. I set parameters and make some decisions at the outset, but what happens within those parameters opens out on its own. Before I start work, I make intuitive decisions about a framework or structure—say a hard-edged circle form—and then decide on the type of mark-making or line-work that will take place within it. There are a finite number of things that I can do within that area, so the drawing almost has a kind of lifespan. It's making or creating a lifespan: sets of operations to perform, and then the process is over. I could do other things to it, but then it wouldn't be what it is; it would become something else.

**BF:** Almost like a chemical reaction.

**DS:** But paradoxically, by preparing this sequence of actions very specifically and then following through with it, all these other mysteries happen. Chance filters back in, and while I have a good idea of where the drawings are headed, I never know precisely how they're going to look in the end.

**BF:** In that case, it's more like a scientific experiment; you have a hypothesis that you put into play to see how it develops. What is it about process-based approaches that you find so engaging?

**DS:** It's a way of stepping outside of myself. I really don't want viewers to think so much about the work in terms of personality or biography—to think, "Dean Smith made this." I mean, these are clearly labor-intensive pieces and the idiosyncrasies of how I make them are part of the work, but while they do end up having specific personal or emotional qualities, I don't make a conscious effort to play that up.

**BF:** Do you see your work as a kind of transcription? The pencil and the mark-making are reminiscent of writing, and the new drawings have a topographic quality, almost like describing a surface. The *thought forms* series of drawings are reminiscent of two-dimensional models of structures. Is there a descriptive impulse to all this?

**DS:** Yes, in terms of trying to render the invisible visible.

**BF:** Do you want viewers to have the feeling of something being revealed? One thing that strikes me about your work is that—process-based as it is—you clearly have an experience in mind for them. It seems very calculated or specific in terms of the visual engagement it invites.

**DS:** It's interesting that you're viewing them as calculated, when, in fact, my decisions are very intuitive. I would say that I want to present viewers with a conundrum, with something ambiguous.

**BF:** Since we're talking about a viewer's relation to the object, do you think about your work in the context of minimalism?

**DS:** Not really, no. I like that sort of work, particularly in the right context, say at Dia: Beacon. Seeing the work in that kind of environment is pretty amazing, and I certainly have an appreciation for it—but talk about calculated work! That's extremely calculated work.

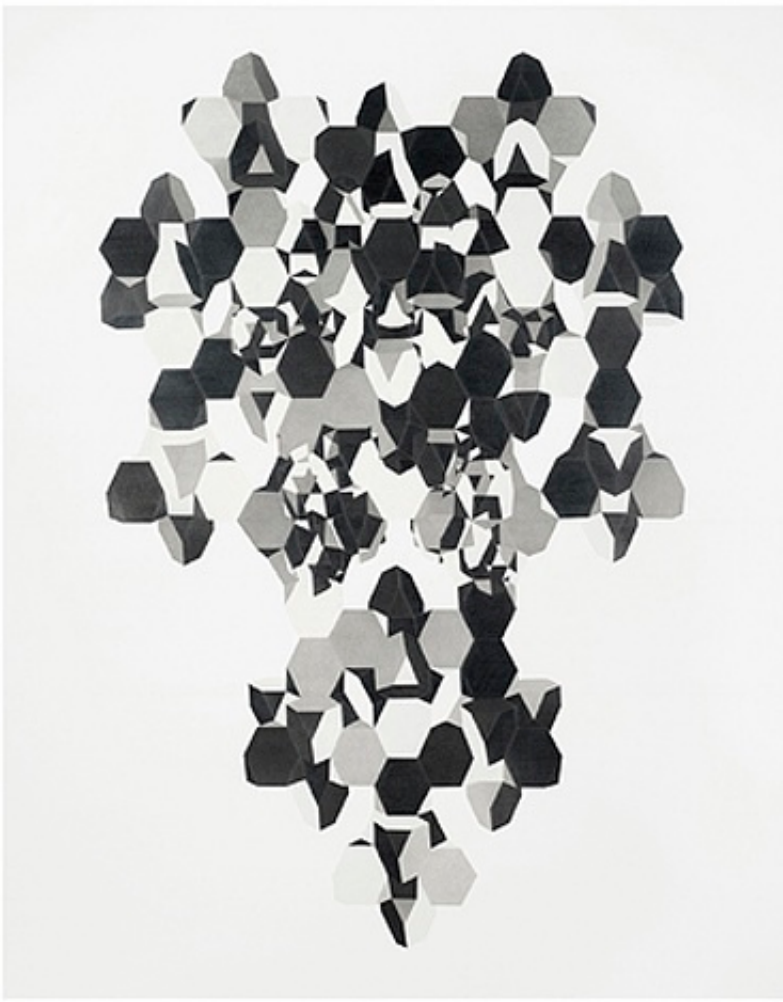
**BF:** There aren't really any surprises.

