



*By Henry Lehmann  
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Poise and posture are major aspects of the paintings of Clive Smith, the New York-based wunderkind, who seemed to become famous the instant he finished his studies at the New York Art League. English born, Smith's previous credentials included work in the fashion industry and a stint, in the 1990s, with Gap Corporation.

Yet, it's doubtful whether Smith could have served as one of those Gap salesmen, cheering us on to buy piles of shirts and socks — at least, to judge from the dour, on edge, unsettled people in his oil-on-canvas odes to loneliness and need.

The world of Smith has a paralyzed, autistic feel to it. In one painting, called *One Without Two*, a woman sits on a bench, her arms extended across her lap, her hands solemnly clasped. Smith loves to present arms and hands, as tools both designed for movement and for getting in touch. More often than not, as in this image, these appendages are warily dormant.

The Statue of Liberty, part of one of the massive tattoos on this woman's

arms, seems to mock her state of captivity. Her seat and the rectangular lines in the near background act as prisons. The empty chair next to her is a metaphor for an emptiness the hopeless woman seems yearning to fill.

The idea of being inexorably cut off is indicated in another oil, simply titled *A Space*, by a box or frame surrounding the seat upon which perches a sad-looking woman. While her youthful pants and T-shirt attire seem quite Gapish, her despairing face looks more like one of those studies of clinical depression for which Kathe Kollwitz is noted.

Smith does not use people he knows as models, as familiarity might blur his vision; instead he hires actors willing to sit for pay. Whatever they earn is well deserved, if only for the minutely adjusted facial expressions they assume. Some of Smith's paintings include textured zones that are true painterly *tours-de-force*, approaching a 3-D effect; but it is the faces inflected with moods that cause these works to transcend mere technical finesse, to add up to somewhat more than the numerous influences.

Smith's works are made up of a complex blend, which includes the precision of Philip Pearlstein's nudes and the rebellious flesh in works by Lucian Freud, with a smattering of George Tooker, pre-Beatle poet of isolation, thrown in for good measure.

Indeed, it's hard not to start humming *All The Lonely People* before paintings that are at once highly contrived and riveting, corny and sincere.

The trouble with these otherwise fascinating works is in fact that they are a bit overloaded with stage decor. Smith should dump some of the super-meaningful deadwood, the chairs that confine and so on, and focus more on the faces themselves. Perhaps then he can assume pre-eminence as social critic, observing and detailing the painful efforts of contemporary people to keep face. As Andy Warhol has taught us, selfhood is from the outside in, and only those able to control completely the way they look at any given moment will inherit the Earth.

♣ *Clive Smith's oils remain at the Galerie de Bellefeuille, 1367 Greene Ave., until Oct. 14. Information: (514) 933-4406.*