**DS:** The surprises generally happen intellectually in your head, as opposed to visually or as Duchamp might say, retinally. I'm interested in those intellectual qualities, but the retinal aspect is so important. My goal is to trip up viewers visually, to get them to ask, "What is this?" And then have them be unable to land on any one specific thing.

**BF:** But it's not like it's wide open, which is what I meant by calculated. There are always several options at play in your work that are pretty specific.

**DS:** Initially, there's a relatively clear, if deceptive, sense of the visual category to which the image belongs. It might resemble a model or a topographic map, but then contradictory references to creatures or physical phenomena or body parts appear. And then if you look closely, you see the spatial terms collapse in on themselves. The scale becomes confusing: is it a magnification of something tiny, or a distant view of something huge? It may appear to be a model of an object in the world, but if you look closely, you see that it is an impossible object—it can only exist in two-dimensional space. The closer you get, the further you get away from it.

**BF:** Your drawings invite a very deep engagement with seeing. The intensely visual nature of the work puts it in the realm of sensational work—work that engages the senses. You've talked about reverie occasionally.



*thought form #10*, 2006; graphite on paper; 76 x 60 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

**DS:** Reverie often has a negative connotation, like daydreaming, so maybe that's not the best word. Ideally, I would like to take a viewer to a place where thinking almost floats; where thought becomes less linear and goal-oriented and more rhizomatic, like a branching structure. You could call it a meditative state—a reverie of questioning that doesn't fixate on one particular thing, but allows a range of possibilities to come into play within the mind.

It all goes back to the nature of wonder, and wonderment, which is really the foundation of philosophical inquiry. What is this? Why is this? How is this? I don't have a particular philosophical agenda, but I'm interested in that state where thinking begins. I'm interested in how that beginning is provoked not by the verbal, but by the visual. And this happens because of how confounding the visual can be.

There's this quote attributed to Georges Braque: "Only one thing in art is valid, that which cannot be explained." It touches on the almost impossible relationship of language to art, and it defines art as that which defies categorization.

**BF:** How do you describe your work? Do you think of it as abstract?

**DS:** Yes and no. The drawings make use of geometry or fields of mark-making, so they're very "abstract" in that

way. But what is abstraction? Abstraction is drawing away some *thing* from a particular context. You abstract this thing from one context in order to take it into a different context. In the end, an abstraction is itself a representation of this new possibility.

**BF:** It's interesting that you mention representation because your work has taken on an increasingly sculptural quality, something that was particularly apparent with the *thought forms* series of drawings.

**DS:** My intention with the *thought forms* was to represent a thought, which is about as non-corporeal and ephemeral as things get. Thought is the last stop after the object and before nothingness, and that seemed like such an interesting place to be.

**BF:** We've talked about scientific illustration. Can you talk a little about your interest in hermetic and alchemical imagery?

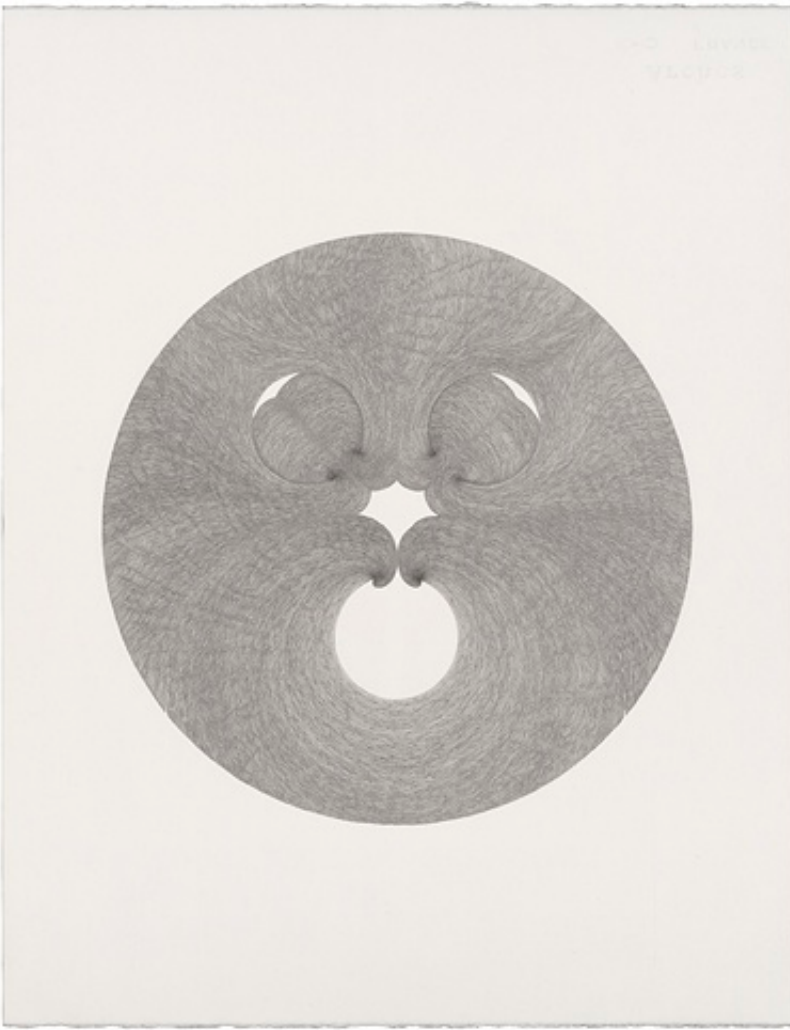
**DS:** When you first look at illustrations in alchemical texts, you see depictions of characters or situations that seem completely figurative, but you quickly realize they are symbols for something else. The image might be a landscape with strange figures or surreal situations. Or it might depict the alchemist's retort, a vessel the alchemists used for their preparations. Inside the retort, there are a wide range of possible events: a couple having sex indicates the union of opposites, or a little dove flying in the retort symbolizes the occurrence of a chemical change.

**BF:** This was about transforming base materials into gold?

**DS:** That's one version of it, albeit a simplified one. Alchemy was more akin to a spiritual discipline. The alchemist aimed to transform various substances, but in the process he was transmuting himself as well.

**BF:** It's often described as the ancestor to modern chemistry and even modern science.

**DS:** The alchemists were trying through various experiments to manufacture the *prima materia*, the original material from which everything in the universe is created. They believed that would bestow all kinds of wonderful things: eternal life or great health or gold.



*untitled (a17)*, 2010; graphite on paper; 22.375 x 17.375 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

**BF:** So these images describe a scientific recipe and a philosophical or spiritual idea at the same time?

**DS:** Yes—the duality.

**BF:** Actually, this reminds me of Wallace Berman's hermetic imagery.

**DS:** Berman was very interested in all that. The verifax collages, which have these very straightforward images of a hand holding a transistor radio whose face shows all kinds of images: a snake, a woman, even a hermetic diagram.

**BF:** That brings me back to my first question about diagrams, which are both images and symbols. Even if we don't understand a symbol's meaning, in our experience of looking at it, we are aware of the intention to communicate something specific, or aware that something is being communicated on several levels at the same time.

**DS:** Systems of representation have this paradoxical nature: they can be very clear and communicative if you have the key to understanding them, but they can also be completely obscure because they are symbolic and not literal.

**BF:** Sign systems are clear to the degree that you participate in the culture that devised them—on the other hand,

the alphabet is opaque if you haven't learned to read it.

**DS:** At the same time, I think that we can look at symbols from other cultures and they have a certain kind of resonance. It's like Agnes Martin saying, "My paintings are not about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in the mind."

**BF:** Just recognizing the symbol.

**DS:** Having a kind of engagement with the symbol, even on a purely emotional level. Wally Hedrick was interested in all this as well, maybe even more literally since he actually did copy hermetic imagery.

**BF:** It's interesting that while you've been inspired by the Beat artists, you haven't carried over their literal use of imagery. You've sheared away the external trappings. There's no image of a retort or transistor radio, but the spirit of the hand holding the transistor, the emotional engagement you mentioned, remains. Do you think people see the connection to the Beat artists in your work?

**DS:** I don't think it's evident. Sometimes people mention Bruce Conner, but I think that's because the drawings are labor-intensive and involve a lot of little marks.

**BF:** You worked for him at one time.

**DS:** I got to know Bruce through my work at the Bancroft Library, when we began to archive his papers. Later on, I worked for him for four hours per week. I was more of a companion and administrative helper. I would take him on walks and get him out of the house and also do a lot of office support. It wasn't until very shortly before he died that I actually became a sort of studio assistant to him. He had a nerve condition, and it was very hard for him to physically manipulate his engraving collages, so I helped with that.

**BF:** Did you learn anything from him?

**DS:** Patience! That and compassion—what it means to be around someone who is slowly dying, but who can't accept it yet. Though it became very clear within the last year that that's what was going on, even though he didn't talk about it.

**BF:** What sort of art inspires you?

**DS:** I think what interests me is that defiance we were talking about. The process where something slips between categories—like between representation and abstraction.

**BF:** Who are some artists that you could point to?

**DS:** Vija Celmins, in so much of her work. Jay de Feo's amazing series of drawings from the mid-'70s. The *One o'Clock Jump* series and the *Tripod* series, which both arose from looking at a real object. The *One o'Clock Jump* series was the side of a plastic tape dispenser, and *Tripod* was a photographic tripod. The drawings have this



compelling ambiguity to them. You can tell it's a tripod, but then it completely shifts into something else. It moves into the figurative. It moves into the symbolic. It's hermetic. And you can't believe that something that is so unambiguous still manages to confound you.

**BF:** What's your interest in Celmins' work?

**DS:** The utter enigma of it, despite its seeming so obvious. It's a view of the ocean surface, or a space heater with glowing electric filaments, or a comet. The image is so resolutely straightforward, but it's not. It's—

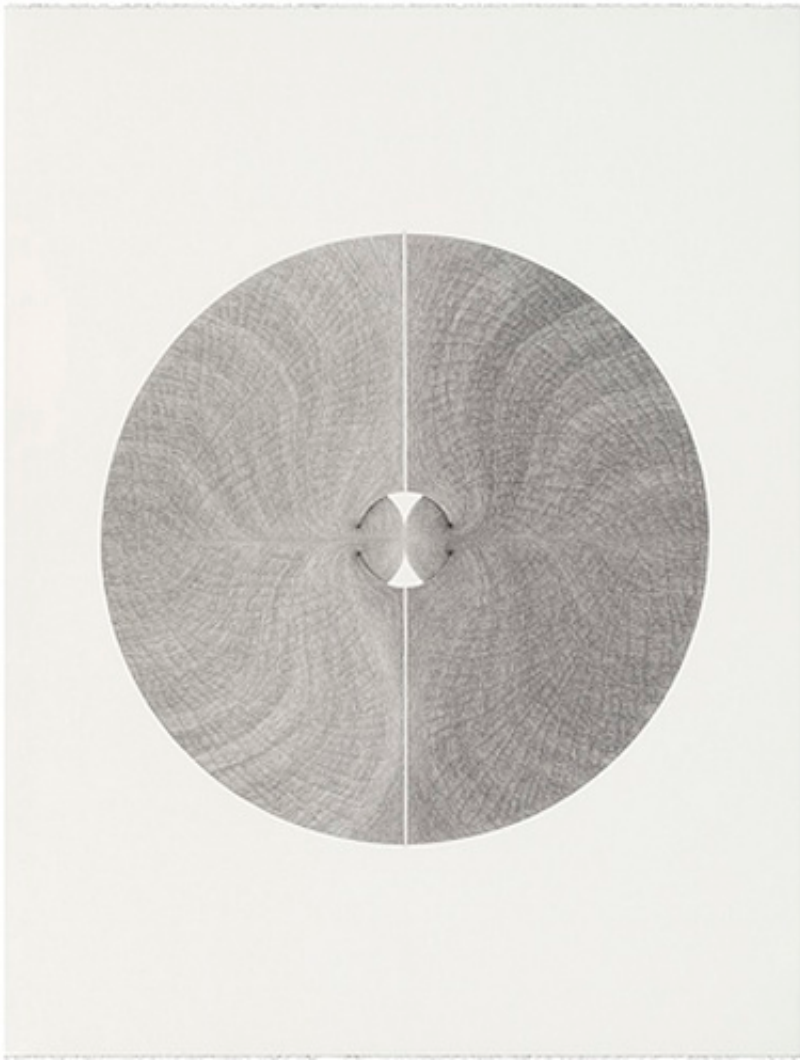
**BF:** It's hermetic.

**DS:** Yeah, it is! Almost like Russian nesting dolls—mystery within mystery within mystery. Even though, fundamentally, it's just a space heater. But then you look at it and you think, "It's talking to me on some level that I can't pin down."

**BF:** You just used the phrase, "talking to me." Looking at your work involves that sense of being addressed. Not in a verbal way. But there is an attentive quality that is manifested and represented by the work. I guess that sounds a little wacky.

**DS:** What we're dancing around is the nature of the spiritual in art, which is a really taboo subject these days.

**BF:** It's a conversation stopper.



*untitled (a18)*, 2011; graphite on paper; 38.5 x 29 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

**DS:** It sure is. In a contemporary context, spirituality smacks of the non-conceptual or even non-thinking. It's curious because in other artistic disciplines—like contemporary music, for instance—people can talk about it freely.

**BF:** I don't know where the interest in spirituality has gone. But it's broader than just "spirituality"; you no longer hear much about phenomenology or consciousness, in spite of the huge strides being made in neuroscience and cognition. It's like the visual arts can't be bothered with the mind. That whole sector of interest has gone cold and lacks credibility right now.

**DS:** Which is very strange. Because it's interesting how certain artists are allowed to carry that torch. If you look at Agnes Martin, her work is intensely spiritual.

**BF:** She didn't make any bones about that. Among contemporary artists there are maybe none that I can think of, except for maybe Fred Tomaselli.

**DS:** He's able to smartly evade any critical problems with the pharmacopoeia, which have a certain downbeat glamor appeal.

**BF:** Mind-altering substances are part of spiritual practices across cultures, but then a cynic says that religion is the opiate of the masses, ergo drugs are a sort of religion. But I guess we're not talking about opiates here.

**DS:** And we're not talking about religion either. Taking psychedelics or meditating—what is that all about? They both arise from a desire to expand consciousness, to have some contact with an experience that is ineffable—that really defies language on a certain level. That's why the “S” word is such a conversation stopper. Because if it defies language and you can't use words to describe it, it has no use-value in the intellectual commerce of contemporary art criticism.

In any case, I'm not saying my work is spiritual, just that I sometimes make use of imagery from spiritual traditions and that these traditions are all about having access to things we can never fully address, i.e., the unnameable. It's not so much talking about God, which doesn't interest me.

**BF:** I'm still thinking about your comment that some artists are allowed to work in this capacity without critical censure. There are actually more, as I think about it, but many of them, like Paul Thek, are dead. And the land artists really come to mind—Smithson, for instance.

**DS:** What has always been really curious to me about Smithson is how he has—pun intended—been totally sanctified by the critical establishment. And yet, in his retrospective at MOCA he had all this Catholic imagery in his early work. The mirror displacement pieces make reference to all sorts of magic and magic traditions. And *Spiral Jetty*? The spiral, its placement on water, water being a symbol of the unconscious. Walking on it, you take a path that spirals in on itself, which is symbolic of the journey inward. But then you look at it again and it's just a pile of rocks in a salty lake.

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**Dean Smith** has exhibited nationally and internationally with recent solo exhibitions at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, and Marvelli Gallery, New York. His drawings are represented in numerous public collections. His films have screened at the San Francisco Cinematheque; The 19th London Lesbian/Gay Film Festival at the National Theater, London; the Clarke Centre, Montreal; the Kunst Museum, Zurich; ATA: Artists Television Access, San Francisco; and in galleries nationally and internationally. Smith received a double B.A. in Art and the History of Art in 1984 and a M.F.A. degree in 1988 all from the University of California, Berkeley. He was a recipient of a California Arts Council Fellowship Award in 2002.

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